

Simply essential

SIM binding to phones can check cyber crime

**T**he Department of Telecom's move to tighten SIM-binding norms is driven by a real, escalating, and costly problem. Telecom-enabled fraud, from SIM swaps and mule numbers to OTP theft, has become one of the weakest links in the country's digital economy. The Centre is right to intervene. Communication apps can easily be used by detached, untraceable accounts, posing a threat to individual and national security.



The new SIM binding rules mandate that messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, must remain linked to the original, active SIM card in a user's phone, stopping use if the SIM is removed or inactive, and forcing web versions to log out every six hours for re-authentication via QR code. A SIM card is verifiably linked to an individual (through KYC), and tied to a specific device via IMEI, so misuse via SIM swapping, cloning, or mule phones becomes harder. The move to extend the rigorous security model of platforms like UPI to general communication apps is widely seen as a necessary security enhancement by the government and the telecom industry. For an overwhelming majority of users who use their messaging app on one phone with a single, permanent SIM, the change will seem imperceptible.

It is perhaps true, that for those who rely heavily on desktop/web versions for work the directive introduces some friction and operational challenges. But cyber-fraud losses in India are staggering, with sophisticated scams often exploiting accounts whose registered SIM cards have been removed, deactivated, or are being misused from outside the country. This lack of an active, traceable SIM-to-device link has allowed fraudsters to operate with near-perfect anonymity. By mandating continuous SIM presence, the government is extending the robust, proven security model used by our banking and UPI systems, where the physical presence of the KYC-verified SIM is mandatory. The directive's requirement for periodic logouts of web sessions (every six hours) is a security hygiene measure, akin to auto-logout on banking portals, designed to curb the remote abuse of accounts. While inconvenient for business workflows, this friction is the cost of closing a critical gateway for account takeover and fraud.

That said, there are apprehensions. Tethering a private messaging account to a government-verified identity (the KYC-linked SIM) could expose whistleblowers by creating a single, traceable metadata link between their official identity and their communications. Furthermore, there are fears over potential government misuse of this traceability. This is where the government must tread with caution and absolute clarity. The success of this essential security upgrade is contingent on its lawful and judicious implementation. The government must enforce SIM binding while strictly adhering to the principles of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023. The focus must be solely on traceability for crime prevention, not data acquisition or surveillance.

POCKET: AI Now

RAVIKANTH



"If you do my homework, that's wrong! If you take my parents' job and do it, that's right!"



MADHAVI SINGH

**W**hen a US federal judge ruled in late November that Meta does not maintain an illegal monopoly in social media, it was a reminder that even the strongest evidence can look weak when enforcers act too late.

Rejecting the US Federal Trade Commission's narrow market definition, the court instead concluded that Meta, formerly known as Facebook, competes against a broad array of rivals such as TikTok and YouTube. While legal scholars can and will dissect the opinion, the biggest takeaway is that timing matters in dynamic markets, implying that antitrust authorities must develop a preventive approach, rather than relying solely on reactive measures.

The case centered on Facebook's acquisitions of Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014, when both were unmistakably competitive threats. Facebook said so itself: internal emails and strategy documents spelled out its intention to copy, acquire, or neutralize rivals, while the firm's leaders explicitly acknowledged the existential threat posed by Instagram. FTC lawyers rarely uncover this type of smoking-gun evidence.

But the case collapsed under the weight of today's market reality. Instead of considering the world as it existed when the mergers occurred, the court (incorrectly) cited the rise of TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube Shorts as evidence that Facebook lacked monopoly power. But TikTok's success hardly disproves Facebook's earlier dominance, because ByteDance, its parent company, spent vast sums on user acquisition, at one point becoming one of the largest buyers of ads on Facebook, Instagram, and Snap in the US. A Chinese company with almost unlimited capital breaking into the market is hardly proof of healthy competition.

LEGAL FLAWS

The flaws in the court's reasoning reflect a deeper problem with litigating consummated mergers: it asks judges to travel back in time and forget what they now know. Questions like "Would Instagram have become this significant without Facebook's investment?" or "What competition might have emerged if the acquisitions had not taken place?" are inherently counterfactual. It is very difficult to measure the impact of competition that never existed.

This suggests that the acquisitions should have been challenged when they were first proposed—a difficult task, but not as hard as challenging consummated deals. Predicting the future is less formidable than reconstructing the present on the basis of an imaginary past.



Antitrust delayed is antitrust denied

**TRUST FACTOR.** The Meta verdict on monopoly power offers a sobering lesson. Rather than acting post facto, mega mergers in the big tech space must be prevented

The flaws of late enforcement were also on display in the Google antitrust trial. Even as a US federal judge ruled in 2024 that Google had illegally monopolised general search services, the remedy was softened by the perception that AI chatbots were already reshaping the market. Even the boldest proposed remedies centered less on restoring competition in search and more on ensuring that the next tech frontier remains open.

The same dynamic was evident in the landmark antitrust case that the US federal government brought against Microsoft in the 1990s. Instead of reviving competition in operating systems, where Microsoft's dominance was entrenched, the litigation cleared space for the next generation of companies by preventing Microsoft from extending its monopoly into browsers and apps. Of course, this is a worthy goal. But illegally monopolised markets need not be treated as a *fait accompli*.

In fast-moving markets, prevention is better than cure, which is why intervening early to block illegal mergers must be the norm, not the exception. Regulators should have prevented Facebook from acquiring

**US antitrust regulators now have stronger merger guidelines and a clearer understanding of how digital markets work. What they need is the political will to act early and decisively**

Instagram and WhatsApp in the first place, but erred on the side of caution, fearing false positives and believing that the market would self-correct. But that decision has proved impossible to unwind, even though Facebook's acquisition of direct competitors in a competitive market should have been a straightforward win for antitrust authorities—the very kind of textbook harm the law is designed to prevent.

To their credit, the FTC and the Department of Justice under former US President Joe Biden had begun to develop and use their preventive toolkit. They challenged several mergers (including Nvidia-Arm, Illumina-GRAIL, and Microsoft-Activation Blizzard), examined practices in nascent industries such as AI partnerships, and launched early probes into emerging monopolies in the cloud computing and semiconductor markets. But the pendulum has swung back under Donald Trump's second administration, which has pursued merger settlements, dialled back investigations into AI giants, and revived the myth that tech firms are the guardians of innovation and national security.

POLITICAL WILL

It doesn't have to be this way. US antitrust regulators now have stronger merger guidelines and a clearer understanding of how digital markets work. What they need is the political will to act early and decisively.

The same applies to other governments. The most consequential tech mergers are reviewed simultaneously in multiple jurisdictions, and regulators in the European Union

and the UK also have powerful preventive tools, including merger review and market studies. Even just initiating an investigation can create enough friction and uncertainty for parties to abandon a deal, as happened with Nvidia-Arm and Visa-Plaid. Until recently, the UK Competition and Markets Authority, like the FTC and DOJ in the US, was increasing its scrutiny of tech mergers and partnerships, particularly in the AI sector.

But the global scramble to attract AI investment has pushed competition enforcement into retreat. Amid increasing geopolitical turbulence, regulators are forgetting the hard-earned lessons of the platform era and pulling back precisely when they should be applying those lessons to block anti-competitive AI mergers and prevent the emergence of AI monopolies. The result is a classic collective-action problem, even though all it takes is one courageous competition authority to block a global deal and change the trajectory of an entire market.

The Meta decision can seem like much ado about nothing: one case that was too difficult to win despite overwhelming evidence. But viewed in a broader context, it becomes clear that timing makes all the difference in antitrust enforcement. Regulators must learn to flex their preventive muscle to have any hope of taming Big Tech.

The writer is Deputy Director of the Thurman Arnold Project and a senior lecturer at the Information Science Project at Yale Law School. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2025

Interest rates unlikely to dip in the medium term

This is due to a combination of factors — tariff uncertainty, weakening currency, high global rates

Sachin Gupta

**T**he Reserve Bank of India began its monetary easing cycle in February 2025, with policy rates cut by 125 basis points by December 2025. Meanwhile, the 10-year G-sec yield has decreased by only 17 basis points during the same period, indicating a limited and gradual pass-through of interest rate reductions at the longer end of the yield curve.

Likewise, the US Federal Reserve has reduced its policy rates by 175 basis points over the last 15 months. Surprisingly, the 10-year Treasury yields have increased by 38 basis points. This shows a clear disconnect between central banks' expectations and the bond market's actual behaviour.

Why is this happening? Policy rates mirror central banks' outlook and their informed assessment of the economy's interest rates. Nevertheless, actual outcomes depend on supply-demand dynamics, anticipated inflation, tariff disputes, geopolitical issues, and overall macroeconomic uncertainty, which we have enough of. Central banks are

attempting to drive growth (in the case of India) and employment (in the case of the US), but the bond market is indicating a harsher truth of persistently high long-term rates.

SOVEREIGN BOND MARKETS

A key factor influencing long-term yields is the demand and supply dynamics in sovereign bond markets. Since many major economies face high fiscal deficits and substantial debt levels, the demand for future borrowing stays elevated. Consequently, increased net issuance of bonds pushes up the term premium, resulting in higher interest rates.

Specifically for India, despite an improving fiscal position, low inflation, strong GDP growth, and long-term interest rates remain elevated. This can be attributed to tariff uncertainty, a weakening currency, and globally high interest rates.

What does it mean for us? It essentially means that despite the RBI's actions, the long-term borrowing and lending rates remain high. High long-term bond yields imply high expected bank deposit rates. High bank deposit rates mean that banks' cost of



RATE DYNAMICS. Uncertain times

funds remains high, and thus they are unable to reduce their lending rates. In fact, it adversely affects banks. Their benchmark-linked lending rates reduce in line with the lower repo rate, even though their cost of deposits remains high. This impacts banks' margins.

MACROECONOMIC RISKS

Beyond demand, supply dynamics, and domestic factors, global macroeconomic risks have a far-reaching impact. Trade and tariff-related uncertainties have added another layer of complexity. Ongoing tariff disputes, supply-chain realignments, and uncertainty around US trade policy, including

sector-specific tariffs and strategic re-shoring incentives, continue to influence inflation expectations and global capital flows.

For India, uncertainty regarding US-India trade relations, export competitiveness, and potential retaliatory tariffs affects currency stability and foreign investor sentiment. For banks, these uncertainties translate into a higher risk premium. Currency volatility raises hedging costs, while geopolitical risks reduce appetite for long-duration assets, keeping bond yields firm even in easing cycles.

While central banks can guide short-term rates, long-term yields remain largely driven by fiscal pressures, inflation expectations, and geopolitical uncertainties. Globally, persistent inflation, heavy sovereign borrowing, and volatile capital flows continue to hold long-term yields high. In my view, none of these risks is likely to abate in the near term; hence, long-term interest rates in India and globally are unlikely to decline in the near future.

The writer is Chief Rating Officer & ED, CareEdge Ratings

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For transparency

Apropos "How tax havens really help in raising debt" (December 13). The widespread use of offshore hubs to issue corporate debt highlights a grey zone between efficient finance and aggressive tax avoidance. For many multinational firms, tax havens are no longer vaults for hidden profits but conduits that lower borrowing costs through treaty benefits and interest deductions. While such structures may be legal and commercially rational, they steadily erode the tax base of developing economies like India. Regulators have responded with GAAR and global anti-avoidance norms, which are necessary to

restore balance between mobile capital and sovereign revenue. The challenge is not to choke access to global finance but to ensure transparency and fairness.

K Chidananand Kumar

Bengaluru

Delhi's deadly air

This is with reference to the article 'Delhi's deadly air crisis' (December 17). The twin issues of pollution in the Capital and stubble burning in neighbouring states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan have been debated for a long time without any amicable solutions. Every problem has a solution if our politicians think beyond politics and

take a scientific approach. The Delhi government should appoint an expert committee to advise the government on reusing the stubble for productive purposes. The farmers should be given reasonable compensation for not burning the stubble. The Centre and States must put aside politics and act in sync to solve this issue.

Veena Shenoy

Thane

FPI pull out

Apropos "Selling season" (December 17), the relentless foreign portfolio outflows this year, exceeding ₹1.6 lakh crore, have understandably deepened the

rupee's slide and raised worries about a vicious cycle of depreciation and further selling. Yet domestic investors have stepped in robustly, pouring in record sums into the markets. High valuations and US tariffs have driven much of this caution abroad, narrowing the gap with cheaper emerging peers. Still, with corporate earnings likely to recover and valuations now more competitive, a deft RBI approach to rupee management—smoothing extremes without rigid defence—could help restore confidence and draw flows back.

M Barathi

Bengaluru

Cumin acreage, a lesson

Apropos 'Cumin acreage may decline...Subdued China demand' (December 17). It is a lesson that dependence on one market for agricultural commodities severely affects domestic farmers. When domestic consumption cannot be increased overnight to offset subdued export to China, trade agreements that India is entering with many other smaller nations due to US tariff pressure, must be well utilised and the government can appoint a nodal officer to oversee such issues.

Rajni Magal

Halekere Village (Karnataka)



## Messi tour: VIP culture wins

Unfortunately, power still decides who gets access

Krishnan Ranganathan

There are a few things money can't buy, but that list is shrinking by the day. Consider: A prison cell upgrade: \$75-127 a day. Your doctor's mobile no: from \$1,500 p.a. The legal right to shoot an endangered black rhino: \$350,000. While these examples are extreme, they signal a broader truth: nothing seems off the market anymore. As Michael Sandel (the creator of Harvard's legendary Justice course) argues, the urgent question today is not what money can buy, but what it should not.

**ETHICS AND MARKETS**  
In a world where everything is for sale, life becomes harder for people of modest means. But the deeper cost is moral: once markets invade certain domains, they change not just how goods are distributed, but how we value them. If someone pays for a kidney, and a consenting adult is happy to sell, the only question asked is, "how much?" Human dignity is irrelevant. Markets, by design, don't discriminate between noble choices and questionable ones.

Economists defend markets for efficiency. Paying for "fast track" at airports or amusement parks saves time. For Prof Sandel, the case for "markets" over "queues" stands on two arguments: libertarian: people should buy and sell freely, so long as no one's rights are violated; and utilitarian: markets can increase collective well-being by allocating goods to those who value them most. Defenders of markets might argue that pricing can also expand access: higher ticket prices fund logistics, security, and scale, making large public events possible. Without markets, many such experiences would simply not exist.

What both arguments miss is that some goods are not merely scarce. Attending a papal mass or a concert is about more than access, it is about shared experience. Turning these into commodities erodes that value. Bruce Springsteen confronted this trade-off in 2009. By capping ticket prices at \$95 — well below market rates — he left millions on the table to remain faithful to his working-class fans. Charging what the market dictates would erode the communal meaning of the event.

Last week, this tension played out in Kolkata. Thousands of football fans paid thousands of rupees hoping to see Lionel Messi



**FIASCO.** Fans could barely see the star (SABAYOTI CHAKRABORTY)

during his GOAT India Tour. What they got instead was a masterclass in VIP culture gone wrong. Messi reportedly appeared for barely 20-30 minutes and was engulfed by politicians, dignitaries, and other VIPs. Fans who had paid ₹4,500 to ₹12,000 could barely see the star. To be fair, sponsors expect access, organisers argue that proximity is part of the package, and politicians claim visibility. Yet in a city renowned for its football passion, proximity to power mattered more than devotion from the stands.

This was not just poor event management. It was the triumph of VIP culture over shared joy. Crucially, market pricing and VIP capture are distinct phenomena. Markets sell access through price; VIP culture reallocates it through power, proximity, and political privilege. The Messi fiasco reveals a twin failure: access was first priced, and then even that allocation was overridden. Fans lost twice: once to the market, and again to privilege.

Where all good things are bought and sold, money inevitably matters. "First come, first served" has an egalitarian appeal precisely because it disregards power, privilege, and pockets. Queues are imperfect too — they favour flexible schedules, stamina, and geography — but the inequality they encode is different.

Markets allocate by willingness to pay; queues by willingness to wait. Neither is perfect but willingness to pay is no better measure of value than willingness to wait. A billionaire can pay for a front-row seat to a concert they barely care about, while a passionate fan in the back misses a moment they saved months to afford. The Messi episode exposes a bitter truth: markets may sell access, but power still decides who actually gets it. When VIP privilege overrides passion, public events become private performances funded by the many and enjoyed by the few.

The writer is former Executive Director at Nomura, is currently a Visiting Faculty at various B-Schools

# Are too many IPOs a signal of maturing market?

**SCALING UP.** Exits via IPOs free up venture/PE capital, while the secondary market absorbs stakes at prices discovered across wide demand



**ABHIJEET CHANDRA**  
**ARYANESH SINGH**

India's Chief Economic Advisor (CEA) recently called out a visible shift: many IPOs are being used as exit routes for early investors rather than as pure engines of long-term capital formation. At first glance, that sounds like mission drift. Look closer, and it reads like a market growing up.

In deep markets, IPOs are both price-discovery events and orderly transfer points. The classic textbook argument is that IPOs serve as a price-discovery mechanism and signals a liquid market.

At the same time, it also posits exchange of ownership through transfer of securitised instruments, usually from venture/private equity to diversified public holders. Indian capital market is increasingly there.

**SCALE, CREDENCE AND VIBES**  
Start with the scale and credence. By mid-November 2025, India has already seen about 91 IPOs raising about ₹1.52 trillion, nearly matching the ₹1.59 trillion raised in all of 2024. Going further, a pipeline of IPOs suggests 2025 could set a new record. That's not a sign of fragility; it is a sign of an ecosystem confident enough to recycle capital quickly.

A second marker of maturity is cooling listing-day euphoria. Average listing gains slipped to around 9 per cent in 2025 (till October), a sharp comedown from the prior year. That sounds, at the loss of a better word,

disappointing, to some segment of investors, until you recall what mature markets look like. The pop narrows as pricing improves and book-runners anchor deals with better institutional participation. Lower pops mean fewer mis-pricings and less value left on the table, that is good for issuers and long-term allocators.

Third, exits via IPOs are normal in developed ecosystems. They free up venture/PE capital to fund the next cohort, while the secondary market absorbs stakes at prices discovered across wide demand. India's secondary market has become deep enough to shoulder that role.

Even on quiet months, cash market turnover at NSE and BSE put together routinely runs in lakh-crore territory; ₹1.02 lakh crore average daily cash turnover in July 2025, despite a cyclical soft patch, signals robust ongoing liquidity for post-listing churn. Liquidity is the oxygen that makes exits via the market possible.

**LETTING BIG AND SMALL SAIL**  
It is evidence of functioning secondary discipline. A 2024 SEBI study found that 54 per cent of IPO shares allocated to non-anchor investors are sold within a week. You can read this as froth, or as the market efficiently testing and reallocating shares to stronger hands. Over time, such churn is how ownership migrates towards investors who truly

**Two scenarios could derail the narrative: excessive short-termism among investors and poor post-listing performance of major IPOs**

want to hold through the business cycle.

The primary pipeline is also getting broader, not just bigger. In the first half of calendar 2024 alone, 153 IPOs (38 mainboard and 115 SMEs) raised about ₹34,923 crore, more than 3.5x the comparable period a year earlier.

SME listings are crucial. They diversify the opportunity set and widen the investor base beyond mega caps. A maturing market isn't just one where unicorns list; it is one where the middle of the distribution can tap public capital without much drama, and fuss.

To be sure, the CEA's caution matters. India still needs IPOs that fund capacity creation, not just shareholder transfer. But the evidence doesn't show a crowding-out of new capital.

Fund raises have been large in rupee terms, pipelines are heavy, and the investor mix is broadening. Reuters' year-to-year tallies point to \$20.5 billion from 91 IPOs in 2024, which banks expecting 2025 to surpass those levels. That is compatible with exits and growth capital, given that the pricing is rational and disclosures are strong.

We believe that there are just more than one reason to accept this exit-via-IPO trend as healthy. First, when early investors sell into the float, their selling discipline (staggered offers and lock-ups, for example) and the market's willingness to absorb those shares become live test of quality.

The recent moderation in pops implies bankers and issuers are reading books more carefully; cheap money era habits, such as over-tight pricing, momentum allocation, among others, are fading. These are, in a way, better price discovery and governance signals.

Secondly, India's trading infrastructure and participation have

over the years scaled dramatically. Even with periodic dips, exchange data show high, persistent turnover and robust derivative hedging tools. That depth allows founders and/or PE exits to be staged without destabilising the float. This, again, is a hallmark of a market that has the capacity to recycle risk efficiently.

**DERAILMENT OR SCALE UP?**  
There are two scenarios that could possibly derail the maturing narrative: excessive short-termism among investors and poor post-listing performance of major IPOs.

If too many IPOs trade below offer price for long stretches, it's natural for public confidence to erode. Some of that pain is already visible.

Recent numbers show that less than half of 2025's IPOs delivered listing-day gains, and many cooled subsequently. The remedy isn't to throttle exits. It is to tighten disclosure, emphasise profitability paths, and calibrate offer sizes. All these measures should upgrade the depth of markets.

Policy, too, can help the transition. The CEA's nudge is timely. Nudging issuers to articulate use-of-proceeds more clearly, promoting anchor-to-retail transparency, and pressing for post-listing governance will keep public markets from morphing into pure flipping venues.

In particular, ironing out the issues such as, earning guidance discipline, related-party transactions, among others will enhance this evolution. Needless to say that flows and volumes suggest a robust market is already in place. That's what mature markets look like, and it is where India is headed.

Abhijeet teaches Finance at IIT Kharagpur where Aryanesh studied Economics major. Views are personal

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### TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 18, 2005

#### Ranbaxy loses Lipitor case

In yet another setback to Ranbaxy Laboratories Ltd, the US District Court of Delaware ruled that the generic company's marketing of the two patents covering Pfizer Inc's cholesterol lowering drug, Lipitor. This follows a ruling in October by a UK High Court delaying an early launch of atorvastatin (generic) in that market.

#### EU proposes deadline for farm subsidies

The European Union and some of the world's poorest nations raised the stakes as efforts to push forward troubled global free trade talks entered their final stretch. Least Developed Countries (LDCs) warned they could "walk away" from the talks if their demands for duty-free, quota-free access to rich countries were not met. Id not cross.

#### Pawar rules out FMC-SEBI merger

Putting an end to speculation on having a single regulator for both commodities and securities markets by merging FMC with SEBI, the Government has decided to retain Forward Market Commission (FMC) as the sole regulator for the commodity futures markets in India.

**RK Raghavan**

The Bondi Beach (Sydney) shoot-out last Sunday by a father-son duo that resulted in at least 15 deaths raises questions about the ability of the civilised world to contain the madness that terrorism is. Where religious hatred is overwhelming and where over-indocinated strikers who are willing to sacrifice their lives are involved, there is precious little government security outfits can do.

We erroneously tend to conflate alertness with efficiency and public safety. No security agency however well trained and equipped can anticipate and frustrate terror all the time. A failure is more often the case. Fortunately India's record of outwitting terrorists has been encouraging, barring a few aberrations like Pahalgam and Red Fort. I believe public awareness and cooperation have been a contributing factor; we need to avoid complacency, though.

There is no magic wand to contain the scourge. Democratic nations are

struggling to evolve strategies that would help identify the villains before they strike.

Also, terror attacks are no longer the result of hierarchical organisations calling the shots.

Motivated and insane individuals with a record of bigotry, irrespective of their religion, can easily dodge the authorities and carry out lethal strikes at innocent congregations.

#### SAVAGE ATTACK

It is the recklessness and hatred of individuals that is causing more damage to the community than directives from well-organised outfits like al Qaeda, ISIS and a host of other organisations. Bondi Beach was the most savage attack in the recent past that was motivated by the crudest religious antipathy.

Unchecked, this hatred is likely to spawn, affecting other religions as well. India fortunately does not have a sizeable Jewish population that could be a target of religious madness. It is rumoured that the two from Sydney had links to the ISIS. This is yet



**TERRORISM.** No magic wand to contain the scourge REUTERS

to be confirmed. I may sound cynical when I say that even the best of anti-terror outfits cannot normally prevent an attack. This is despite the fact that we do not know how many plans have been nipped in the bud. Agencies need enormous luck and perseverance to unravel plans of ruthless elements to strike.

When this is the backdrop, how can we berate our agencies whenever they fail.

Terrorists have several huge advantages over government outfits. First is supreme mobility, to travel across continents. One of the Sydney

duo had recently visited Indonesia, which has the world's largest Muslim population.

The Australian Police is yet to fathom reasons for this travel. It is something like searching for a needle in the haystack while mounting a search for the average terrorist. The latter has the incredible ability to merge with the community and surface only when mounting an action.

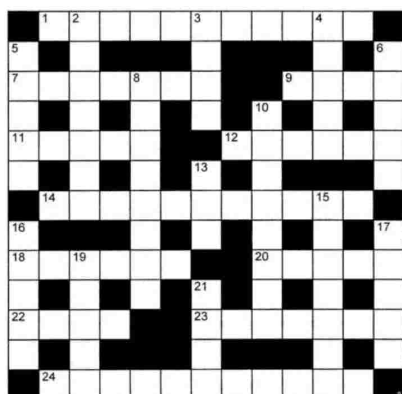
This is true of the father-son combination of Sydney. When they did act they were daring, ruthless and professional. We do not know what kind of planning they did. It was probably within the family.

What stands out eventually is the growing anti-Semitism in the world. An average Israeli will increasingly shudder travel to any part of the world. Is this the kind of world that we want to live in?

This is the debate that should dominate discussions in many forums.

The writer, a former CBI Director, is presently Professor of Criminal Justice at the Jindal Global University, Sonapat (Haryana)

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2848



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Royal fool (5/6)
- Make hostile demonstration (7)
- Wood-cutting implement (4)
- Humped animal (5)
- Participates in (6)
- Road-clearing vehicles (4/7)
- Lying on the back (6)
- Joint of bivalve shell (5)
- Impressive, large-scale (4)
- Think differently (7)
- Remotest (11)

#### DOWN

- People propelling boats (7)
- Jest (4)
- Wine-berry tree (5)
- Taken \_\_\_\_\_ by surprise (5)
- In dirt and confusion (5)
- Permitting (8)
- Pensées (8)
- Insect; move at speed (3)
- Late summer flower (5)
- Erica; butterfly (5)
- Private soldier in France (5)
- Not working (4)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- He was a fool to try to entertain a king (5/6)
- Cheer ironically as advocates are put to torture (7)
- Shaper of wood one soundly puts on (4)
- Desert transport arrived at Libyan capital (5)
- Apportions out what one may have in company (6)
- After a fall fails exam, but they clear the way ahead (4/7)
- Lying face up but with a turn in one's backbone (6)
- Much may turn on gin cocktail the man swallows (5)
- Great story that puts one in the picture (4)
- Initially diplomat is posted where no agreement exists (7)
- Promote one's cause with the majority, nothing being beyond (11)

#### DOWN

- Eight Romans swinging round the East (7)
- No such a quip is a serious matter (4)
- One born earlier than Tree (5)
- One is thus taken for a ride, and by surprise (5)
- Untidy place for shipmates to eat with Leading Yeoman (5)
- Granting that everything is unpaid as yet (8)
- Despise the street being up, these come to mind (8)
- Knowing it's a hired vehicle, take to the air (3)
- Lady's about to make racket perhaps and gets in one's way (7)
- Schoolteacher who loses his head may be found in bed (5)
- Man with a different hat for the open country (5)
- Get back up carrying fuel with soldier in France (5)
- It doesn't like early starts so will just tick over (4)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2847

**ACROSS** 1. Sitting 5. Amble 8. Chuckle 9. Pin-up 10. Residence 12. Her 13. Wader 17. Arm 19. Threesome 21. Lotto 22. Grapple 24. Yards 25. Nacarar  
**DOWN** 1. Secure 2. Trussed 3. Irk 4. Green 5. Apple-tree 6. Bench 7. Expert 11. Down tools 14. Shopper 15. Barley 16. Repent 18. Motor 20. Regan 23. Arc





### Editor's TAKE

## A strategic embrace in Addis Ababa

Upgrading bilateral ties to a strategic partnership signals New Delhi's intent to deepen cooperation with an African nation of the Global South

In recent years, India has emerged as a powerful voice of the Global South. The G20 Summit in Delhi further cemented its position as a leader keen on taking up issues concerning developing countries and forging lasting ties with nations in Africa and Asia that form the bulk of the Global South. In keeping with India's policy of cooperation with these countries, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first-ever visit to Ethiopia marks a significant diplomatic milestone.

The most important takeaway from the visit is the elevation of India-Ethiopia relations to a strategic partnership, backed by multiple agreements. These agreements clearly signal strong political intent translating into concrete developmental priorities. The personal rapport between the two leaders was another highlight that received media attention, and rightly so. Prime Minister Modi's bilateral meeting with Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali offered clear evidence of the growing bond between the two countries. The emphasis on cooperation in areas such as the economy, technology, defence, health, capacity building, and multilateral engagement points to a relationship that is moving beyond traditional goodwill towards long-term collaboration. Modi's assertion that the partnership would bring "new energy, new momentum and new depth" reflects an ambition to institutionalise cooperation. The conferment of Ethiopia's highest civilian honour—the Great Honor Nishan of Ethiopia—on Modi was a powerful diplomatic signal. The warm welcome accorded to Modi, with Abiy Ahmed personally receiving him at the airport and accompanying him to public engagements points to personal bonding.

A key highlight of the visit was India's decision to double scholarships for Ethiopian students. This move is likely to further strengthen India's standing in Ethiopia and deepen people-to-people ties. Education and training have long underpinned India's soft power, and expanding these avenues creates connections that endure beyond political cycles. The broader framing of both nations as "democratic powers" and "fellow travellers of the Global South" is equally noteworthy, positioning the partnership within a shared worldview that emphasises development, strategic autonomy, and reform of global governance institutions.

India also found in Ethiopia another African partner that shares concerns over terrorism. Ethiopia's support and condolences following the Pahalgam terror attack reinforce counterterrorism as an area of shared concern.

Moving on, the Ethiopia leg of Modi's tour followed a productive visit to Jordan, where five MoUs were signed, underscoring India's expanding outreach to West Asia and Africa, yet another frontier of Global South. Taken together, these visits illustrate India's effort to weave economic cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and strategic interests into a cohesive foreign policy. India sees Ethiopia as a political gateway to Africa and a fast-growing economic partner, while Ethiopia views India as a dependable development ally without a hidden agenda. The ties can only grow stronger with time.

## The uncertain geometry of relationships

Relationships rarely follow a straight line. They move through phases of deep intimacy and unsettling distance, moments when minds seem to think in unison and others when trust quietly erodes



VINAYSHIL GAUTAM

Any relationships of a close bond—say between parents and children; among siblings; between married couples; childhood friends who have grown up together, and more—have predictable patterns of intimacy, aloofness, and so on. There are patches of time where the intimacy is so strong that thought processes almost run parallel and overlap. It leads to intimacies and togetherness—a kind of bonding which gives meaning not only to life but also to the understanding of relationships. While it lasts, it is like a roller-coaster ride, and it almost appears timeless.

But then, as time passes, experiences vary, and people no longer trust each other the way they did not so long ago. There are many reasons why this could happen, and one of the commonest is the entry of another figure who responds more closely to a person's felt needs or aspirations. The entry of a third figure affects many direct relationships and sometimes may even be as close as sibling relationships or conjugal relationships. Hence, an important takeaway is the ability of relationships to jointly handle a third person's involvement with caution, care, and foresight.

This is difficult because emotions are involved, and one's needs change. A husband-wife relationship can typically be affected, one way or another, by the birth of a child or even life experiences from the family background of one or both partners.

If this can happen in the intimacies of a direct relationship, how much more so would it happen in a distant relationship, where people have met not in a natural bonding but casually, over work or even a location?

All put together, the arithmetic or calculus of this law has eluded many attempts at developing a pattern or even predictability.

Operationally, therefore, it becomes a matter of insights into the basic characteristics of human beings as such, rather than as individuals.

It would seem obvious that people seek relationships to suit their fundamental needs of living, loving, and progressing; each one wants happiness, appreciation, and dependability. How one offers this to another person is a matter not only of chance but also of the physical state and condition of the person. It is commonplace to realise that hormonal imbalances create behavioural overtones, and at times very distinctive and identifiable ones. An obvious occasion for the manifestation of hormonal impacts is menopause. Formal literature on the effects of menopause has been widely researched in women. However, a reliable pattern identified consensually under menopausal influence has still to



RELATIONSHIPS ARE AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF EXISTENCE, AND THE SOONER ONE SUCCEEDS IN GIVING THEM HIGHER PREDICTABILITY THAN AT PRESENT, THE EASIER LIFE COULD BE FOR ALL

The writer is an internationally acclaimed management consultant  
@daily\_pioneer  
@vinayshilg  
vinayshil-gautam-3488128

fully emerge. Interestingly enough, men also pass through menopausal influences, but literature on this is less common. In the case of men, this is less studied than in women.

In case both parties in a relationship are going through the influence of menopausal hormonal changes, then the relationship is bound to be affected, and the effect can often be more unpredictable, without any research validation to which one can refer. Thus, relationships are very often like fiddling with wires in the dark. The results and consequences are not always pleasant or, for that matter, predictable. It is amusing to notice that in spite of so much drumming up about artificial intelligence, these issues have not even begun to be capped, let alone approached.

While it is easy to identify scientific breakthroughs or new expressions of modelling product design or even work design, reflections on emotional crests and troughs are few and far between. Thus, the true area of manifestation of one's efforts needs more attention than perhaps many other things. This is because emotions determine the basic orientation of a person and how they relate to another worker or even, for that matter, a machine of the times.

Guidance or orientation, therefore, becomes a challenge, and much ill-informed behaviour takes the place of informed guidance, let alone directive guidance.

Unfortunately, the present state of research and knowledge does not do more, and one has to deal with the facts of the case as they are. There is an expression in this statement: "the truth is often stranger than fiction".

All this can be a fitting subject matter for research into personality and the coping options which an individual is capable of mastering.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

Many a time, proverbs sum up generations of experience and can be quite illuminating. However, proverbs are sometimes contradictory, and illustrations would help to explain.

There is a statement, "look before you leap", and an equally powerful statement, "he who hesitates is lost". Which of these two statements is closer to the truth? Similarly, there is the statement, "two heads are better than one", and another, "too many cooks spoil the broth". Which of these statements is true? Similar other examples can be given, but enough has been said to point out the limitations of folk wisdom represented through popular statements.

Clearly, the time is ripe to create a research agenda on relationships and slowly bring greater light to the grey areas of networking, which indeed affect everyone's existence. A beginning has to be marked somewhere.

Relationships are an important component of existence, and the sooner one succeeds in giving them higher predictability than at present, the easier life could be for all.

### PIC TALK



Buddhist monks play the shahnai during the 'Kagyu Monlam' prayer ceremony at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhi Gaya. PHOTO: PFI

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## When Gen Z dials: The unlikely return of the landline



SHAINY SHARMA

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

It is a truth universally acknowledged — though rarely admitted aloud — that the generation born with a smartphone almost fused to its palm is now, quietly and with a hint of mischief, placing a landline on its coffee table. Yes, the same landline once confined to grandparents' homes, complete with coiled cords, dramatic rings, and the uncanny habit of dying during thunderstorms.

In 2025, this technological relic is enjoying an unlikely renaissance, embraced by Gen Z with equal parts irony and intent. When history repeats itself, it seems, it does not ask permission; it simply rings.

At the heart of this revival lies a profound fatigue with hyper-connectivity. Smartphones, once hailed as tools of freedom and empowerment, have evolved into

relentless taskmasters. Notifications bark for attention, applications beg to be opened, and algorithms observe with the vigilance of an overzealous parent.

A 2024 Deloitte Digital Wellness Report revealed that nearly half of Gen Z respondents felt overwhelmed by constant alerts, with many actively experimenting with digital detoxes. Like the prodigal child returning home, this generation appears to be rediscovering a simple truth: when everything demands attention, silence becomes a luxury. The landline, blissfully indifferent to applications, updates, and analytics, offers exactly that.

There is something almost poetic about a device that does only one thing — and does it unapologetically. A landline rings; you answer, you speak, you hang up. There is no doom-scrolling spiral, no accidental plunge into conspiracy videos at 2 a.m., no fitness app quietly judging your life choices. The physical act of replacing the receiver creates a sense of closure no touchscreen can replicate.

As one Gen Z user observed in a recent cultural feature, once the handset goes down, the world truly stops buzzing. Proverbs may evolve, but the old wisdom remains intact: too many cooks spoil the broth, and too many apps certainly spoil the mind. Naturally, Gen Z does nothing without an eye for aesthetics, and

the landline revival is no exception. Pastel rotary phones, translucent plastic models from the 1990s, and sculptural retro designs now adorn minimalist apartments and artisanal cafes. Interior designers speak of a growing appetite for "retro corners", spaces where nostalgia is staged but the yearning beneath it is sincere. These phones photograph beautifully, nestled beside houseplants and beverages whose prices could fund a small nation. What was once obsolete has become desirable the moment it stopped trying to keep up.

Yet beneath the décor lies a deeper cultural unease. The rise of artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven content has sparked quiet anxiety, with studies showing that many Gen Z students worry about unseen forces shaping their preferences. Choosing a landline, then, is more than nostalgia; it is a subtle rebellion. Being unreachable, even briefly, has become an assertion of autonomy. Sociologists read this as resistance to a world engineered for distraction. In slowing communication, the landline restores something precious: the space to breathe, to listen, and occasionally, to think. Sometimes, to move forward wisely, one must dare to dial back — quite literally.

The Pioneer SINCE 1865

The writer is an educator

### RECREATING LIFE WITH PENSION: DIGNITY, SECURITY & JUSTICE FOR ALL

Retirement is a diverse experience, often celebrated for its newfound freedom, yet it also demands thoughtful adaptation to new routines, responsibilities, and interests.

A pension plays a crucial role in this transition. It is a regular income received from investments made during one's working life, with contributions deducted from salary before tax and invested in a pension fund.

The best time to begin saving for a pension is as early as possible. Early investment allows funds more time to grow, reducing the monthly amount required to achieve desired retirement goals. Simply put, the younger one starts saving, the less one needs to contribute to secure the same retirement income.

special significance for pensioners in India. On this day in 1982, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgment that guaranteed dignity and decency to retired officials and pensioners. Pensioners' Day commemorates the tireless efforts of late D.S. Nakara, whose struggle led to this historic verdict.

In his judgment, late Justice VV Chandrachud, then Chief Justice of India, observed that pension is neither a bounty nor an act of grace, but a rightful payment for past service and a vital social welfare measure.

Despite this, the plight of pensioners remains challenging even today. Let us continue the conversation for justice and dignity for all pensioners.

The 17th of December holds

CK SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

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

### Public responsibility demands leadership

Nitish Kumar's recent public behaviour has caused widespread concern among citizens who expect restraint and dignity from those occupying high constitutional office. Public platforms demand composure, sensitivity, and respect, as every action is closely observed and interpreted by society. Any gesture or conduct that appears inappropriate or dismissive, particularly towards women or towards the beliefs and personal rights of others, undermines public confidence. Leaders are role models, and their behaviour inevitably shapes social attitudes and public discourse. Careless actions, whether intentional or not, weaken the principles of equality, respect, and accountability that form the foundation of democracy.

Bihar deserves leadership that consistently reflects constitutional morality and promotes harmony among diverse communities. Public trust, once eroded, is difficult to restore.

Therefore, it is essential for civil society, institutions, and citizens to remain alert and voice concerns through democratic means. Constructive criticism and accountability are vital for safeguarding democratic norms and ensuring governance that respects dignity, decency, and public sentiment at all times.

ARSHAD BASTVI | MUMBAI

### Debating schemes beyond political symbolism

Elected governments possess the legitimate authority to introduce new schemes or rename existing ones according to their policy priorities. Naming welfare programmes has historically reflected political ideology, and earlier Congress governments routinely associated schemes with the Nehru-Gandhi family without significant parliamentary or public objection. In this context, the intense opposition to renaming schemes by the present government appears excessive and politically motivated. The controversy surrounding the proposed repackaging of MNREGA as GRAM has triggered disproportionate outrage. Objections appear rooted not in policy substance but in symbolism, including the removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name and the perceived cultural implications of the word "Ram". Such reactions divert attention from more pressing issues of governance and welfare delivery.

A more meaningful debate would address whether the scheme benefits citizens, aligns with fiscal capacity, and improves implementation. Questions regarding the official status of titles and cultural nationalism deserve scholarly discussion rather than political hostility. Constructive engagement, not emotional opposition, best serves public interest.

JAI P GUPTA | AMBALA CANTT

### Diplomatic gestures reflect global trust

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Ethiopia was marked by a significant diplomatic gesture, as he was personally received at Addis Ababa airport by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Such courtesies symbolise mutual respect and highlight the increasing importance of personal diplomacy in international relations.

During the visit, the leaders engaged in comprehensive bilateral and expanded discussions, reviewing the full spectrum of cooperation between their nations. They acknowledged the steady growth of ties, strengthened by goodwill, trust, and frequent high-level exchanges. Both sides emphasised the need to further institutionalise engagement through structured dialogue mechanisms.

Political consultations, joint working groups, and sector-specific cooperation were identified as key instruments for sustaining momentum. The announcement of the fifth round of Political Consultations in New Delhi demonstrates continuity and seriousness in diplomatic engagement. Such interactions reinforce long-term partnerships and contribute to stability, development, and mutual understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

DIMPLE WADHAWAN | KANPUR NAGAR





# Opposition to Vande Mataram has little to do with faith

Objection to *Vande Mataram* has less to do with Islamic theology and more to do with a longstanding hatred among sections of the subcontinent's Muslims towards India's pre-Islamic. A significant section of the Indian subcontinent's Muslims continues to perceive Pakistan as a symbol of Islamic aspirations and religious identity

FIRST Column



BALBIR PUNJ

So, what should we make of the opposition against *Vande Mataram*, the song that the Constituent Assembly officially recognised as the National Song in 1950? Both the 'secular' camp — comprising left-liberals and parts of the Muslim leadership — have often claimed that singing it is 'un-Islamic'. In reality, these objections seem less about genuine Islamic theological concerns and more about a deep-seated hatred among certain segments of the Muslim elite in the subcontinent towards India's non-Islamic civilisational roots. This inbuilt hostility, which contributed to the creation of Pakistan, continues to foster a divisive mindset that underpins the communal divide in the region.

Like organisations and individuals, ideas too evolve over time. *Vande Mataram*, undoubtedly, has its origins as part of a novel with anti-Muslim strands. But by the early twentieth century, it had moved decisively beyond the realm of literature to become one of the most powerful slogans of the national movement.

The Indian National Congress itself stands as a pedagogic illustration of such metamorphosis. Established in 1885 by Allan Octavian Hume — a retired officer of the British Indian Civil Service and an Englishman — the Congress was, at its inception, little more than a forum for constitutional petitioning within the imperial structure.

Yet, within a generation, and especially after 1920 under Gandhiji's leadership, it reinvented itself into the principal architect of mass nationalism. Would it be intellectually honest to repudiate the Congress on the grounds that its institutional genesis lay in a British initiative? If not, how does one justify the continued antagonism towards *Vande Mataram* by invoking its textual context?

During the independence struggle, *Vande Mataram* became a rallying cry for freedom fighters. In 1907, Madam Bhikai Cama unfurled the first Indian tricolour abroad at Stuttgart, emblazoned with the words *Vande Mataram*.

The British administration attempted to suppress it. The song, however, became inte-



**WHAT EXPLAINS THIS CONTRADICTION? PAKISTAN'S LOVE FOR ISLAM IS EASILY OVERSHADOWED BY ITS INTRINSIC COMPTEPT FOR ITS PRE-ISLAMIC TRADITIONS THAT ARE IDENTIFIED WITH RESIDUAL INDIA**

The writer is an eminent columnist and the author of 'Trust with Apydya: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Masyaaf'

dailyopinion @balbirpunj The Pioneer

gral to the Congress's political culture. Rabindranath Tagore first sang it at its 1896 Calcutta session, and in 1905 at Varanasi, the party formally adopted *Vande Mataram* for national occasions.

By the 1930s, Muslim leaders had started raising objections to the song on religious grounds. Remember, during 1920-30, many fissiparous tendencies, with overt and covert support from the British, were on the rise. In Tamil Nadu, an anti-North, anti-Hindi, and anti-Brahmin campaign was launched, which quickly transformed into an anti-Congress and pro-British movement in the name of 'social justice'.

Muslim opposition to the Congress was not confined only to *Vande Mataram*. They, during those fateful years, opposed almost everything that embodied India's rich and diverse civilisational spirit, aligning instead with the colonists alongside the Communists.

In this context, my previous column mentioned the Pirpur Committee Report. Since then, I have been contacted by some readers eager to know more about this nearly forgotten chapter of history.

Formally titled A Report of the Inquiry Committee Appointed by the Council of the All-India Muslim League, it was pub-

lished in March 1938. Commonly known as the Pirpur Report, it was named after its chairman, Raja Muhammad Mehdi of Pirpur — a prominent and senior Muslim League leader from the United Provinces.

The Pirpur Committee accused the then Congress-run provincial governments of anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu biases. It implied that Hindus, Hindu communalism, and the Congress were all synonymous. It raised several issues, including the use of Hindi, the singing of *Vande Mataram*, and the right to 'slaughter' cows.

The Congress, instead of opposing this divisive mindset, surrendered. In October 1937, the Congress Working Committee met in Calcutta and officially shortened *Vande Mataram*.

The abbreviated version as the national song. The Pirpur Report was used to strengthen the demand for Pakistan on the plea that Muslims could not get a fair deal in an independent India, likely to be ruled by a Hindu-dominated Congress. The report, in the present context, might well serve as a charge sheet against PM Modi.

The allegations of 'atrocities' perpetrated against Muslims by the Congress listed in the report, and those used to paint Modi

as 'anti-Muslim', are uncannily identical. Barely a decade later, on June 19, 1947, the Congress agreed to the partition of India. Yet, one must ask: did these concessions cause any meaningful shift in the ideological outlook of a significant section of the Muslim community that remained in residual India?

We are repeatedly told that many Muslims rejected the Muslim League's 'Two-Nation Theory' and chose residual India over Pakistan. If that is true, why does *Vande Mataram* — a song representing India's civilisational ethos — still provoke resistance from parts of the very community that supposedly rejected that theory?

The truth is that the demand for Pakistan was primarily driven by elite Muslims from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Bengal — yet the vast majority of them chose not to migrate to the new nation they had strongly supported. Instead, they stayed in residual India, adopted khadi, and quickly joined the Congress. They changed their political identity without changing their mindset. Equally telling is the trajectory of Syed Ahmad Mehdi, son of the Raja of Pirpur and heir to the author of the infamous Pirpur Report. He later became a Congress Member of Parliament (1957-62 and 1962-67) and eventually rose to the

rank of Union Cabinet Minister. This single career arc captures a broader post-Partition pattern: those who had once legitimised the two-nation logic turned seamlessly into flag-bearers of India's 'secular' politics.

How objection to *Vande Mataram* has less to do with Islamic theology and more to do with a longstanding hatred among sections of the subcontinent's Muslims towards India's pre-Islamic civilisational identity.

A significant section of the Indian subcontinent's Muslims continues to perceive Pakistan as a symbol of Islamic aspirations and religious identity.

However, this perception is deeply flawed. In practice, Pakistan has never been a genuine custodian of Islam or global Muslim concerns. On 22 June this year, the US bombed Iran. Most of the Islamic world (particularly subcontinent Muslims) were enraged over it — but not the Pakistani establishment. Indian subcontinent Muslims have generally expressed sympathy for Palestine and Iran.

Pakistan, however, endorsed the Israel-approved 'Gaza Plan', even as, amid US-backed Israeli airstrikes on Iran, Pakistan's Army Chief Asim Munir was in Washington formulating a forward strategy with US President Donald Trump. Pakistan has a strategic association with China, a country known for working systematically to obliterate the Islamic identity of its Uyghur Muslim population and render it invisible in its homeland, the Xinjiang province. Usually, a state claiming to represent Islamic ethos and interests should have estranged relations with a nation that is a strategic partner. The genocidal genocide of Muslims within its borders. But Pakistan not only keeps quiet over it, it is happy to reduce itself to the status of China's surrogate state.

What explains this contradiction? Pakistan's love for Islam is easily overshadowed by its intrinsic contempt for its pre-Islamic traditions that are identified with residual India. PM Modi's and Union Home Minister Amit Shah's observation that the Congress's 1937 compromise sowed the seeds of Partition is not just rhetorical flourish but a historical fact.

The ideological pattern is clear: concessions made in the name of communal harmony neither satisfied separatist demands nor strengthened national unity. Instead, they are capable of addressing petty grievance and rejection that eventually tore the subcontinent apart.

# Stressed teachers, anxious children: A school system under growing strain



HIMADRI SEKHAR DE

Walk into any school today and beneath the familiar buzz, you will sense something deeper — a collective emotional fatigue. It isn't only students who appear overwhelmed. Parents, teachers, and even school systems are carrying levels of stress that were unheard of a generation ago. What we are witnessing is not scattered anxiety; it is an ecosystem under strain, and children are absorbing the heaviest weight.

## Teachers: Overworked and Emotionally Exhausted

Teaching has always been demanding, but today's teachers face pressures far beyond academic responsibilities. Compliance requirements, documentation loads, online updates, supervisory tasks, and activity coordination have expanded their roles dramatically. Most teachers were trained in pedagogy, not bureaucratic administration. This mismatch leaves them anxious, fatigued, and often disillusioned.

Yet behind their professional roles lie private burdens — financial worries, family issues, caregiving responsibilities, and personal emotional struggles. When a teacher walks into a classroom depleted, the environment inevitably absorbs that energy. As one teacher recently put it, "We are expected to stay calm for our students even when we don't have a moment to breathe ourselves."

A stressed teacher cannot consistently model serenity or resilience for young minds. Their nervous system becomes the emotional climate of the classroom.

## Parents: Pressured, Guilty, and Overwhelmed

If teachers are stretched at school, parents are stretched at home. Rising living costs, job instability, health concerns, the demands of nuclear families, and constant comparison through social media have placed parents under unrelenting pressure. Even well-intentioned parents often operate with guilt and anxiety they cannot fully name.

Children absorb this long before they understand it. A home tinged with emotional strain quietly becomes an extension of the stress a



child experiences at school.

The question then becomes unavoidable: when both teachers and parents are struggling, who is holding the child?

## Children: Navigating a High-Pressure World

Today's students live in an environment radically different from anything previous generations experienced. Academic expectations are higher. Social comparisons are constant. Online personas create pressure to appear perfect. Opportunities are vast, but so are the fears of failing, lagging behind, or being judged.

This emotional landscape is intensified by digital exposure. Several international reviews over the past decade show that higher smartphone and social media use among adolescents correlates with elevated risks of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thinking — especially when use becomes compulsive.

Yet digital factors are only one strand in a larger web of stress, emotional overload, and unmet developmental needs.

Increasingly frequent reports of student self-harm and suicide are tragic reflections of an environment that overwhelms children with pressures they are developmentally ill-equipped to manage. No counselling session can offset a home or school environment saturated with anxiety.

## The Flawed Argument: "We Also Faced Stress"

Adults often respond to young people's struggles by saying, "We also had stress growing up." But the comparison is fundamentally flawed.

The 1980s and 1990s had no smartphones, no real-time comparison, no algorithmic pressure, no hyper-competition, no constant academic evaluation, and vastly less information overload. Children today face psychological inputs at an intensity and speed that older generations

simply did not encounter.

The world has changed. Stress has multiplied. The ecosystem around a child is now immeasurably heavier.

## Why Fixing the Child Alone Never Works

Children do not exist in isolation. Their mental health is shaped by the emotional stability of the adults around them. When teachers are overburdened and parents overwhelmed, children inhabit a world that mirrors this instability. This is why one-off workshops, short counselling sessions, or isolated interventions often fail.

Real, lasting change requires strengthening the ecosystem — the adults, the systems, the expectations — not just the child.

## The Way Forward: Healing the Whole Ecosystem

A healthier educational environment demands balanced reform across three fronts:

### In Schools:

Compliance must not overshadow pedagogy. Teachers need reasonable expectations, emotional support, and training in managing the psychological complexities of modern classrooms.

### At Home:

Parents need guidance to reduce emotional spillover, manage stress, and communicate in developmentally healthy ways. A calm home becomes a psychological buffer for children.

### For Children:

Well-being must be experienced, not only taught. Consistency between what adults teach and how they behave is crucial. As one counsellor said, "You cannot plant seeds of well-being in soil that is constantly trembling."

### A Possible Future

The crisis is real, but it is reversible. When we recognise that children's mental health reflects the emotional health of the adults around them, the path ahead becomes clearer. If we nurture teachers, support parents, and build balanced school systems, children will naturally experience greater security, confidence, and joy.

A mentally healthy child is not created in isolation — they are shaped by the ecosystem they grow in. Heal the ecosystem, and you heal the child.

The writer is a positive psychology specialist working in child development, mental health education, and resilience-building for students, teachers and families

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# Higher education: A bold blueprint for Viksit Bharat



MANOJ TIWARI

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025 marks a significant milestone in India's higher education reform journey. Rooted in the constitutional mandate under Entry 66 of the Union List and aligned with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020, the Bill lays a strong foundation for reformed, transparent, and globally benchmarked regulation of higher education. The proposed framework is both timely and progressive, with the potential to substantially strengthen academic excellence, institutional autonomy, and national capacity-building across the higher education ecosystem.

India's higher education landscape has witnessed unprecedented growth over the past decades, with more than a thousand universities and tens of thousands of higher educational institutions serving over four crore students. While this expansion has enhanced access, it has also resulted in regulatory fragmentation and overlapping compliance requirements due to the existence of multiple statutory bodies.

The proposed Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA), as an apex umbrella institution, seeks to streamline this landscape by consolidating standard-setting, accreditation, and regulation under a unified, technology-driven framework. For institutions of higher learning, this rationalisation is a welcome step towards reducing procedural redundancies and enabling greater focus on teaching, research, and innovation.

The Bill's emphasis on a "light but tight" regulatory architecture, as envisioned by NEP 2020, resonates strongly with the broader higher education sector's commitment to academic integrity, transparency, and innovation. By shifting the regulatory focus from prescriptive control to outcomes-based oversight, supported by public self-disclosure, the proposed framework promotes trust-based governance while ensuring accountability. The move towards faceless, technology-enabled single-window systems is particularly significant, as it promises efficiency, objectivity, and reduced administrative burden for well-performing institutions.

Importantly, the Bill explicitly safeguards the existing autonomy of Institutions of National Importance, while simultaneously strengthening the overall regulatory environment for universities and other higher educational institutions. The proposed Standards Council, Regulatory Council, and Accreditation Council, operating independently within their respective domains, create a robust checks-and-balances mechanism that upholds academic standards while encouraging institutional differentiation and innovation.

From a strategic standpoint, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill also complements the vision of institutions of higher learning to foster interdisciplinary education, research-driven teaching, and industry-relevant skill development.

The Bill's focus on global best practices, flexible academic structures, and continuous reskilling directly supports efforts across the higher education sector to prepare future-ready graduates capable of addressing complex economic, technological, and societal challenges.

Enhanced transparency, student feedback-driven evaluation, and a strong grievance redressal mechanism further contribute to building a learner-centric ecosystem.

Equally significant is the Bill's emphasis on youth empowerment and digital literacy in higher education. By enabling institutions to innovate responsibly and align academic offerings with national development priorities, the proposed framework strengthens the talent pipeline essential for India's economic and social transformation. The Bill provides an enabling environment for institutions of higher learning to deepen their contributions to nation-building and the broader vision of Viksit Bharat.

In conclusion, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025 represents a forward-looking reform that balances autonomy with accountability, innovation with integrity, and growth with quality. The higher education community views this legislation as a constructive step towards creating a coherent, globally competitive, and future-ready higher education system. Institutions of higher learning remain committed to working within this evolving framework to uphold excellence, nurture talent, and contribute meaningfully to India's journey towards a developed and self-reliant nation.

The writer is Director, Indian Institute of Management, Mumbai, and Professor, Industrial and Systems Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur

imkitiwar09 @dailyopinion manoj-tiwari-5005063



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

## Insurance reforms

Need to address concerns over 100% FDI

THE Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill proposes to raise the FDI (foreign direct investment) limit in the insurance sector to 100 per cent from the existing 74 per cent. This is part of the new-generation financial sector reforms initiated by the Modi government, which has set itself the goal of "Insurance for all" by 2047. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has said that raising the FDI limit to 100 per cent will help attract more capital, improve competition and increase insurance penetration by making policies more affordable. However, concerns are being raised about this ambitious move. Terming it "irrational", the All India Insurance Employees Association is apprehensive that if existing foreign partners of Indian private companies decide to operate independently, it could lead to hostile takeover bids.

The Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India will have to play a proactive role to address these fears. It is laudable that the Bill proposes to empower the regulator to disgorge wrongful gains made by insurers and distribute them among affected policy-holders. The move to strengthen public sector insurance firms and give them greater operational autonomy is also welcome. This is particularly significant in the context of the government's disclosure that the Adani Group is among the top recipients of investments by the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC). However, the FM's claim that her ministry does not issue any advisory or directions to the LIC regarding its investment decisions has not found many takers.

Composite licensing, a long-pending demand of the industry, has been excluded from the Bill's purview. Such licensing allows an insurer to offer life, health and general insurance under one roof, in line with the global preference for integrated models. In view of such lacunae, it will be challenging for the government to achieve universal insurance coverage and improve ease of doing business in this key sector. Safeguarding the interests of policy-holders will require stronger long-term commitment.

## A deadly convergence

Kabaddi, cash and the underworld

THE murder of kabaddi team promoter Rana Balachauria in Mohali is not an isolated crime; it is the latest flashpoint in a long-simmering gang rivalry that has steadily encroached upon Punjab's sporting and cultural spaces. Shot dead in the middle of a tournament, in front of hundreds of spectators, Balachauria's killing lays bare how deeply organised crime has penetrated what was once a symbol of rural pride and athletic tradition. Investigations and subsequent arrests point to a familiar pattern. Rival gangs, locked in turf wars across the Majha region, are no longer fighting only over land, drugs or extortion routes. Kabaddi, which is flush with sponsorships, betting money and local influence, has become a lucrative arena for asserting dominance.

The so-called "Moosewala link" illustrates another disturbing dimension. Gang claims on social media portraying the murder as revenge for the killing of singer Sidhu Moosewala may or may not withstand police scrutiny, but their intent is clear: to mythologise violence, draw lines of allegiance and amplify fear. Similar tactics were seen after the murders of kabaddi players and promoters, including Sandeep Nangal Ambian. What makes the situation more alarming is the recurring overlap between gangs and sports persons themselves, as seen in other cases where kabaddi players have figured among accused or victims. This blurring of lines corrodes the credibility of sport and exposes young athletes to criminal networks masquerading as patrons and protectors.

Political outrage after each killing rings hollow unless followed by sustained action. Arrests, while necessary, are not sufficient. The state must dismantle the financial ecosystems that allow gangs to thrive in sports, regulate tournaments, track funding sources and protect players and promoters who refuse to align with criminal interests. Kabaddi should not become collateral damage in Punjab's gang wars.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, DECEMBER 18, 1925

## 'India in 1924-25'

PROF Rushbrook Williams's 'India in 1924-25', like its predecessors, is a singularly interesting volume. Besides being a mine of official information, it is a survey, necessarily rapid and somewhat one-sided but none-the-less valuable, of all or most of the events of any importance in the economic or political sphere that happened in India during the year under review. In the first chapter, the writer treats such questions as India's relations with her northern neighbours; conditions on the North-West frontier in 1924, including Hindu-Muslim relations and the deplorable happenings at Kohat; the attitude of the educated classes towards the general question of Indian defence, particularly such questions as the Indianisation of the commissioned ranks, and the desirability of having an Indian Sandhurst; the relations of India and the Empire, and the views of educated classes thereon; and the position of the Indians abroad. The second chapter deals with such questions as dyarchy; the difficulties of the provincial constitution; the demand for advance in the central government; the Mudirman Committee; the position of the local self-government and its general tendencies; questions of law and order; crime during the year; both ordinary and revolutionary; Indian jails; civil justice and legislation. The third chapter gives an idea of central and provincial finance; provincial contributions; the Taxation Enquiry Committee; separation of railways from general finances; retrenchment and financial equilibrium; a forecast of the 1925-26 expenditure; and a survey of India's imports and exports.

## Munir tightens grip on unstable Pakistan

The military establishment is struggling to push the narrative of smooth governance



RANA BANERJI  
FORMER SPECIAL SECRETARY,  
CABINET SECRETARIAT

EVEN as the dust settles on the mysterious six-day delay in notifying Field Marshal Asim Munir as Pakistan's Chief of Defence Forces (CDF), the omnipotent military establishment has not been able to comfortably push the narrative of smooth governance and stability on the political and economic fronts.

The confusion temporarily led to speculation about former PM Nawaz Sharif's unease over Munir's assumption of absolute powers. However, saner counsel seems to have prevailed as the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) will have to keep relying on the army leadership's assistance for long-term political survival—the CDF will now remain in place for nearly two years beyond the next general election.

On December 11, announcing the verdict of the much-delayed Field General Court Martial (FGCM) against Raiz Hameed, now divested of military rank, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) indicated that the FGCM had found him guilty on all four charges — engaging in political activities, violating the Official Secrets Act in a manner "detrimental to the safety and interest of the state", misuse of authority and government resources, and causing wrongful loss to individuals. It emphasised that "all legal rights, including the right to a defence team of his choice" had been complied with. Significantly, in a thinly veiled threat to implicate former PM Imran Khan in a future military trial, the ISPR elaborated that Hameed's "involvement in



STRATEGY: The ruling party is banking on the military leadership for long-term survival. REUTERS

fomenting vested political agitation and instability in cohorts with political elements and in certain other matters" would be dealt with separately.

The stiff sentence of 14-year rigorous imprisonment was unexpected. Apart from suggesting that senior army Generals were not exempt from accountability, its timing marked a warning against possible voices of dissent opposed to Munir's extended coterminous tenure as CDF and Army Chief. It also left open scope for Hameed to turn approver against Imran at a later stage.

The army leadership changed its strategy of providing regular access to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) leaders and Imran's relatives to meet him in Adiala jail. After a long gap, when rumours surfaced about his well-being and possible shifting to an undisclosed location, one of his sisters was allowed to see him. Imran's ex-wife, Jemima Khan complained in a tweet on X to Elon Musk about his sons not being allowed to communicate with him. This allegation was strenuously denied by the Foreign Office.

While Imran has not relinquished his posture of confronta-

tion, a new 23-member political coordination committee of the PTI was set up to act as an interface with the military establishment. Headed by advocate Salman Akram Raja, it comprises more moderates and only a sprinkling of known hardliners. Mehmoob Khan Achakzai, Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly, was included. On the other hand, Sohail Afridi, newly-appointed Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), has been tasked with upping the ante of public protests in his province.

Addressing the National Ulema Conference in Islamabad on December 10, Asim Munir urged religious scholars to help foster national unity and provide better quality education in madrassas. Referring to persisting terrorism

in KP and Balochistan, he cautioned that in an Islamic state, only the State could declare jihad. The question-answer session at the conference was strictly regulated and Munir walked away even as a few lone voices raised murmurs of dissent, dissociating madrassa education from terror.

The judiciary has remained muted and sullen, even as sections of the Bar at the national and provincial levels continue to criticise the 26th and 27th Amendments. Justice Tariq Mehmood Jahangiri appeared in the Islamabad High Court to defend the veracity of his law degree, but Chief Justice Dogar disregarded his request to recuse himself from the hearing.

With political stability proving elusive, Pakistan has fared no better on the economic front. Though the International Monetary Fund approved \$12-billion disbursement under its existing Extended Fund Facility, there were stern strictures focusing on inadequate combatting of corruption and inability to prevent siphoning of funds by business elites.

Embarrassingly for the military establishment, well-known US-based Pakistani-origin economist Atif Mian argued in his hard-hit-

ting writup (December 9), 'Five for Fifty: Toward an economic vision for Pakistan', that the average Pakistani could earn as much as any other citizen of the world for the next 30 years if only it sustains average per capita income growth of 5 per cent a year. He believes what has held Pakistan back is not a lack of talent or effort, but absence of a clear, sustained economic vision. The country needed a regime change to realise its potential. Atif wrote, qualifying that he meant this "not in political terms necessarily, but in strategic policy".

Referring to the Special Investment Facilitation Council, which has failed to significantly open up foreign investment channels despite being under direct military supervision, Atif pointed out that Pakistan's policy establishment still misunderstood what investment was, repeatedly mistaking inflows of borrowed funds for growth-generating capital. The economic partnership with China had not been well-designed, he felt, built on technology transfer, skills and higher domestic productivity. Instead, policy leaned on fossil-fuel power plants, often in the wrong places and with high fixed and operating costs in dollars. This resulted "in a zombie power sector, which the government is now trying to rescue by laxing electricity".

He lamented poor policy choices that had locked Pakistan into a stagnation regime, citing examples of "real-estate-driven elite capture, institutional support for negative-sum games of sectarianism", even the "most recently appointed special czar for crypto".

Meanwhile, after abolishing the post of Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, Munir has still not announced who will be promoted to the four-star slot of Commander, Strategic Forces. Among his most trusted lieutenants, Lt Gen Asim Malik, continues as DG ISI, though his four-year term on this rank ended in October. Others from the 80th Pakistan Military Academy course batch of senior-most three-star Generals await this decision anxiously.

## THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The civil-military divide is the most fundamental fracture in Pakistan's body politic. — Noam Chomsky

## Monkeys remain a constant in Shimla

ANUJ TOMAR

In this book, *Shimla Past and Present* (1904), Edward Buck wrote: "Of recent years, the monkeys have become a decided nuisance in Shimla, they are terribly destructive pests in station gardens and do not improve our houses by frolicking on their roofs. The native population of the station, however, accepts the position with that quiet resignation for which the inhabitant of Hindustan is so famous, and in the Lakkar Bazaar the 'bundars' are particularly numerous and mischievous."

More than a century later, not much has changed — we suffer the same predicament with a spirit of capitulation. Monkey attacks are frequent and people are bitten. I have the rare distinction of having been bitten twice, thrice shy. Woefully, unprepared schemes to cull, relocate, repel, reform or morally uplift the 'bundars' have come to naught.

Meanwhile, the simians are thriving — indeed, one might say they are experiencing a golden age of petty crime of sorts. One often encounters them perched on their vantage positions, eyeing the passersby as though deciding who will be mugged next, by bearing their fangs.

They commit daylight robberies with the élan of seasoned brigands, relieving unsuspecting folks of their bags and eatables. Stealing eyewear — spectacles and sunglasses — is their preferred modus operandi. A monkey will duly return your prescription glasses, but only upon receiving an appropriate ransom — bananas, roasted gram or biscuits. Their terms are non-negotiable, and they accept neither UPI nor pleas for mercy.

In one such notable heist, a monkey was spotted perched atop a tin roof clutched a bundle of currency notes, perhaps a chance prize from a snatched bag. Then, in what appeared to be a moment of generosity or sheer mischief, he began raining the notes down one by one — a sight generally associated with politicians, not wildlife. And the crowd below scrambled for the airborne moolah. Surprised by the attention, this cash-rich crook swiftly retreated into trees, but continued to shower currency like a furry philanthropist on the move. It did attract sufficient public and media attention.

A rowdy troop of monkeys waylaid a young officer and his wife while they were strolling down the Mall Road. Sizing up the situation — and their chances — they reluctantly sacrificed their softy to the furry assailants. The wife took a dig, "Since when have officers been afraid of monkeys?" Salvaging the situation, he quipped, "Indeed, but the monkeys wouldn't know, would they?"

Adding to the general chaos, the city's traffic now crawls late into the night, thanks to the perpetual tourist rush. This nocturnal racket and large bright mast lights across the town have inspired the monkeys to adopt a nightlife of their own too. Where once they retired at dusk, they now prowl after dark with the confidence of nightclub regulars. Their urbane ways of life can be a cause of envy.

And thus, Shimla continues its century-old uneasy cohabitation of the primates — one securing their doors and windows with iron grills and running for cover at the sound of monkey chatter, whilst the other unabashedly dictating terms, and every now and then violently shaking a tree branch in a frenzy to drive home their undisputed dominance. Truly, some traditions never die.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## Desist from exploiting flyers

It refers to 'IndiGo fiasco must spur course correction'; the Competition Commission of India, a government body regulating fair market practices, should cap the share of aviation players to prevent dominance of any one of them. No airline should be allowed to have more than 25% market share. There should be equitable distribution of airport resources like slots and gates to prevent control by a few. The DGCA must enforce stricter, proactive oversight, especially regarding new rules like Flight Duty Time Limitations and crew rostering. The ultimate goal should be to provide congenial atmosphere to the airlines as well as passengers. Facilitation, not exploitation, should be the thumb rule.

KR BHARTI, SHIMLA

## Study implications of Bill

Refer to 'Higher education Bill'; putting the three regulatory bodies — UGC, AICTE and NCTE — under a unified architecture aligns with the National Education Policy's promise of 'tight but tight' regulation. The aim is clear: reduce bureaucratic clutter, harmonise standards across disciplines and allow institutions greater academic flexibility while maintaining accountability. The Bill's tenacity will be judged not by its architecture alone but by its execution — whether it genuinely simplifies regulation, protects institutional autonomy and raises academic standards. Its success will rest on whether it empowers universities to think freely, teach boldly and compete globally, rather than merely regulating them efficiently.

YASH PAL RALHAN, JALANDHAR

## Discrepancies in facts

Apropos of 'Revisiting the valor of 9 JAT in the 1971 battle of Chhamb'; the article has some inaccuracies. Firstly, no 'deep' recce was permitted, only tactical patrols could be sent across the Line of Control. Secondly, the writer states that 9 JAT moved forward on December 4; however, the withdrawal of 191 Infantry Brigade took place two days later on the night of December 6, so there was no question of them crossing each other. Thirdly, Armour support was available, and tanks of 9 Horse and 72 Armoured Regiment were deployed in the vicinity. Three enemy tanks of 28 Cavalry were knocked out and captured by us. Fourthly, each

infantry brigade was provided adequate artillery support. Lastly, it is incorrect to say that valour was not recognised; citations of deserving personnel were sent up by the division to the corps HQ. As a matter of fact, Maj HS Grewal of 9 JAT was posthumously awarded a Vir Chakra for fighting this battle.

MAJ GEN AJS SANDHU (RETD), BY MAIL

## PM's presence essential

Refer to 'Missing in Parliament'; at a time when the Parliament is in session and public trust in institutions is under strain, the Prime Minister's physical presence in the House is not optional — it is essential. No foreign visit, however well-intentioned, can substitute the constitutional responsibility of debating on issues affecting the nation. India's democracy demands that its highest legislative authority answer questions, face scrutiny and convince the Opposition, before projecting its successful leadership abroad. For the Prime Minister, domestic duty should come first.

GAURAV BADHWAR, ROHTAK

## Modi evades difficult questions

With reference to 'Missing in Parliament'; the issue of the PM's absence from parliamentary debate is an important one. It seems PM Modi wants to evade criticism or opposition. He has not faced the press in the past 10 years. Just a mere reference to the Gujarat riots during an interview by Karan Thapar made him walk away. He does not interact with the press during his foreign visits nor does he allow foreign dignitaries to hold a joint press conference in India.

PRIT PAL SINGH, BY MAIL

## Procedural safeguards

The decision of a Delhi court refusing to take cognisance of the Enforcement Directorate's money laundering complaint against Congress leaders, Sonia Gandhi and Rahul, in the National Herald case underscores the centrality of due process in criminal jurisprudence. By holding that proceedings under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act cannot be sustained in the absence of an FIR relating to a scheduled offence, the court has reaffirmed that procedural safeguards are not mere technicalities but foundational legal requirements.

RUKMA SHARMA, JALANDHAR



# India's 390 mn kids must look towards Australia



**MADHUR M MAHAJAN**  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, GGSDS COLLEGE, CHANDIGARH

AUSTRALIA has become the first country in the world to ban social media for children under 16 effective December 10. This law emerged from evidence gathered from behavioral studies conducted in Australian schools that excessive screen exposure among younger teens reduced academic focus and increased the influence of social media on children's emotional development. Cyberbullying, sexual exploitation and algorithm-driven content significantly worsened anxiety, depression, poor sleep and addictive behaviours among adolescents.

Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, Twitch, etc have been asked to block millions of accounts of users below the age 16. The new law provides enforcement powers to the eSafety Commissioner to pass corrective directions to non-compliant platforms and financial penalties of up to \$33 million on such companies.

Social media companies have criticised the feasibility and cost of universal age verification, warning of potential privacy risks and user drop-off.

In India, the laws on social media regulation are governed through the Information Technology Act, 2008; the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021; and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDP Act), 2023. While these regulate how platforms process children's data, what safety mechanisms they must maintain and how quickly harmful content must be removed. The 2021 Intermediary Rules require platforms to deploy grievance officers, ensure content takedown within specified timelines and maintain due diligence practices.

Social media intermediaries offer parental grievance channels and heightened safety features, though these obliga-

tions do not prevent teens from joining platforms. The DPDP Act strengthens protections for minors by requiring parental consent for children's data, prohibiting targeted advertising and introducing penalties for misuse of sensitive data.

However, execution gaps persist. Age verification remains voluntary and inconsistent, explicit and violent content remains accessible. The regulatory regime does not prevent children's access outright but places responsibilities on platforms. Thus, the burden of monitoring falls on parents, schools and users themselves.

Social media is increasing anxiety, depression and low self-esteem driven by social comparison, cyberbullying and unrealistic online ideals. Studies indicate that 27% of teens show addiction symptoms and 65% feel inadequate due to online content, affecting academics and relationships. Concerns include sleep disorders (40% affected), cyberbullying and body-image issues. A study reveals that about 73% of children aged 8-13 in tier-I and tier-II cities are using social media apps, exposing them to such vulnerabilities at a very early age.

India should draw inspiration from Australia rather than relying solely on voluntary compliance. It should set up an age limit for accessing such platforms and impose meaningful penalties for violations. A comprehensive model that provides scope for shared devices, differing literacy levels and digital-access disparities is needed. Access to educational tools should not be restricted under the guise of age-control measures. Over-verification and collection of personal data, excessive control and vague discretionary enforcement should be avoided.

With over 390 million children aged 0-16, India's youth represents an extraordinary reservoir of promise. Their minds, still forming, must be shielded from the clutter that undermines their confidence and clouds their vision.

Stronger safeguards, humane policies and responsible technology can create a digital space where young minds grow, not wither. Eventually, the measure of a nation is not just in what it builds, but in how gently it protects the dreams of its children.



**JOEL SCANLAN**  
SR LECTURER, CYBERSECURITY & PRIVACY, UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

THE tech industry's unofficial motto for two decades was "move fast and break things." The philosophy broke more than just taxi monopolies or hotel chains. It also constructed a digital world filled with risks for our most vulnerable. In 2024-25 alone, the Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation received nearly 83,000 reports of online child sexual exploitation material, primarily on mainstream platforms—a 41% increase from the year before.

Also, links between adolescents' use of social media and a range of harms have been found, such as adverse mental health outcomes, substance abuse and risky sexual behaviours. These findings represent the failure of a digital ecosystem built on profit rather than protection.

With the government's ban on social media accounts for under-16s having taken effect recently as well as age assurance for logged-in search engine users from December 27 and adult content from March 9, 2026, we have reached a landmark moment. But we must be clear about what this regulation achieves and what it ignores. The ban may keep some children out (if they don't circumvent it), but it does nothing to fix the harmful architecture awaiting them upon return. Nor does it take steps to modify the harmful behaviour of some adult users. We need meaningful change toward a digital duty of care, where platforms are legally required to anticipate and mitigate harm.

Currently, online safety often relies on a "whack-a-mole" approach: platforms wait for users to report harmful content, then moderators remove it. It is reactive, slow and often traumatising for the human moderators involved. We need safety by design. Safety features must be embedded in a platform's core architecture. It moves beyond simply blocking access, to questioning why the plat-

form allows harmful pathways to exist. We are already seeing this when platforms with histories of harm add new features—such as "trusted connections" on Roblox that limits in-game connections only to people the child also knows in the real world. This feature should have existed from the start.

A research conducted in partnership with the University of Tasmania challenges the industry narrative that safety is "too hard" or "too costly" to implement. Simple, well-designed interventions can disrupt harmful behaviours without breaking the user experience for the others. A finding comes from a partnership with a large adult site, Pornhub. In the first publicly evaluated deterrence intervention, when a user searched for keywords associated with child abuse, they didn't just hit a blank wall. They triggered a warning message and a chatbot directing the user to therapeutic help.

We observed a decrease in searches for illegal material, but also more than 80% of users who encountered this intervention did not attempt to search for that content on Pornhub again in that session. This data is consistent with findings from three randomised controlled trials.

The warning that Google displays directs users to "Stop It Now" if they search for illegal material relating to child sexual exploitation. By interrupting the user's flow with a clear deterrent message, we can stop a harmful thought from becoming a harmful action. This is safety by design, using a platform's own interface to protect the community.

This is why it's vital to include a digital duty of care in online safety legislation. Instead of users entering at their own risk, online platforms would be responsible for identifying and mitigating risks, such as algorithms that recommend harmful content or search functions that help users access illegal material. Platforms can start making meaningful changes today. Examples include implementing grooming detection (enabling the automated detection of perpetrators trying to exploit kids), blocking the sharing of abuse imagery and videos and the links to websites that host such material, as well as proactively removing harmful pathways that target the vulnerable—such as children online being able to interact with adults not known to them.

Deterrence messaging plays a role too—displaying clear warnings when users search for harmful terms is effective. Tech companies should test what works, sharing data rather than hiding it.

Courtesy: The Conversation



REUTERS

Children must be shielded from the clutter that undermines their confidence.

Safety features must be embedded in a platform's core architecture.

# BJP's initiatives take nari shakti to the next level



**VANATHI SRINIVASAN**  
NATIONAL PRESIDENT, BJP MAHILA MORCHA

WHEN the Indian women's kabaddi team defended their World Cup title in Dhaka, they were a team of young women—many from small towns and farming families—standing on a global stage as if they had always belonged there. Leading them was 23-year-old Sanju Devi, daughter of daily wage workers from a Chhattisgarh village, now Player of the Tournament at a World Cup.

In Colombo, our specially-abled women's team lifted the inaugural Blind Women's T20 World Cup, going unbeaten through the tournament and showing the world that disability does not mean invisibility. In another corner of the country, Arundhati Chaudhary from Kota, who once trained with a wrist injury so severe she could barely throw a right hook, returned as a world champion in the 70 kg category—and as a havalidar in the Army.

These achievements tell us that today's Indian woman is more confident, visible and ambitious than ever. And that confi-



SANDEEP JOSHI

dence is now an engine of India's growth.

For our mothers' generation, a "successful" daughter was one who studied well and married "on time". Today, that definition has exploded. On the field, women in blue and red jerseys are normal, not rare. A girl in a government school can point to a kabaddi captain and say, "She looks like me." A village girl can be inspired by watching a team that proves someone like her can play for India.

Off the field, the same fearless mindset is reshaping our economy. When Falguni Nayak left a banking career at 50 to build Nykaa, she was told it was too late. Today, she stands as one of India's richest self-made women and the founder of a homegrown beauty giant. In Bengaluru, Himani Yadav, an IIT-Guwahati graduate, turned her own engagement ring

choice into ONYA, a lab-grown diamond jewellery brand that is expanding. In the Cauvery delta, women like Madhu Nachammai are turning local bananas into cosmetics brands, while others build VR tourism and IoT companies from tier-II and tier-III towns.

These stories are measurable. India's female labour force participation rate, which hovered in the low 20s a decade ago, has risen to 41-42% in 2023-24, with especially strong gains in rural areas. Women are working more and with a sense of purpose.

In the startup ecosystem, women lead or co-lead about 18% of startups, almost double of their share a few years ago. At the grassroots level, women are taking charge of local governance. Around 40% of representatives in Panchayati Raj institutions are women, making

Women today are asking for partnership and respect. The more we trust them to lead, the higher this nation will rise.

decisions on water, health, roads and schools.

Individual courage is at the heart of these stories, but the background has also changed in important ways. In the last decade, government initiatives have put more economic power directly into women's hands. Under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, more than half of basic bank accounts are held by women. Under the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, around 70% of loan accounts belong to women, helping crores of their turn side hustles into small businesses.

KheLo India and women's leagues have created platforms for thousands of girls to compete with better coaching and infrastructure. The women's record performances at games are not flukes; they are the result of girls getting a real chance to play—and play to win.

Why does this matter for India? Because women's confidence changes everything. When she works, the GDP grows. When she builds a company, she creates jobs. When she leads in local government, services improve for communities. When she is financially independent, the next generation is better fed, better educated and more ambitious.

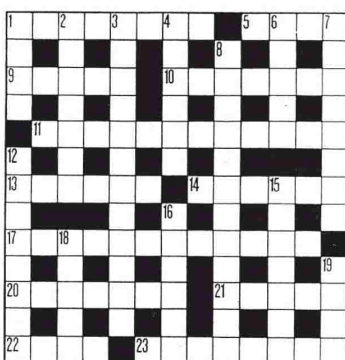
There is also a soft power dimension. A country showcasing a world champion kabaddi team led by a village girl, blind cricketers lifting a World Cup, self-made women billionaires, small-town tech founders and "lakshpati didis" is sending a message: this democracy trusts its daughters.

Yet, our work is not done. There are still girls who drop out of school too early, women held back by unpaid care work, talented graduates who never get a safe, fair chance to prove themselves. If New India is serious about growth, we must share them, actively:

- Families must share responsibilities so that daughters and daughters-in-law can pursue bold careers and ventures.
- Companies must measure success not only in profit margins but in how many women they hire, mentor and promote.
- Political parties must keep increasing the number of women in real decision-making roles.

Young women today are far more confident. They are not waiting for permission; they are asking for partnership and respect. The more we trust them to lead, the higher this nation will rise.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



### ACROSS

- Urbane (8)
- Old (4)
- Splendid meal (5)
- Widespread outcry (7)
- Having become public knowledge (3,2,3,4)
- Reddish-yellow (6)
- Counting frame (6)
- Pleasant to look at (4,2,3,3)
- Canada's most populous city (7)
- Prefix for between (5)
- Head start (4)
- Bugle call to wake up (8)

### DOWN

- Adroit (4)
- Brilliant display (7)
- An emphatic refusal (7,5)
- Stir up (6)
- Pop music ensemble (5)
- Gloom (8)
- Hurry directly to (4,1,7)
- Of home and family (8)
- Fine glassware (7)
- Especially successful action (6)
- The least bit (5)
- Genuine (4)

### Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Status quo, 8 Fluke, 9 Abstain, 10 Gifted, 11 Homage, 12 Face-lift, 15 Floodlit, 18 Amidst, 20 Arrive, 21 Bigotry, 22 Eider, 23 Think tank.

Down: 2 Taboo, 3 Titan, 4 Spiteful, 5 Office, 6 Sustain, 7 Head start, 11 Half-baked, 13 Citation, 14 Corrode, 16 Divert, 17 Fit out, 19 Siren.

## SU DO KU



EASY

## YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

## CALENDAR

- DECEMBER 18, 2025, THURSDAY
- Shaka Samvat 1947
  - Marghashirsh Shaka 27
  - Pooh Parvishite 4
  - Hijri 1447
  - Krishna Paksha Tithi 14, up to 5:00 am
  - Chhri Yoga up to 3:06 pm
  - Anuradha Nakshatra up to 8:07 pm
  - Moon in Scorpio sign
  - Gandmoola start 8:07 pm

## FORECAST

CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	22	09
New Delhi	23	09
Amritsar	20	10
Bathinda	23	11
Jalandhar	20	10
Ludhiana	21	11
Bhiwani	23	07
Hisar	23	09
Sirsa	23	08
Dharamsala	25	07
Manali	18	04
Shimla	21	11
Srinagar	11	-01
Jammu	23	08
Kargil	05	-07
Leh	05	-08
Dehradun	24	07
Mussoorie	21	12

TEMPERATURE IN °C





## Change for the worse

### The move to alter MGNREGS beyond recognition must be dropped

The Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin), or VB-G RAM G Bill, tabled in the Lok Sabha on Tuesday to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), deserves to be rejected for more than one reason. What is sought to be changed is not only the nomenclature but also the fundamental character of the existing Scheme (MGNREGS). This marks yet another attempt by the BJP-led government at the Centre to reduce the size of the development space to States. The only plausible reason for the name change is the fact that the BJP's ideological master, the RSS, had strong differences with Gandhi. The use of Gandhi's name in the 20-year-old scheme signifies the link to his Gram Swaraj concept that gives importance to democratic decentralisation. But the new Bill, by making the Union government virtually the sole decision maker in the proposed law, will not make any positive contribution in this direction. Supporters of the government point out that the increase in the days of work to 125 in a year is a major benefit for people in rural India. But, the data, on employment given to households under the MGNREGS, reveal that it was only during 2020-21, the COVID-19 pandemic year, that 9.5% (nearly 7.2 million) of households actually worked for 100 days. Over the last two years, only around 7% of families could get the full quota.

By calling the VB-G RAM G "a centrally sponsored scheme", the Union government has done away with the special status that the MGNREGS had enjoyed, wherein it had been absorbing the entire cost of wages payment for unskilled manual labour. In the proposed scheme, the fund-sharing pattern between the Centre and States generally would be 60:40. A benefit of the existing scheme was that rural wages have gone up sharply. The finances of States are not in a robust condition and there are apprehensions about the likely impact of the restructuring of the GST. Besides, when direct cash transfer schemes are increasingly being viewed as a political game changer, it is an open secret that not many States will be keen on participating in the fresh scheme. More importantly, the soul of the current law - a bottom up demand-based scheme - has been taken away. What has been proposed is a supply-driven framework wherein allocations will be capped, as decided by the Union government. Also, States will have to bear any excess expenditure, which is a new feature. Tamil Nadu and Kerala have opposed the Bill citing an undermining of States' interests. A feature of the Bill, which is meant to ensure that work does not clash with farm work during sowing/harvesting, may be included explicitly in the MGNREGS, after consultations with States. However, passionately Minister for Rural Development Shivraj Singh Chouhan may say that the new law is in line with Gandhi's sentiments, good governance, which is the goal of the idea of Ram Rajya, does not become a reality without diffused grassroots democracy - a condition neither sought to be promoted nor nourished by the proposed legislation.

## Rearguard action

### India needs year-round action to tackle fallout of change in weather

The fog season has commenced in India, kicking off the annual cycle of adversity, accidents and chaos in northern India. The spike in particulate matter pollution after monsoon winds, and how it lays bare the year-round unmitigated pollution - now characteristic of not only Delhi, its surrounding capital regions and vast swathes of the Indo-Gangetic plains but, increasingly, even Mumbai, Kolkata and mushrooming urban clusters - is well known. Fog, which results from the fall in temperatures and an accumulation of moisture close to the ground, is also accompanied by air quality nose-diving. The air quality index (AQI) - that anyway hovers in the danger zones of 300-400 or 'very poor' air - breaks through into the worst categories of 'severe' and 'severe+' (400+) triggering extended waves of panic among citizens already besieged by poor quality air. Fog does not necessarily increase the toxicity of the air, which is anyway beyond permissible limits, but brings in additional catastrophes from poor visibility. So far, at least 25 people have been killed and 59 injured in fog-linked road accidents across Uttar Pradesh, with the worst tragedy unfolding on the Yamuna Expressway in Mathura, where a multi-vehicle pile-up turned into an inferno. Airline operations are in disarray in Delhi as 228 flights, including 131 departures and 97 arrivals, were cancelled and hundreds delayed on Monday.

The plummeting AQI saw emergency-level restrictions, called GRAP-4, come into effect in Delhi - it bans construction and demolition activities, pushes schools online and restricts the kinds of vehicles that can ply. On top of this, the Delhi government delivered a vacuous threat that vehicles without a pollution under control certificate would be denied fuel at refuelling stations, and those that did not comply with Bharat Stage-6 emission norms would be barred from entering city limits. This does not account for the fact that it is the residual emissions that are unabated in the capital region, trapped by moisture, that depresses the index. The Centre announces a spate of 'meetings' that do little other than reiterate exhortations that are unheeded. This is the time that the Commission for Air Quality Management, an empowered body, must stress its independence and take year-round action to ensure that whatever the weather, Delhi's AQI stays below 350.

Citizenship is tied to a person's residency in a delimited territory. A citizen is ordinarily expected to be residing in a particular location. The migration of people across borders - international or within a country - dislocates this presumed overlap between citizenship and territory, causing a conceptual drift. Neither governments nor political parties are fully equipped to deal with this, and what we see around the world is public angst that is being harnessed for mobilisation against recent immigrants, mass deportations and efforts to clean up voter lists.

In India, the Election Commission of India (ECI) is undertaking a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls. Pushing back against challenges to the move, the ECI told the Supreme Court of India: "Rapid urbanisation and frequent migration of population from one place to another on account of education, livelihood and other reasons have become a regular trend. Some electors obtain registration in one place and then shift their residence and register themselves at another place without getting their names deleted from the electoral roll of the initial place of residence. This has led to an increased possibility of repeated entries in the electoral roll. Thus, the ECI came to the conclusion that the situation warrants the conduct of a pan-India SIR beginning with the State of Bihar."

Under President Donald Trump, the United States Department of Justice asked all 50 States to hand over their full voter registration databases, arguing that access to complete electoral rolls was necessary to enforce federal election laws. The move triggered resistance from several States. This push coincided with a sweeping executive order signed by Mr. Trump to reshape federal election procedures, including a requirement for documentary proof of U.S. citizenship, such as a passport or birth certificate - measures supporters say strengthen election integrity, but which critics warn could undermine State autonomy and restrict voter access. Around 22 million-24 million non-citizens are in the U.S. legally; estimates of undocumented residents vary but run into the millions. In India and the U.S., the notion of alien voters influencing politics is strong.

### A rise in those moving out

Though the proportion of international migrants in the world's population has remained broadly stable over the decades, the absolute number of migrants has grown rapidly. Migrants as a proportion of the global population may have increased by only about one percentage point since 1960 according to most estimates. But the number of people living outside their country of birth has expanded dramatically - from about 154 million in 1990 to over 300 million by mid-2024, and projected to reach 13.8 lakh in 2025, and projected to reach 13.8 lakh in 2025, and projected to reach 13.8 lakh in 2025, and projected to reach 13.8 lakh in 2025.

In western countries, nativist populism is linked to the rise in the proportion of foreign-born residents. In the U.S., about 14%-15%



Varghese K. George

of the population is foreign born, up from roughly 13% in 2010. The United Kingdom has seen a sharper transformation: the share of those foreign-born rose from about 8% in 2001 to roughly 16% by 2021. Canada has one of the highest proportions among large economies, with about 22% of the population foreign-born. Australia stands out, with around 31%-32% of its population born overseas. Immigration is among the top three issues for voters in most developed countries in 2025, though its intensity as a concern has reduced a bit.

Governments want to regulate and manage the flow of people. India wants to 'export human resources', a euphemism for sending more people abroad for jobs. Rich countries that need young workers are increasingly not wanting them to stay on and claim citizenship, but to leave after a certain number of years. Returning migrants will bring back new social and political attitudes. In their host countries, they will form a labour class without political rights - as with H-1B workers in the U.S., though they have a distant pathway to citizenship. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Singapore have created a category of workers without any political identity, and developed countries are now looking at temporary workers on similar lines.

There are about 35.4 million Overseas Indians (people of Indian origin); 15.8 million of them are Indian citizens, and 19.6 million are persons of Indian origin. Under the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2010, Indian citizens living abroad can enrol and exercise their franchise in their place of residence in India as mentioned in their passport. A petition before the Supreme Court argues that they should be able to vote remotely. The petitioner contends that the 2010 amendment shortchanges non-resident Indians by granting them the right to vote on the one hand, while requiring them to be physically present in India to actually exercise that right.

### Policies and migration

Indian government policies have also encouraged migration from rural to urban areas and to specific regions such as Kashmir. In 2020, the rules for domicile in Jammu and Kashmir were relaxed, allowing non-locals - such as government officials posted for 10 years, residents for 15 years, and students for seven years - to obtain domicile status, with access to jobs and property. While critics argue that these changes are intended to alter the region's demographic composition, the government maintains that they are meant to facilitate development and integration.

Within national boundaries, there are other borders, and migrations across them have political and governance consequences. Domicile laws restrict access to many streams of education and jobs to natives of a particular State or region. The most significant implication of movement within the country's borders concerns voting

rights. The right to vote is tied to a particular polling booth where a citizen is ordinarily resident. The SIR exercise is a determination of whether one can vote, but also, perhaps more importantly, where one can vote. The same person voting in Maharashtra or Kerala - net migrant-receiving States - as opposed to Bihar, which is a net migrant-sending State, has different political implications for national politics.

Changes in population composition affect politics, and an example is Mumbai, where Marathi speakers now constitute less than 40%, while Hindi speakers are around 30%. The nativist politics of the Shiv Sena has been decimated; parties now routinely field Hindi-speaking candidates in elections. In 2001, 31% of India's population were migrants and by 2011, this proportion had increased to 38%. Two-thirds of these migrants are women, due to marriage. Men, who make up the remaining third, tend to move farther and largely for economic reasons. Census 2027 will capture the enormity of this movement of people after nearly two decades.

Migrating people carry attitudes, values, stories and belief systems. The White House now celebrates Deepavali - a practice that began in 2003. It was through migration that Vedic practices spread from the Aryavarta region of the epics to its eastern and peninsular frontiers, mixing with pre-existing lore and expanding the cultural universe that would later be called Hinduism. Languages move with migrating people. Historically, it has been a case of more men than

women who migrated, and migrating men met native women; the languages we speak today reflect this, Peggy Mohan argues in *Father Tongue, Motherland*

### Birthright citizenship

Moving people is now challenging even the idea of birthright citizenship in countries where it once existed unquestioned. The Trump administration is trying to overturn a long-held interpretation of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that all those born in the U.S. are eligible for citizenship. Until recently, an estimated 30,000 people were travelling to the U.S. annually to give birth, and there were tour companies that made this a business model. A 2015 law made it legal for people to seek visas for giving birth in the U.S., but in 2020, with the rise of Trump-era nativism, this was withdrawn. India, through a change in its citizenship law, has barred children born to an illegal immigrant from acquiring citizenship by birth.

Moving people moves the history of humankind. Moving people is remaking the politics of India. These changes will become visible through the Census, the SIR, and then delimitation, which will redistribute Lok Sabha representation across State borders for the first time in half a century.

varghese.g@thehindu.co.in

# The story of 'We, the moving people'



The Special Intensive Revision of the electoral rolls, Census 2027 and delimitation will sharpen the migrant imprint on Indian politics

# The changing patterns of India's student migration

India's latest wave of student migration marks a decisive shift that is no longer confined to elite universities or programmes that are fully funded. Today's migration is characterised by self-financed education where middle-class households invest heavily in the promise of a global degree and upward social mobility. In Ministry of External Affairs data, more than 13.2 lakh Indian students were enrolled in over 70 countries by 2023, which rose to 13.35 lakh in 2024, and projected to reach 13.8 lakh in 2025.

India is one of the top senders of international students, with the United States and Canada as the top destinations (40%), followed by the United Kingdom, Australia and Germany. This significant development is reflected in the report of the Parliamentary Committee on the Welfare of Indian Diaspora (2022) which engages with students as one of India's major diaspora categories.

### The true picture

While all this is seen by some as a democratisation of foreign education, with doors opening to students from different socio-economic classes, the reality is more complex. Many of these students are channelled into lower-tier institutions and vocational colleges, into courses often unrelated to their expertise and without much job prospects, due to recruitment agencies that operate in a grey legal zone. The partnership between recruitment networks and less credible private colleges abroad is driven primarily by commissions and profit, reflecting the largely unregulated expansion of the foreign education industry.

The outcome is widespread deskilling and underemployment, with many graduates unable to transition into skilled work. In the U.K., what were once polytechnics have become universities post 1992 that cater primarily to international students, sometimes waiving entry requirements and triggering controversy due to declining academic standards. Reports suggest that



Giju Zacharia Oommen

is Chairperson, Kerala State Food Commission



Anu Abraham

is Senior Researcher, Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)

The rapid expansion of Indian student migration points to contradictions between aspiration and outcome, and opportunity and exploitation

approximately only one in four Indian postgraduates in the U.K. secures a sponsored skilled visa.

Student migration from India represents a middle-class aspiration with significant risks. Kerala, historically defined by Gulf labour migration, illustrates this transformation as the Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) 2023 reports that student migration doubled in five years, from 1.29 lakh in 2018 to 2.5 lakh in 2023, which is 11.3% of total emigrants. Outward student remittances from Kerala are estimated at ₹43,378 crore, equivalent to about 20% of total inward remittances from labour migrants.

### Reverse remittance

Most students migrate through self-financing or education loans, often mortgaging family property, with the hope of better employment and higher wages that would repay debts and enable higher living standards. However, for many, this journey ends in debt, underemployment or forced return, a phenomenon that economists describe as reverse remittances, where Indian households subsidise foreign economies.

Foreign students contribute significantly to host economies. In Canada, international students contributed about \$30.9 billion to GDP in 2022, supporting over 3,61,000 jobs. In 2023, Canada hosted over 4,27,000 Indian students, which is roughly 45% of international enrolments. In the U.S., roughly 4,00,000 Indian students, in 2024, spent an estimated \$7 billion-\$8 billion annually on tuition, housing and living costs, sustaining universities and local economies.

Across destinations, students shoulder substantial financial burdens, sometimes to the tune of ₹40 lakh-₹50 lakh, to finance studies abroad. Rising rents, restricted working hours, and visa caps exacerbate financial and mental strains. Unable to find skilled work, many take up

low-wage unskilled jobs, often juggling multiple part-time jobs, sometimes undocumented, to work longer hours, and facing exploitation. Restrictive visa rules, limited post-study employment options and a lack of placement support from low-ranked colleges exacerbate this downward mobility. For instance, until 2024, the U.K. allowed students to convert student visas into care visas, offering a survival route in a tight job market, but this pathway has since become impossible due to new restrictions.

### The local context

This outflow of students needs to be understood within the domestic context that is driving it. It is the perceived lack of quality in domestic institutions or an inability to find well-paid domestic employment? With foreign universities establishing offshore campuses in Dubai, Singapore, and other destinations offering western degrees at lower costs, it is telling that Indian students rarely choose them. The reason is more structural. For many, studying in OECD countries is not only about education but about permanent residency, social mobility and an escape from a third world identity.

Ironically, this wave of student migration has also created a new form of cheap labour for OECD countries, akin to Gulf labour migration except that it is now accompanied by reverse remittances often financed through savings and debt.

This rapid expansion of Indian student migration exposes deep systemic contradictions between aspiration and outcome, and between opportunity and exploitation, resulting in a phenomenon that can be described as brain waste. It calls for stronger regulation of education agents, pre-departure counselling, and bilateral frameworks to ensure institutional accountability abroad.



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Contentious move

The move by the Centre to change the name of the rural employment scheme, MGNREGA, to VB-G RAM G is jarring. Where is the need to change the name of the

scheme, named after the greatest icon of our freedom movement? Increasing the number of man days, from 100 to 125, is a smokescreen. Increasing the financial

burden of States is the first step that would lead to the breakdown of the scheme. The Centre can initiate new welfare schemes.

S.V. Venkatakrishnan, Coimbatore

While the objectives of VB-G RAM G sound good, the mechanisms chosen to achieve them (capped funding, increased State burden, central control) will practically dilute the legal

guarantee and make the scheme less accessible to the rural poor. It is a fact that India has witnessed a gradual rise in rural-to-urban migration due to a lack of

opportunities in villages. Khirrasgara Balaji Rao, Hyderabad

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



# Overseas Bill betrays migrant workers

In the shadow of India's economic ascent, millions of its citizens – predominantly from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Kerala – embark on perilous journeys abroad, chasing the mirage of dignity through sweat and sacrifice.



**Rejimon Kutappan**  
is a labour migration expert

These are India's labour migrants: construction workers scaling Gulf skyscrapers, domestic helpers scrubbing floors in Arab mansions, factory hands assembling gadgets in Southeast Asian sweatshops. They remit billions, fuelling families back home and propping up a gross domestic product that aspires to superpower status. Yet, as the Overseas Mobility (Facilitation and Welfare) Bill, 2025, winds its way through the Indian Parliament, it stands not as a shield for these foot soldiers of globalisation, but as a conveyor belt accelerating their slide into exploitation.

This legislation, billed as a sleek upgrade to the 1983 Emigration Act, is a Trojan horse of deregulation dressed in the garb of efficiency. It promises 'facilitation' but delivers fragility, prioritising bureaucratic streamlining over the blood-and-bone realities of migrant workers. If passed unamended, it will etch deeper scars into India's global workforce.

**Key issues**

At its core, the Bill eviscerates enforceable rights that could anchor labour migrants against the tempests of abuse. The 2021 draft, for all its flaws, at least envisioned migrants as agents of their fate – empowering them to haul exploiters into court with their own hands. The 2025 version yanks that lifeline away, consigning workers to the whims of indifferent state machinery. Worse still, the Bill abandons the most vulnerable flanks of the migrant army. Labour migration is a gendered battlefield, with women bearing the brunt of trafficking and sexual violence. The 2021 draft imposed hefty penalties for crimes against

women and children; the new one dilutes this to a vapid nod towards "vulnerable classes," a catch-all that invites judicial foot-dragging.

The Bill's silence on human trafficking leaves a yawning chasm. Labour migrants are not statistics; they are sons and daughters, dispatched to high-risk corridors, where exploitation is not an aberration but architecture. By scrubbing these safeguards, the Bill does not facilitate mobility – it fertilises the soil for modern-day slavery.

Exploitation's machinery hums on unchecked, too, as the Bill guts anti-predation tools that once kept recruitment agencies in line. Gone is the 2021 mandate for transparent fee disclosure, the very dam against the flood of debt bondage that drowns migrants before they even board the flight.

Today, a worker from rural Bihar might fork over lakhs to a shadowy agent for a "guaranteed" job in Riyadh, only to arrive facing a substituted contract at half the pay – if he arrives at all.

The Bill's "accreditation" system for agencies invites a carnival of crooks. Emigration Check Posts vanish in favour of digital nods – convenient for Delhi's desks, catastrophic for the worker signing away his life in a back-alley deal.

Once abroad, the betrayal deepens. The 2021 vision held agencies responsible for reception, dispute mediation, and document renewals. Now, these duties dissolve into "functions" for government bodies, overburdened and under-resourced.

The Integrated Information System, touted as tech-savvy salvation, morphs instead into a surveillance spectre, hoovering migrant data without consent. Who benefits? Not the worker phoning home in desperation, but the state logging his every move – while foreign bosses, spared direct penalties, laugh from afar. Illicit online recruitment, the

digital Wild West where fake jobs lure the desperate via WhatsApp scams, goes unmentioned.

Reintegration, that fragile bridge home, fares no better. The Bill murmurs of "safe return" but skimps on funds for vocational training or trauma counselling, cynically excluding deportees within 182 days as non-"returnees."

This centralised colossus compounds the cruelty, erecting a Delhi-dominated edifice that sidelines the federal mosaic where migration pulses. States such as Kerala, with its migrant-sending savvy, or Uttar Pradesh, cradle of the exodus, get no seat at the Overseas Mobility Council's table, nor do trade unions or rights groups.

State Nodal Committees, grassroots sentinels in the 2021 draft, evaporate under centrally

appointed officers. Crises brew locally – family pleas in Lucknow, hospital vigils in Thrissur – yet solutions gestate in air-conditioned isolation. Penalties, meanwhile, limp: recruitment rackets fined, but traffickers and overseas tyrants are untouched.

**Time to act**

India's labour migrants are not expendable exports; they are the sinew of a nation that preens on their remittances while pocketing their perils. The 2025 Bill will turbocharge this inequity.

Parliament must intervene, reinstate self-advocacy rights, mandate fee transparency and post-arrival safeguards, federalise governance with civil society's roar, and arm penalties with compensation claws. Define trafficking, broaden "work" to embrace grey frontiers, and fund reintegration that rebuilds lives. The hour demands not facilitation, but fortification. For these workers, whose hands build empires abroad and homes within, anything short is not reform – it is rupture.

The legislation, billed as a sleek upgrade to the 1983 Emigration Act, is a Trojan horse of deregulation dressed in the garb of efficiency



# A summit that rose beyond optics

The Telangana Rising Summit outlines the Congress government's Vision 2047

**STATE OF PLAY**

**N. Ravi Kumar**  
ravikumarn.r@thehindu.co.in



For the Revanth Reddy-led Congress government, the Telangana Rising Summit earlier this month was the first major ground-up event of its kind since coming to power two years ago. Keenly watched, it was as important for the underlying message it sought to convey as for the optics.

Everything about it was new: the ambitious Telangana Vision 2047 document for which it served as a launch vehicle, the wide-ranging discussions, and the choice of the proposed Bharat Future City as the venue. Though Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy sought to avoid any political connotation by declaring in the run-up that the two-day event would be an economic summit and by personally inviting Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the link was not easy to miss. Comments from Opposition leaders in the State only helped generate more public attention.

Neither Mr. Reddy nor his government, however, is new to challenges. It was not just limited to politics; the State administration encountered opposition to land acquisition, was rapped on the knuckles when it tried to dispose of 400 acres of prime land near Hyderabad, and grappled with a resource crunch while trying to move fast on big-ticket projects, be it Metro Rail expansion or the Musi River rejuvenation. A proposal to raise reservations for Backward Castes in local bodies also ran into legal hurdles.

The two years were not without their share of highs. The dispensation implement-

ed some of its poll promises, especially the popular free bus scheme for women, even as delegations led by Mr. Reddy to Davos, the U.S., and South Korea helped garner investment commitments for new projects.

The Telangana Rising Summit thus provided an opportunity for the Chief Minister to elaborate on his government's plans to make the State a \$1 trillion economy by 2034 and a \$3 trillion economy by 2047.

The government made the most by unveiling the Vision document – the pathway with inclusive growth as its core. Ministers spelt out the broad outline, discussing both opportunities and challenges for their departments. While the Chief Minister stressed the larger picture, unveiled the Vision document and presided over MoU signings, the emphasis on team effort also sent a clear message about who was in the driver's seat.

The staggering cumulative investment commitments received from a number of companies added value to what might otherwise have been seen as a two-year-in-government celebration. Though it is common knowledge that MoUs and letters of intent take time to fructify, the commitments worth ₹5.75 lakh crore on projects across diverse sectors could not be ignored.

The most significant statement the government made through the Summit was by

showcasing its proposed Bharat Future City, which is eventually expected to span 30,000 acres and form an integral part of a three-tier development model for Telangana. Many of the projects for which MoUs were signed are to be grounded there. Interestingly, in a State where protests over land acquisition have been common, but where land has yielded manifold returns for speculators and investors in a short span on the back of rapid development and growing demand, the Future City did not find opposition. It is possibly because realty is a common denominator and cuts across ideologies, given how the credit for the development of Cyberabad or IT hub of Hyderabad is sought to be cornered by politicians.

If there was any opposition, it was nothing beyond murmurs. While the BJP State leadership described the Summit as an attempt to whitewash the government's failures, a BRS leader dismissed it as a road to a real estate venture, and another from the party used the occasion to recall the its 10-year rule and how it serves as the foundation for the present level of interest. No one, however, opposed the Bharat Future City. Given the broad-based development proposed, the long gestation, and the need for policy continuity, it is anyone's guess as to how it will shape. The Hyderabad Pharma City project, which derailed after a change in leadership, is a case in point, with the Congress government deciding to use land acquired by the BRS for that project for the Future City instead.

The Summit thus was a forum for the government to take stock and live up to the tagline "Telangana means business".

# Record-high number of Indians deported from U.S. in 2025

Concern and distaste for deportations have increased among Democrats and Republicans

**DATA POINT**

**The Hindu Data Team**

In 2025, 3,258 Indian nationals were deported by the United States to India, the highest annual figure since at least 2009. Concurrently, more than half of surveyed Americans said that the U.S. was doing "too much" when it came to deporting illegal immigrants, according to the Pew Research Centre.

The data on deportation was provided in a reply to a question posed by Minister Ramji Lal Suman in a Rajya Sabha session. The figure for 2025 includes deportations that occurred between January 1 and November 28, 2025. There were more than two times as many deportations this year when compared to 2024 (Chart 1). The deported individuals are those who have, according to the U.S. government, illegally entered the country, overstayed their visa validity, are staying there without any documentation, or have criminal convictions against them.

In October this year, more than half of the surveyed U.S. adults believed that the Trump administration was overstepping when it came to deportations. In fact, when asked if "all" the illegal immigrants should be deported, only 31% of them said yes, with more than half saying that only "some" should be deported.

The disapproval of deportations has increased by nine percentage points between March and October of this year. The increase was seen across partisan coalitions. Where only 13% of Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents said the administration was doing "too much" in March, 20% of them did in October. The share of Democrats and Democrat-leaning who believed so also increased during this time period, chalking up to 86% in October (Chart 2).

Even though there is an increase in the share of Republicans

who feel Donald Trump is overstepping, a considerably high share of them continue to believe that all immigrants living illegally in the country should be deported (Chart 3). White Republicans were the racial group with the highest share of respondents who believed the same. About 40% Asian Republicans shared the same beliefs.

While only 8% of Democrats said that all illegal immigrants should be deported, a large share of Democrats did believe that some such immigrants should be deported. About 16% of Black Democrats wanted the deportation of all illegal immigrants. Hispanic respondents from both parties were the groups with the most respondents who said no illegal immigrants should be deported. While general concern about Mr. Trump overstepping in deportations increased between March and October across both parties, the same cannot be said when it comes to their worry about personal impact. In March, 27% of Democrats were worried that regardless of their immigration or citizenship status, a family member, close friends, or themselves were at risk of being deported. By October, more than 40% of Democrats reported they felt this way.

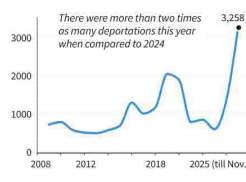
The Republican respondents did not waver in their sentiments over the course of the year, as only 10% of them said the same in both March and October. While concerns have risen across most racial and ethnic groups, they remain highest among Hispanic individuals, as more than 50% of them said they were worried that someone close to them could be deported. Hispanic respondents, along with African-American and Asian individuals, saw spikes in the share of people who felt the same (Chart 4). About six in ten Hispanic people say Immigration and Customs Enforcement has conducted arrests or raids in their area in recent months. This is higher than the shares of Asian (47%), Black (39%) or White (38%) adults who say so.

## Rising removals

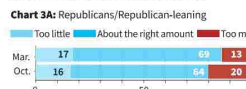
Data for the charts were sourced from Parliament Q&A and the Pew Research Centre. The survey of U.S. adults was conducted from Oct. 9-16, 2025 period



**Chart 1:** Number of Indian citizens deported by the United States of America



**Chart 2:** % of U.S. adults who say that when it comes to deporting immigrants who are living in the U.S. illegally, the Trump administration is doing too little/about the right amount/too much among...



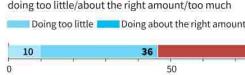
**Chart 3:** % of U.S. adults who say that when it comes to deporting immigrants who are living in the U.S. illegally, the Trump administration is doing too little/about the right amount/too much among...



**Chart 4:** % of U.S. adults who say all/some/none of the immigrants living in the U.S. illegally should be deported among...



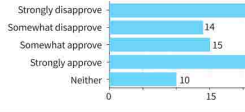
**Chart 2A:** % of U.S. adults who say that when it comes to deporting immigrants who are living in the U.S. illegally, the Trump administration is doing too little/about the right amount/too much



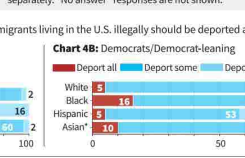
**Chart 2B:** % of U.S. adults who say all/some/none of the immigrants living in the U.S. illegally should be deported



**Chart 2C:** % of U.S. adults who approve/disapprove of the Trump administration's approach to immigration



**Chart 4A:** % of U.S. adults who say all/some/none of the immigrants living in the U.S. illegally should be deported among...



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 18, 1975

## Sarees export in 1974-75

New Delhi, December 17: India's exports trade in sarees amounted to a little over Rs. 7.5 crores in 1974-75

The saree has found a permanent place in many a feminine wardrobe abroad despite climatic differences and surprising range of fashion trends.

Cotton sarees constitute the major area of Indian exports. These fetched the bulk of foreign exchange of Rs. 3.9 crores in 1974-75. The export range in the group includes a variety of sarees, such as, decontrolled powerloom sarees grey which brought in foreign exchange worth Rs. 1.13 crores (46 lakh sq. metres) during 1974-75. The main importer of this variety was Bangladesh whose intake was 44 lakh sq. metres, valued at Rs. 1.08 crores.

Bleached carded yarn sarees valued at Rs. 14.3 lakh were marketed in USSR, German Democratic Republic and Saudi Arabia. Piece-dyed fetched foreign exchange over Rs. 19 lakhs. The main importers were Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia and Sudan. Hand-printed sarees valued at Rs. 10 lakhs were exported to Nepal, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

Silk sarees secured nearly Rs. 1.9 crores in foreign exchange. In this group, different varieties of silk sarees zari bordered over 90 per cent silk handlooms, earned Rs. 64 lakhs (2.1 lakh metres). The main markets were U.K. (Rs. 27 lakhs) followed by Singapore, Kenya and Mauritius. Other silk sarees, over 90 per cent silk handloom, valued at Rs. 1.02 crores (3.8 lakh metres) were exported to U.K. (Rs. 21.5 lakhs), Singapore (Rs. 14 lakhs), Malaysia (Rs. 14 lakhs) and Federal Republic of Germany (Rs. 12 lakhs). Handloom silk sarees embroidered with real zari brought in foreign exchange worth Rs. 60 lakhs and handloom silk sarees embroidered with imitation zari earned Rs. 13.6 lakhs.

Art silk sarees were also in demand abroad. The export earnings in this field was valued at Rs. 1.7 crores.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 18, 1925

## Sale of Kipling's work

New York, December 17: The sale of a collection of 622 rare Kiplingiana yielded a record price of 12,662 dollars. The first edition of the "School-boy Lyrics" fetched 1,450 and "Echoes" 1,225 dollars respectively.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

**NEWS IN NUMBERS**

**Number of government schools with zero students**

**5,149** Of the 10.13 lakh government schools across India, 5,149 have no students at all. And more than 70% of these schools reporting zero enrolment in the 2024-25 academic year are in Telangana and West Bengal, according to government data. PTI

**Number of Afghan refugee camps shut down by Pakistan**

**42** The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan on Wednesday said it has shut down as many as 42 camps that had housed Afghan refugees for over 40 years. Millions of Afghan refugees crossed into Pakistan after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. PTI

**Number of National Highway projects behind schedule**

**574** As many as 574 under construction National Highway (NH) projects worth ₹3.60 lakh crore have exceeded their completion schedule. Minister of Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari said 133 NH projects with total cost of about ₹1 lakh crore have been awarded. PTI

**EU members who voted to delay the deforestation law**

**405** The European parliament approved an EU deal to delay its anti-deforestation law by a year, until December 2026, clearing the penultimate legal hurdle before the delay can pass into law. The parliament voted to approve the delay, with 405 lawmakers in favour. REUTERS

**Number of posts currently vacant in the Delhi Police**

**9,248** Over 10% of the sanctioned strength in Delhi Police is currently vacant, with the Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) rank recording the highest proportion of vacancies at over 36%. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## How is the Aravalli range to be protected?

How do the Aravalli hills and ranges prevent the desertification of the Indo-Gangetic plain? What were the recommendations of the Central Empowered Committee? Why was it necessary to arrive at a uniform definition of the Aravalli hills? Has the Supreme Court completely banned mining in the ranges?

**EXPLAINER**

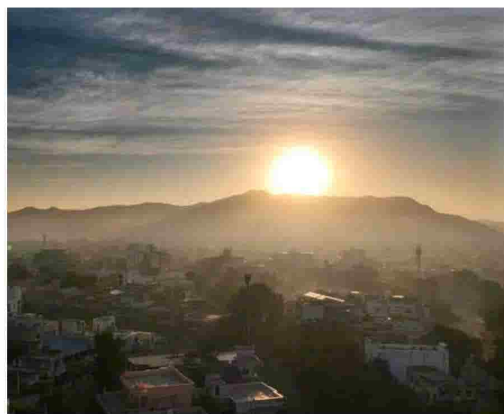
**Jacob Koshy**

**The story so far:**

The Supreme Court (SC), in an order last month, settled on a uniform definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges, and paused the grant of fresh mining leases inside its areas spanning Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

**What is the range's significance?** Apart from being nearly two billion years old and India's oldest mountain range, they serve as an important ecological barrier to prevent the desertification of the Indo-Gangetic plains. They help arrest the eastward spread of the Thar Desert into Haryana, Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh, and play a major role in stabilising climate, supporting biodiversity, and recharging groundwater. Stretching from Delhi to Gujarat across 650 km, the mountains support water-recharge systems and are the source of important rivers such as the Chambal, Sabarmati, and Luni. It is richly endowed with sandstone, limestone, marble, granite, and minerals such as lead, zinc, copper, gold, and tungsten. While historically mined for these resources, it has in the past four decades been excessively quarried for stone and sand. This has contributed to deteriorating air quality as well as plummeting groundwater recharge. A proportion of the mining has also been illegal. The Court noted that India is bound by international commitments, under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, to protect vulnerable ecosystems such as the Aravalli range.

**Was action taken against mining?** The Environment Ministry, since the early 1990s, has laid down rules restricting mining to only sanctioned projects but these have been flagrantly violated. In 2009, the SC stepped in and imposed a



**Threatened landscape:** A sunrise against the Aravalli mountain ranges in Ajmer, Rajasthan, in 2022. AP

blanket ban on mining in the Faridabad, Gurugram, and Mevat districts of Haryana. In May 2024, the SC prohibited granting of fresh mining leases and renewals in the range and directed its Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to undertake a detailed examination, leading to a set of recommendations submitted in March 2024. The CEC proposed a comprehensive approach that included a complete scientific mapping of the Aravalli range across all States; a macro-level environmental impact assessment of mining activities; and strict prohibition of mining in ecologically sensitive areas such as protected habitats, water bodies, tiger corridors, key aquifer recharge zones and areas within the National Capital Region. It urged stringent regulation of stone-crushing units. It also recommended that no new mining leases or renewals be permitted until proper mapping and impact assessments were

completed. Those recommendations were taken up by the Court in its order of November 2025. Further, in June, 2025, the Centre started an Aravalli 'Green Wall' project. The plan is to expand green cover in the five-km buffer area around the Aravallis in 29 districts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi. The government said this initiative will play a crucial role in restoring 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.

**Why a uniform definition?**

The Court found that States were using inconsistent criteria to identify Aravalli formations. There have also been differing definitions, including by expert groups such as the Forest Survey of India (FSI) on what makes up 'Aravalli Hills and Ranges.' In 2010, the FSI had said hills with "(i) slope >3°, (ii) foothill buffer = 100m, (iii) inter hill distance or valley width= 500m and (iv) the area enclosed

by above defined hills from all sides," would make up Aravalli hill and ranges. To resolve this, it constituted a committee comprising representatives from the Environment Ministry, the FSI, State Forest Departments, the Geological Survey of India and the CEC. This committee was tasked with creating a scientifically grounded, nationwide definition of the Aravallis. The committee submitted its findings in October 2025. The SC committee finally ruled that only hills above 100 metres would make the cut. The amicus curiae, K. Parameswar, objected that this was too narrow a definition and potentially opened all the hills below 100 metres for mining, compromising "...their continuity and integrity." However, the Additional Solicitor General, Aishwarya Bhati countered that the definition on slopes, foothill buffers etc. as proposed by the FSI would, on the contrary, exclude large areas from the Aravalli Hills and Ranges. The committee recommendations of 100m was far more inclusive.

**What are the SC's other directions?**

The Court directed the preparation of a detailed Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM) covering the entire Aravalli range. The plan must demarcate areas where mining must be absolutely prohibited, identify zones where limited and highly regulated mining may be permitted, map sensitive habitats and wildlife corridors, evaluate cumulative ecological impacts, determine ecological carrying capacity, and articulate restoration and rehabilitation measures.

**Why was there no ban on mining?**

The Court explained that past experiences show total bans often lead to the rise of illegal mining syndicates, violent sand mafias and unregulated extraction. The Court therefore opted for a calibrated approach: existing legal mining continues under tight regulation, new mining is paused until a scientifically driven plan is prepared, and permanently sensitive areas remain off-limits.

**THE GIST**

▼ The Environment Ministry, since the early 1990s, has laid down rules restricting mining to only sanctioned projects but these have been flagrantly violated.

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## Why have Thailand-Cambodia border clashes flared up again?

Why is the border between the two countries contested? How did the U.S. broker a ceasefire?

**R. Preetha**

**The story so far:**

On December 8, Thailand launched airstrikes into Cambodia after clashes erupted along their disputed border, with both sides accusing each other of breaching the U.S.-brokered ceasefire in October. On December 12, after calls with both leaders, President Trump stated that Thailand and Cambodia had agreed to "cease all shooting". However, Thailand has vowed to continue military actions until threats are neutralised.

**What happened early this year?** In May 2025, tensions between the two countries escalated when a Cambodian soldier was killed in a skirmish, leading to troop buildup and diplomatic strains. July witnessed five days of intense fighting involving artillery, rockets, and Thai

airstrikes that killed at least 48 people and displaced over 3,00,000. A ceasefire was brokered through U.S. pressure and Malaysian mediation, ending the tensions. The truce was formalised in October with an agreement signed in Kuala Lumpur. However, in November, Thailand suspended its implementation after a landmine injured a soldier. It accused Cambodia of planting new mines. On December 7 and 8, clashes renewed, escalating to Thai airstrikes targeting Cambodian military sites, including alleged rocket positions. As of now, casualties include over 15 Thai soldiers and dozens on the Cambodian side, along with mass civilian evacuations.

**What is the border dispute about?** The core issue is sovereignty over un-demarcated sections of the 817-km border, inherited from colonial-era treaties concluded in 1904 and 1907 between France (which ruled Cambodia)

and Siam (present-day Thailand) respectively. These agreements planned for the boundary to follow the Dangrek Mountains watershed, but the French-drawn maps placed key ancient Khmer temples, particularly Preah Vihear, on the Cambodian side. The 11th century Hindu temple Preah Vihear has been central to the dispute, with both countries claiming historical ownership. In 1962, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Preah Vihear belonged to Cambodia, although the surrounding promontory remained contested. Later, in 2013, the ICJ clarification affirmed Cambodian sovereignty over most of the area. Nationalist sentiments in both countries complicate the bilateral issue, with temples reflecting historical Khmer glory for Cambodia and territorial integrity for Thailand. Between 2008-2011, deadly clashes occurred after Cambodia tried to list Preah Vihear as a

UNESCO World Heritage site.

**How have mediation efforts failed?**

Since the major clashes in 2008-11, several mediation efforts involving the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the ICJ, and external actors, aimed at resolving the dispute, have failed. In 2011, ASEAN, under Indonesia's chairmanship, played a key role. It proposed deploying Indonesian observers to monitor a ceasefire and support troop withdrawals from a demilitarised zone ordered by the ICJ that year. But Thailand resisted any third-party involvement. In 2025, renewed fighting in July led to fresh mediation efforts. President Trump held calls with leaders in Bangkok and Phnom Penh; his threats of 36% tariffs on exports to the U.S., their biggest market, led to an unconditional ceasefire.

**What is the way forward?**

At the border level, de-escalation should build on measures attempted under the October agreement, including verifiable troop withdrawals, joint de-mining, and direct military communication. At the bilateral level, sustained engagement through joint commissions is necessary for border demarcation; Thailand's preference for bilateral talks must be reconciled with Cambodia's openness to third-party involvement.

R. Preetha is pursuing a postgraduate degree at Stella Maris College, Chennai.

**THE GIST**

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# Possible discovery of dark matter sparks debate, experts urge caution

Physicists don't know what makes up dark matter; one hypothesis is that it is a new type of subatomic particle called WIMPs, which barely interact with normal matter and never with light; the trick to finding them then is high-energy particles released when two WIMPs annihilate each other

Prakash Chandra

Is it a false alarm or a discovery that solves one of the greatest mysteries in cosmology? This is the question weighing on astronomers as they examine a study published recently in the *Journal of Cosmology and Astroparticle Physics*, which claims to have finally detected the elusive "dark matter".

Dark matter is believed to have been around for most of the 14-billion-year history of the universe. Astronomers began searching for it in the early 1930s after the Swiss astronomer Fritz Zwicky observed that galaxies in the Coma Cluster were moving too quickly for the amount of ordinary matter it contained. He realised the speed of their rotation was so great that they should have flown apart as they didn't have enough matter to generate the gravity needed to hold them together. He deduced that some hidden mass could be providing the "extra gravity" required for the galaxies to stay intact. He named this dark matter.

## Invisible WIMPs

According to the Standard Model of particle physics, ordinary (baryonic) matter that makes up the world around us consists of elementary particles such as baryons (protons and neutrons) and electrons, along with massless photons of electromagnetic radiation such as light. Baryons themselves are made up of even smaller particles called quarks and gluons. But all these fundamental particles form just 5% of all mass in the known universe. Dark matter accounts for 27%, while a mysterious force called "dark energy" makes up the rest.

Physicists don't know what dark matter is made up of, but one hypothesis there is a hitherto unknown type of subatomic particle called WIMPs. The name is short for 'weakly interacting massive particles'. According to physicists, WIMPs barely interact with normal matter and not at all with any form of electromagnetic radiation. Since dark matter doesn't emit, absorb or reflect light, astronomers can only study its gravitational effect on visible matter, such as stars and galaxies.

The trick to finding it is then to spot its tell-tale signature: high-energy particles, such as gamma-ray photons that are released when two WIMPs collide and annihilate each other.

## New claim

Tomonori Totani of the University of Tokyo has now claimed to have identified just such a gamma-ray signal in his study, using data from the Fermi Gamma-ray Space Telescope.

"We detected gamma rays with a photon energy of 20 giga-electron-volts (or 20 billion electron-volts, an extremely large amount of energy) extending in a halo-like structure towards the centre of the Milky Way galaxy", Prof. Totani said. "The gamma-ray emission component closely matches the shape expected from the dark matter halo."

He added that the measured gamma ray energy spectrum "closely matches model predictions for the annihilation of hypothetical WIMPs with masses roughly 500-times that of a proton."

Astronomers always knew dark matter must be virtually hiding in plain sight and that they'd find it sooner or later. Has Prof. Totani found it, however? Not quite, say experts, as the research data have to



Scientists believe the Milky Way galaxy's disc lies within a much larger, roughly spherical dark matter halo. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

survive rigorous scrutiny and critical evaluation by more independent researchers.

## 'Excess' radiation

"When we see a signal that looks like it could be dark matter, we can check other regions that are rich in dark matter to look for a comparable signal there," Tracy Slatyer, professor of physics and Director, MIT Centre for Theoretical Physics, told this correspondent via email.

"Studying the detailed properties of the signal would tell if it's consistent with what we expect from dark matter or if it has traits more consistent with an alternative source. So far, we have had many signals that seemed at first glance likely to be dark matter, but subsequent in-depth analysis revealed they were from a different source. Moreover, the overall size of the signal is not what you would expect from classic WIMP models (it is too large), and when we do the test of looking at other dark-matter-rich regions, we do not see a corresponding signal."

According to Rishi Khatri of the Department of Theoretical Physics at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, Mumbai, the findings suggest the detection of an excess of radiation compared to what cosmologists expect from the model of the Milky Way galaxy.

"It is possible that this excess is just



The measured gamma ray energy spectrum closely matches model predictions for the annihilation of hypothetical WIMPs with masses roughly 500-times that of a proton

TOMONORI TOTANI  
UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO

pointing to something missing in the model of our galaxy rather than dark matter," Prof. Khatri said in an email interview. "Based on what the study claims, we can predict what kind of signal we can expect from other nearby galaxies and then try to observe these signals. There have been similar claims many times in the past about the detection of dark matter, but they turned out to be false."

## Radiation from other sources

Discoveries in particle physics have to typically reach a confidence level called '5 sigma' before they are considered valid. Where does the new finding stand on this scale?

"The excess reported in the paper seems to be quite more than 5-sigma, without taking into account the uncertainty in modelling," Prof. Khatri said. "The author has not given a number

with the modelling uncertainty included. This should give you an idea about how uncertain we are about the uncertainty (i.e. error on the error bars), which is very important in such studies." An immediate task for astronomers would be to rule out the possibility of the radiation coming from some other sources of high-energy radiation like supernovae, the explosive deaths of massive stars; neutron stars, the ultra-dense collapsed cores of massive stars after supernova explosions; or black holes.

The gravity of dark matter, like normal matter, should cause the light passing nearby to bend, in a phenomenon called gravitational lensing. A spectacular example of this is the Bullet Cluster, where the collision of two clusters of galaxies resulted in the separation of dark matter from normal matter, and astronomers could discern the halos of dark matter around the galaxies by how they bent the path of light.

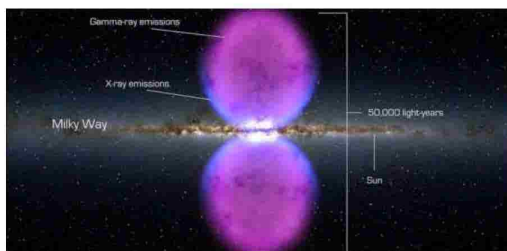
## The LCDM model

If the findings stand up to scrutiny and it turns out that a dark matter particle has actually been found, the widely accepted Lambda-Cold Dark Matter model of the universe wouldn't have to be modified. "This is because, as Prof. Khatri said, "A new particle that would form dark matter is actually included in the LCDM model."

Instead, "what we do not know is the exact nature of dark matter." And "if the dark matter is a 500 GeV WIMP as is claimed, it would be expected to have only very tiny interactions with other dark matter particles or with ordinary matter," Prof. Slatyer said. "So it would be safe to treat it as having only gravitational interactions, and many of the predictions of LCDM could remain almost unchanged."

One thing that can be said with certainty is that this grand cosmic narrative is at an exciting stage as astronomers untangle the fabric of the universe to try to understand its evolution and nature.

(Prakash Chandra is a science writer. prakashisat@gmail.com)



An illustration of the two gigantic X-ray/gamma-ray bubbles (blue-violet) known to be associated with the Milky Way (centre). NASA



Yoshinori Iizuka with an ice core sample at the Hokkaido University Institute of Low Temperature Science, Japan. AFP

## Pamir ice cores could provide answers to the loss of glaciers

Agence France Presse

Dressed in an orange puffer jacket, Japanese scientist Yoshinori Iizuka stepped into a storage freezer to retrieve an ice core he hopes will help experts protect the world's disappearing glaciers.

The first-sized sample drilled from a mountaintop is part of an international effort to understand why glaciers in Tajikistan have resisted the rapid melting seen almost everywhere else.

"If we could learn the mechanism behind the increased volume of ice there, then we may be able to apply that to all the other glaciers around the world," potentially even helping revive them, said Iizuka, a professor at Hokkaido University.

Thousands of glaciers will vanish each year in the coming decades, leaving only a fraction standing by the end of the century unless global warming is curbed, a study published in *Nature Climate Change* reported on December 15.

Earlier this year, Iizuka and other scientists braved harsh conditions to set at an altitude of 5,810 m on the Kon-Chukurbashi ice cap in the Pamir Mountains.

The area is the only mountainous region on the planet where glaciers have not only resisted melting, but have even grown slightly, a phenomenon called the Pamir-Karakoram anomaly.

The team drilled two ice columns approximately 105 m long out of the glacier.

One is being stored in an underground sanctuary in Antarctica; the other was shipped to Iizuka's facility, the Institute of Low Temperature Science at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, where the team is hunting clues on why precipitation in the region increased over the last century and how the glacier has resisted melting.

**The area is the only mountainous region on the planet where glaciers have not only resisted melting, but have even grown slightly**

Some link the anomaly to the area's cold climate or even increased use of agricultural water in Pakistan that creates more vapour. But the ice cores are the first opportunity to examine the anomaly scientifically.

"By understanding the causes behind the continuous build-up of snow from the past to the present, we can clarify what will happen going forward and why the ice has grown," Iizuka said.

Since the samples arrived in November, his team has worked in freezing storage facilities to log the density, alignment of snow grains, and the structure of ice layers.

In December, the scientists were kitted out like polar explorers to cut and shave ice samples in the comparatively balmy minus 20 C of their lab.

The samples can tell stories about weather conditions going back decades or even centuries.

A layer of clear ice indicates a warm period when the glacier melted and then refroze, while a low-density layer suggests packed snow, rather than ice, which can help estimate precipitation.

Brittle samples with cracks, meanwhile, indicate snowfall on half-melted layers that then refroze.

And other clues can reveal more information. Volcanic materials like sulphate ions can serve as time markers while water isotopes can reveal temperatures.

The scientists hope that the samples contain material dating back 10,000 years or more, though much of the glacier melted during a warm spell around 6,000 years ago.

Ancient ice would help scientists answer questions such as "what kind of snow was falling in this region 10,000 years ago? What was in it?" Iizuka said.

For feedback and suggestions for 'Science', please write to science@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Daily page'

## THE SCIENCE QUIZ

### The discovery of Epimetheus

Prathmesh Kher

#### QUESTION 1

Name the American astronomer credited with discovering Epimetheus. He was actually verifying Audouin Dollfus's images, in which the latter had discovered a different moon. Astronomers later realised the moon the American had spotted was a new one: Epimetheus.

#### QUESTION 2

Epimetheus shares its orbit with another moon, X, the one Audouin Dollfus had found. Kepler's laws stipulate that the moon closer to Saturn should complete its orbit first, but the two moons' orbits differ so little that they complete their orbits only 30 seconds apart. Name X.

#### QUESTION 3

The two moons, Epimetheus and X from Q2,

periodically catch up with each other as they move around Saturn, and \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blanks with an unusual phenomenon that's the result of the moons' gravitational interaction causing them to share and redistribute their momentum.

#### QUESTION 4

Both Epimetheus and X (from Q2) are together called \_\_\_\_\_ because they have enough mass for their gravitational pull to sweep up any dust and rocks in their respective orbits. Other examples of such moons include Daphnis. Fill in the blanks.

#### QUESTION 5

Epimetheus appears to have darker terrain and smoother terrain as two types, and astronomers have reasons to believe the material in both areas is rich in \_\_\_\_\_. Fill in the blanks.  
Visual: The moon is named for a titan in

Greek mythology who is the brother of Y. Together, Epimetheus and Y stand for Hindsight and Foresight. Name Y, depicts him performing a legendary action. Credit: Public domain

#### Answers to December 11 quiz:

1. Entity for whose interpretation Born won a Nobel – **Ans: Wavefunction**
  2. Alternative QM formulation developed by Born and Heisenberg – **Ans: Matrix mechanics**
  3. Entity whose slow motion underlies Born-Oppenheimer approximation – **Ans: Nuclei**
  4. Chinese physicist who expanded Born's book on crystal lattices – **Ans: Kun Huang**
  5. Indian institution where Born spent time in 1935-1936 – **Ans: IISc**
- Visual: **Olivia Newton-John**  
First contact: **K.N. Viswanathan** | Tamal Biswas | Anmol Agrawal | Mohammad Sohail | Parvej Khan



Visual: Epimetheus appears to be the brother of Y. Together, Epimetheus and Y stand for Hindsight and Foresight. Name Y; the image depicts him performing a legendary action. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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



Simply essential

SIM binding to phones can check cyber crime

**T**he Department of Telecom's move to tighten SIM-binding norms is driven by a real, escalating, and costly problem. Telecom-enabled fraud, from SIM swaps and mule numbers to OTP theft, has become one of the weakest links in the country's digital economy. The Centre is right to intervene. Communication apps can easily be used by detached, untraceable accounts, posing a threat to individual and national security.



The new SIM binding rules mandate that messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, must remain linked to the original, active SIM card in a user's phone, stopping use if the SIM is removed or inactive, and forcing web versions to log out every six hours for re-authentication via QR code. A SIM card is verifiably linked to an individual (through KYC), and tied to a specific device via IMEI, so misuse via SIM swapping, cloning, or mule phones becomes harder. The move to extend the rigorous security model of platforms like UPI to general communication apps is widely seen as a necessary security enhancement by the government and the telecom industry. For an overwhelming majority of users who use their messaging app on one phone with a single, permanent SIM, the change will seem imperceptible.

It is perhaps true, that for those who rely heavily on desktop/web versions for work the directive introduces some friction and operational challenges. But cyber-fraud losses in India are staggering, with sophisticated scams often exploiting accounts whose registered SIM cards have been removed, deactivated, or are being misused from outside the country. This lack of an active, traceable SIM-to-device link has allowed fraudsters to operate with near-perfect anonymity. By mandating continuous SIM presence, the government is extending the robust, proven security model used by our banking and UPI systems, where the physical presence of the KYC-verified SIM is mandatory. The directive's requirement for periodic logouts of web sessions (every six hours) is a security hygiene measure, akin to auto-logout on banking portals, designed to curb the remote abuse of accounts. While inconvenient for business workflows, this friction is the cost of closing a critical gateway for account takeover and fraud.

That said, there are apprehensions. Tethering a private messaging account to a government-verified identity (the KYC-linked SIM) could expose whistleblowers by creating a single, traceable metadata link between their official identity and their communications. Furthermore, there are fears over potential government misuse of this traceability. This is where the government must tread with caution and absolute clarity. The success of this essential security upgrade is contingent on its lawful and judicious implementation. The government must enforce SIM binding while strictly adhering to the principles of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023. The focus must be solely on traceability for crime prevention, not data acquisition or surveillance.

POCKET: AI Now

RAVIKANTH



"If you do my homework, that's wrong! If you take my parents' job and do it, that's right!"



MADHAVI SINGH

**W**hen a US federal judge ruled in late November that Meta does not maintain an illegal monopoly in social media, it was a reminder that even the strongest evidence can look weak when enforcers act too late.

Rejecting the US Federal Trade Commission's narrow market definition, the court instead concluded that Meta, formerly known as Facebook, competes against a broad array of rivals such as TikTok and YouTube. While legal scholars can and will dissect the opinion, the biggest takeaway is that timing matters in dynamic markets, implying that antitrust authorities must develop a preventive approach, rather than relying solely on reactive measures.

The case centered on Facebook's acquisitions of Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014, when both were unmistakably competitive threats. Facebook said so itself: internal emails and strategy documents spelled out its intention to copy, acquire, or neutralize rivals, while the firm's leaders explicitly acknowledged the existential threat posed by Instagram. FTC lawyers rarely uncover this type of smoking-gun evidence.

But the case collapsed under the weight of today's market reality. Instead of considering the world as it existed when the mergers occurred, the court (incorrectly) cited the rise of TikTok, Snapchat, and YouTube Shorts as evidence that Facebook lacked monopoly power. But TikTok's success hardly disproves Facebook's earlier dominance, because ByteDance, its parent company, spent vast sums on user acquisition, at one point becoming one of the largest buyers of ads on Facebook, Instagram, and Snap in the US. A Chinese company with almost unlimited capital breaking into the market is hardly proof of healthy competition.

LEGAL FLAWS

The flaws in the court's reasoning reflect a deeper problem with litigating consummated mergers: it asks judges to travel back in time and forget what they now know. Questions like "Would Instagram have become this significant without Facebook's investment?" or "What competition might have emerged if the acquisitions had not taken place?" are inherently counterfactual. It is very difficult to measure the impact of competition that never existed.

This suggests that the acquisitions should have been challenged when they were first proposed—a difficult task, but not as hard as challenging consummated deals. Predicting the future is less formidable than reconstructing the present on the basis of an imaginary past.



Antitrust delayed is antitrust denied

**TRUST FACTOR.** The Meta verdict on monopoly power offers a sobering lesson. Rather than acting post facto, mega mergers in the big tech space must be prevented

The flaws of late enforcement were also on display in the Google antitrust trial. Even as a US federal judge ruled in 2024 that Google had illegally monopolised general search services, the remedy was softened by the perception that AI chatbots were already reshaping the market. Even the boldest proposed remedies centered less on restoring competition in search and more on ensuring that the next tech frontier remains open.

The same dynamic was evident in the landmark antitrust case that the US federal government brought against Microsoft in the 1990s. Instead of reviving competition in operating systems, where Microsoft's dominance was entrenched, the litigation cleared space for the next generation of companies by preventing Microsoft from extending its monopoly into browsers and apps. Of course, this is a worthy goal. But illegally monopolised markets need not be treated as a *fait accompli*.

In fast-moving markets, prevention is better than cure, which is why intervening early to block illegal mergers must be the norm, not the exception. Regulators should have prevented Facebook from acquiring

**US antitrust regulators now have stronger merger guidelines and a clearer understanding of how digital markets work. What they need is the political will to act early and decisively**

Instagram and WhatsApp in the first place, but erred on the side of caution, fearing false positives and believing that the market would self-correct. But that decision has proved impossible to unwind, even though Facebook's acquisition of direct competitors in a competitive market should have been a straightforward win for antitrust authorities—the very kind of textbook harm the law is designed to prevent.

To their credit, the FTC and the Department of Justice under former US President Joe Biden had begun to develop and use their preventive toolkit. They challenged several mergers (including Nvidia-Arm, Illumina-GRAIL, and Microsoft-Activation Blizzard), examined practices in nascent industries such as AI partnerships, and launched early probes into emerging monopolies in the cloud computing and semiconductor markets. But the pendulum has swung back under Donald Trump's second administration, which has pursued merger settlements, dialled back investigations into AI giants, and revived the myth that tech firms are the guardians of innovation and national security.

POLITICAL WILL

It doesn't have to be this way. US antitrust regulators now have stronger merger guidelines and a clearer understanding of how digital markets work. What they need is the political will to act early and decisively.

The same applies to other governments. The most consequential tech mergers are reviewed simultaneously in multiple jurisdictions, and regulators in the European Union

and the UK also have powerful preventive tools, including merger review and market studies. Even just initiating an investigation can create enough friction and uncertainty for parties to abandon a deal, as happened with Nvidia-Arm and Visa-Plaid. Until recently, the UK Competition and Markets Authority, like the FTC and DOJ in the US, was increasing its scrutiny of tech mergers and partnerships, particularly in the AI sector.

But the global scramble to attract AI investment has pushed competition enforcement into retreat. Amid increasing geopolitical turbulence, regulators are forgetting the hard-earned lessons of the platform era and pulling back precisely when they should be applying those lessons to block anti-competitive AI mergers and prevent the emergence of AI monopolies. The result is a classic collective-action problem, even though all it takes is one courageous competition authority to block a global deal and change the trajectory of an entire market.

The Meta decision can seem like much ado about nothing: one case that was too difficult to win despite overwhelming evidence. But viewed in a broader context, it becomes clear that timing makes all the difference in antitrust enforcement. Regulators must learn to flex their preventive muscle to have any hope of taming Big Tech.

The writer is Deputy Director of the Thurman Arnold Project and a senior lecturer at the Information Science Project at Yale Law School. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2025

Interest rates unlikely to dip in the medium term

This is due to a combination of factors — tariff uncertainty, weakening currency, high global rates

Sachin Gupta

**T**he Reserve Bank of India began its monetary easing cycle in February 2025, with policy rates cut by 125 basis points by December 2025. Meanwhile, the 10-year G-sec yield has decreased by only 17 basis points during the same period, indicating a limited and gradual pass-through of interest rate reductions at the longer end of the yield curve.

Likewise, the US Federal Reserve has reduced its policy rates by 175 basis points over the last 15 months. Surprisingly, the 10-year Treasury yields have increased by 38 basis points. This shows a clear disconnect between central banks' expectations and the bond market's actual behaviour.

Why is this happening? Policy rates mirror central banks' outlook and their informed assessment of the economy's interest rates. Nevertheless, actual outcomes depend on supply-demand dynamics, anticipated inflation, tariff disputes, geopolitical issues, and overall macroeconomic uncertainty, which we have enough of. Central banks are

attempting to drive growth (in the case of India) and employment (in the case of the US), but the bond market is indicating a harsher truth of persistently high long-term rates.

SOVEREIGN BOND MARKETS

A key factor influencing long-term yields is the demand and supply dynamics in sovereign bond markets. Since many major economies face high fiscal deficits and substantial debt levels, the demand for future borrowing stays elevated. Consequently, increased net issuance of bonds pushes up the term premium, resulting in higher interest rates.

Specifically for India, despite an improving fiscal position, low inflation, strong GDP growth, and long-term interest rates remain elevated. This can be attributed to tariff uncertainty, a weakening currency, and globally high interest rates.

What does it mean for us? It essentially means that despite the RBI's actions, the long-term borrowing and lending rates remain high. High long-term bond yields imply high expected bank deposit rates. High bank deposit rates mean that banks' cost of



RATE DYNAMICS. Uncertain times

funds remains high, and thus they are unable to reduce their lending rates. In fact, it adversely affects banks. Their benchmark-linked lending rates reduce in line with the lower repo rate, even though their cost of deposits remains high. This impacts banks' margins.

MACROECONOMIC RISKS

Beyond demand, supply dynamics, and domestic factors, global macroeconomic risks have a far-reaching impact. Trade and tariff-related uncertainties have added another layer of complexity. Ongoing tariff disputes, supply-chain realignments, and uncertainty around US trade policy, including

sector-specific tariffs and strategic re-shoring incentives, continue to influence inflation expectations and global capital flows.

For India, uncertainty regarding US-India trade relations, export competitiveness, and potential retaliatory tariffs affects currency stability and foreign investor sentiment. For banks, these uncertainties translate into a higher risk premium. Currency volatility raises hedging costs, while geopolitical risks reduce appetite for long-duration assets, keeping bond yields firm even in easing cycles.

While central banks can guide short-term rates, long-term yields remain largely driven by fiscal pressures, inflation expectations, and geopolitical uncertainties. Globally, persistent inflation, heavy sovereign borrowing, and volatile capital flows continue to hold long-term yields high. In my view, none of these risks is likely to abate in the near term; hence, long-term interest rates in India and globally are unlikely to decline in the near future.

The writer is Chief Rating Officer & ED, CareEdge Ratings

LETTERS TO EDITOR Send your letters by email to [bleditor@thehindu.co.in](mailto:bleditor@thehindu.co.in) or by post to 'Letters to the Editor', The Hindu Business Line, Kasturji Buildings, 859-860, Anna Salai, Chennai 600002.

For transparency

Apropos "How tax havens really help in raising debt" (December 13). The widespread use of offshore hubs to issue corporate debt highlights a grey zone between efficient finance and aggressive tax avoidance. For many multinational firms, tax havens are no longer vaults for hidden profits but conduits that lower borrowing costs through treaty benefits and interest deductions. While such structures may be legal and commercially rational, they steadily erode the tax base of developing economies like India. Regulators have responded with GAAR and global anti-avoidance norms, which are necessary to

restore balance between mobile capital and sovereign revenue. The challenge is not to choke access to global finance but to ensure transparency and fairness.

K Chidananand Kumar  
Bengaluru

Delhi's deadly air

This is with reference to the article 'Delhi's deadly air crisis' (December 17). The twin issues of pollution in the Capital and stubble burning in neighbouring states of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan have been debated for a long time without any amicable solutions. Every problem has a solution if our politicians think beyond politics and

take a scientific approach. The Delhi government should appoint an expert committee to advise the government on reusing the stubble for productive purposes. The farmers should be given reasonable compensation for not burning the stubble. The Centre and States must put aside politics and act in sync to solve this issue.

Veena Shenoy  
Thane

FPI pull out

Apropos "Selling season" (December 17), the relentless foreign portfolio outflows this year, exceeding ₹1.6 lakh crore, have understandably deepened the

rupee's slide and raised worries about a vicious cycle of depreciation and further selling. Yet domestic investors have stepped in robustly, pouring in record sums into the markets. High valuations and US tariffs have driven much of this caution abroad, narrowing the gap with cheaper emerging peers.

Still, with corporate earnings likely to recover and valuations now more competitive, a deft RBI approach to rupee management—smoothing extremes without rigid defence—could help restore confidence and draw flows back.

M Barathi  
Bengaluru

Cumin acreage, a lesson

Apropos 'Cumin acreage may decline...Subdued China demand' (December 17). It is a lesson that dependence on one market for agricultural commodities severely affects domestic farmers. When domestic consumption cannot be increased overnight to offset subdued export to China, trade agreements that India is entering with many other smaller nations due to US tariff pressure, must be well utilised and the government can appoint a nodal officer to oversee such issues.

Rajni Magal  
Halekere Village (Karnataka)



OPINION

**America-first compass  
for new security strategy**



While the 2017 NSS called out China's increasing threat in all areas, this one calls for a "rebalance" of America's economic relationship with China. AFP

{ OUR TAKE }  
**The end of  
MGNREGS**

VB-G RAM G's funding and administrative structure should strengthen and expand rural jobs, not weaken the scheme

The Union government sprang a surprise in Parliament this week by introducing the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) or VB-G RAM G, to replace the two-decade-old Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), a showpiece of the previous UPA administration. Beyond the obvious political overtones in renaming a project that once netted the Congress rich electoral dividends and engineering an abbreviation with ideological alignment with the ruling coalition, three aspects of the debate merit discussion.

One, the proposal expands the statutory guarantee of wage employment in every financial year from 100 days to 125 days, a welcome development in a country where chunks of the rural population move between relative comfort and destitution with alarming regularity. The bill suggests paying an allowance within 15 days of application of work, potentially easing chronic delays in payments. It delineates clear focus areas for asset creation such as water security or climate adaptation, a good step for a programme where the quality of assets is sometimes sub-par. And it mandates regular audits, fraud detection, GPS and mobile-based monitoring — which could be of help in a scheme where allegations of corruption are rife.

Two, the bill proposes sharing of financial liability between the Centre and the states in a 90:10 ratio for northeastern and Himalayan states, and 60:40 for other states and Union territories with a legislature. Plus, any additional spends — MGNREGS was demand driven, which meant that the Centre paid if additional work demand was made — will be borne by the state government. This might ease central finances (the wage cost of MGNREGS was fully funded by the Centre, with states chipping in for the material cost), but it is unclear if this is sustainable for any state against a backdrop where even rich provinces such as Maharashtra are struggling to balance their books. It is also unclear where poor states, where the demand for work is high, will find the money. This newspaper has expressed concern over profligate spending by states — across the political spectrum — on freebies and poll sops. This cannot be allowed to hurt the scheme.

Three, VB-G RAM G's design — where the Centre, based on objective parameters it prescribes, determines the state-wise normative allocation for each financial year — sets the stage for more friction between the Centre and states not ruled by the BJP.

Despite all its faults, MGNREGS was an important pillar for the rural economy for two decades, both as a cushion for the poor in good years and a lifeline in moments of distress such as demonetisation or after the pandemic. It buoyed peasants, set a floor for rural wages, and just like the PM-Anna Jyana, worked as a safety net. Politics should not overwhelm its core mission. VB-G RAM G should aim to do more.

**Uncapped but very  
much in demand**

Half (39 out of 77) the sold players in the IPL 2026 mini-auction on Tuesday were uncapped players. Three of them — Karthik Sharma, Prashant Veer and Aaqib Nabi — were among the top 10 most expensive buys. And several others were talents scouted from the domestic T20 leagues around the country. This represents a shift in how IPL teams are going about building their squad — by investing early in hometown talent. Chennai Super Kings, for instance, was looking for players to replace Mahendra Singh Dhoni and Ravindra Jadeja. They could have gone for tried and tested pros, and a few years back, they would have done exactly that. But this time, they chose to trust youth and their scouting teams to pick 19-year-old Sharma and 20-year-old Veer. Their decision was also likely influenced by the 2025 season, when, after a disastrous start, the team introduced young replacements who made an immediate impact.

To be sure, this strategy has also been forced upon teams because players from England and Australia aren't always available for the whole season and there aren't enough top T20 players from other countries. Having Indian players in the squad means continuity and better control for the team management.

As older, marquee players retire, spotting and backing the next generation of Indian stars is no longer about waiting for players to emerge on the international stage; it is about signing them up early, and hoping that potential turns into performance. Venture capitalists would approve.

The US's new National Security Strategy signals a "hands-off" approach towards matters that are not of American interests. All tools will be used to ensure the US's primacy remains intact

Not even the most blasé among us can complain of boredom in international politics. Events are moving so swiftly that it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep up with the latest developments, even for those in the business. One of the most drastic changes that occurred recently was the shift in the US's geopolitical compass, as underlined in its new National Security Strategy (NSS) released by the Donald Trump administration. It is an astonishing document, quite unlike what is expected of a global power. The short point is that it has immediate implications for India's security. That might need more changes in our policies across multiple areas.

US administrations over the years have released NSSs to orient the government, at all levels, towards the direction of their choosing. Everything, from budgeting to fighting the doctrine of the armed forces, is based on the document. As such, it is usually big on "vision" in terms of global interests and the strengths needed to advance them. Trump's first administration was "advancing American influence in the world". His second one simply wants a safe western hemisphere, and leaves the rest of the world to fend for itself, unless US security is involved — in which case, Washington expects each power to step up and contribute rather than leaving it to US troops and money. That said, it still mentions the vitality of uninterrupted oil and the security of Israel, among other issues. But the US is not getting into "nation-building". That era is over.

Then, there is the rather unusual list of threats. In 2017, the list of threats included Russia, China, and North Korea. This time, North Korea has been dropped, while Iran is mentioned only in terms of praise for Trump's oil operations and Israeli actions. Russia is seen against Europe's fixation on it as an "existential threat", and the need to end the conflict in Ukraine. That divide was seen recently at the meeting of foreign ministers of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) on Ukraine. US secretary of State Marco Rubio chose not to attend. Meanwhile, the NSS calls out Germany for "building some of the world's largest processing plants in China, using Russian gas that they cannot obtain at home", even as Europeans as a whole are censured for "civilisational erasure", apparently due to, among other things, too much migration — which it flags as being at an end. These are dangerous paths to tread at a time when right-wing parties such as the Alternative for Germany have been increasing their vote-share, as part of a surge in such politics seen globally since 2024. This is bad news for Europe itself.

And for those who seek to engage with it. Again, while the 2017 iteration called out China's increasing threat in all areas, this one recognises China's economic muscle and calls for a "rebalance" of America's economic relationship with China, "prioritizing reciprocity and fairness" even while noting that, to realise the objective of reaching a \$40-trillion economy, it may need strong trade with Beijing. That's supply-chain dependence talking. However, it also calls for a policy of strong deterrence to prevent war in the Indo-Pacific, recognising that any grabbing of Taiwan would affect not only semiconductor access but also allow China to dominate one of the busiest shipping routes. But here's the difference with the earlier approach. In line with a similar demand it makes of its allies in Europe, there is a "spend and domore" instruction here as well for Japan and Australia, which have significant stakes in the region.

This is where India also comes in for mention. Since India will also suffer from such Chinese transgressions, "Washington wants 'strong cooperation' with New Delhi. That seems to be alright with the Indian Navy. It has just cleared a \$7,995-crore deal for sustaining the MH-60 Seahawk order with Lockheed Martin. This was welcomed in no uncertain terms by the US State department on X.com. Meanwhile, it's worth noting that almost all of the Indian Navy's recent purchases are from the US, with General Electric entering the 'Next Generation Missile Ves-

els". It is hardly surprising, given that the NSS arises out of asking three simple questions. First, what "should" the US want; second, what the available means are; and third, how to connect ends to the means. These are indeed the basic parameters of any NSS, which no amount of fine language can get past. New Delhi might do well to follow this in its own NSS.

The end result of this exercise is that the US is now clearly looking inwards, while recognising that it does not want or care to engage in costly adventures outside its hemisphere. But that doesn't mean America's primacy doesn't count. It will use its available levers to fulfill that objective, including "strategic use of tariffs". So, it's all more of the same together with a "hands-off" policy on most crises that don't affect the US directly. For India, this means more opportunism by Pakistan — as also the obverse, which is the freedom to deal



Tara Kartha

Tara Kartha is former director, National Security Council Secretariat. The views expressed are personal.

**A remit too wide: Personality  
rights without a rulebook**

Celebrity actors, singers, and even sportspersons, are rushing to court to stop the unauthorised use of their name, face, voice or likeness. The surge in these "personality rights" cases has coincided with two developments: the rise of social media and the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Deepfakes, AI-generated voices, manipulated images and viral memes have made it easier to reproduce and remix a public figure's identity.

While the government has recently issued AI Governance Guidelines to address some of these concerns, we are already witnessing the emergence of a new kind of private ordering of rights through celebrity-led personality rights cases. The Delhi High Court's directives to social media firms to protect cricketer Sunil Gavaskar's and Andhra Pradesh deputy chief minister Pawan Kalyan's personality rights are recent instances of this.

Celebrities argue that new technologies pose risks to their reputation, privacy and livelihoods. At first glance, these concerns appear reasonable. The law must provide remedies for defamation, obscene portrayals and material deception of the public. In fact, the law already does so for each of these harms. For example, actions for defamation lie under both civil and criminal laws; impersonation through deepfakes can be regulated under provisions of the Information Technology Act and Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS); and selling, circulating obscene material is punishable under the BNS. Still, rather than invoking existing laws, celebrities and courts are fashioning new "personality rights" without clear benchmarks for assessing harm or misuse.

Personality rights are not statutory rights in India. They have evolved through case law. These rights allow famous people to control the contexts in which their identity is used and commercialised. The aspects of identity that are protected are very broad and have been characterised as "prominent rights" that include (a) the name, including screen name and any abbreviation, moniker, or variation; (b) voice; (c) image; (d) likeness; (e) distinctive performance, appearance, and mannerisms; and (f) signature and any other uniquely identifiable attribute. Courts invoke a medley of doctrines drawn from privacy and dignity, trademark law's principles of confusion and tarnishment, and false advertising laws. Yet, personality rights remain conceptually distinct from each, lacking a coherent and settled legal foundation.

Today, the mere use of a famous person's identity can invite legal trouble based solely on the celebrity's subjective sense of offence. For example, Abhishek Bachchan was unhappy because someone sold T-shirts with his name and face. Anil Kapoor was annoyed with people using the catchphrase "Jhakaas". Karan Johar was peeved with his name being used in a movie title. Pawan Kalyan was upset

because someone used his photograph for commercial gain. Other celebrities have been distressed by deepfakes placing them in obscene contexts, spreading rumours, or falsely depicting them as endorsing events or websites.

While some of these claims are certainly justified, some seem much less so. In the absence of objective standards, there is a tendency to chill speech and expression that may interfere with trade and commerce, through blanket injunctions.

Allowing celebrities to assert near-absolute control over how they are referred, repesented and discussed is in tension with recognised democratic values. Few benches of the Delhi High Court have cautioned against an over-expansive interpretation of personality rights in *DM Entertainment v. Boly Ghil House*, an original

*Collectibles v. Galactus Furware Technology* in 2010 and 2023. Even the Supreme Court in *Bata India Ltd v. Prakash Jha Productions* (2012), in the context of trademark law, has recognised the importance of critical commentary and allowed a more permissive approach for such purposes. These courts have emphasised that news reporting, criticism, satire, parody, informational and artistic expression are protected. However, when it comes to public records of celebrities, they rely on subjective notions such as "negative portrayal" or "harm to reputation" without clearly defining what crosses the legal line.

While privacy claims are justified, lines remain blurry when it comes to public records of celebrities. In 1994, the Supreme Court in *R Rajagopal v. State of Tamil Nadu*, had laid down principles related to publicity rights and the right to privacy. While the general rule was that every citizen has the right to access information that forms part of the public record may be published or commented on. In this regard, many aspects of a celebrity's identity exist in the public domain. Use of such material in news reports that do not constitute disaffection against the government, stifles free speech and violates Articles 14 (equality), 19 (a) (freedom of speech), and 21 (life and liberty) of the Constitution. Their ease quickly snowballed into a broader constitutional challenge, joined by the Editors Guild of India, the People's Union for Civil Liberties, Anur Shourie, Mahua Mottra, and several others.

Sedition's defenders often invoke *Kedar Nath Singh v. State of Bihar* (1962). But when they forget is the historical context in which *Kedar Nath* was decided: the annexation of Goa, the 1962 war with China, and the resultant National Emergency as well as poverty, drought, and separatist demands for independent states. It was amid these exceptional pressures that the Court preserved Section 124A but read it down so that it applied only to speech inciting violence or public disorder, while drawing a firm line distinguishing the government in power from the nation itself. In doing so, it held that criticism of the government was constitutionally protected.

In practice, however, that judicial promise has frayed. In recent decades, sedition casefiles have been filed for slogans, cartoons, social media posts, and campus activism. In May 2022, the Supreme Court took the extraordinary step of ordering that "no coercive action" be taken in sedition cases that remain pending while the Union re-examines the law. But even as sedition receded from the headlines, the law quietly assumed centre stage.

Aparajita Lath is an intellectual property rights lawyer based in Bengaluru. The views expressed are personal.

URSULA VON DER LEYEN | PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

There is no more important act of European defence than supporting Ukraine's defence. The next days will be a crucial step for securing this, it is up to us to choose how we fund Ukraine's fight

Remarks made ahead of an European Council meeting on Ukraine

**From sedition to UAPA:  
Policing dissent in India**

Few laws reveal the Indian State's unease with dissent as starkly as sedition. Drafted in 1870 to protect the British Crown from political unrest, it was infamously wielded against figures such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi. Section 124A of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code

was never meant for a constitutional democracy. Yet, more than 70 years after Indian independence, it has resurfaced in one form or the other whenever the State felt politically challenged by citizens. As the Supreme Court now re-examines the law, constituents must be clear on its worth noting that the UK, from where India inherited sedition, has long since consigned it to history.

The immediate spark for this judicial reckoning came in February 2023, when journalist Kishore Wangkhemcha and Kanhaiya Lal Shukla, both charged with sedition, approached the Supreme Court challenging the law. They argued that the vague language, which criminalises attempts to "excite disaffection" against the government, stifles free speech and violates Articles 14 (equality), 19 (a) (freedom of speech), and 21 (life and liberty) of the Constitution. At the same time, UAPA hovers over the discussion because its application often blurs into areas that sedition once occupied. If sedition reflected colonial anxiety, UAPA treats dissent itself as a presumed threat.

The debate has taken on fresh urgency with the enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita in 2024, which witnessed fresh challenges to Section 124A on the ground that it is merely sedition repackaged in even broader and vaguer terms. As a result, the Supreme Court will now examine the constitutionality of this new provision alongside the original sedition challenge. Ultimately, the debate over sedition is a test of constitutional sincerity. Striking down Section 124A may erase a colonial relic, but as long as the UAPA architecture remains unexamined, freedom to dissent remains on the chopping block — only the legal label changes. India must hold space for disagreement even when it is uncomfortable. If the constitution envisions a nation confident enough to tolerate disagreement, the law must mirror that courage.

Insiyah Vahanvaty is a socio-political writer and author of *The Fearless Judge*. Abhishek Bhardwaj is Professor & Dean of BITS Pilani's Law School in Mumbai. The views expressed are personal.

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## Trade possibilities

The latest numbers should not distract policymakers

One of the biggest global economic issues this year has been the radical shift in America's trade policy. United States (US) President Donald Trump imposed the so-called reciprocal tariffs on all major trading partners and has negotiated new terms of trade with many of them. India has stood out as an outlier in this scheme of things. Aside from the reciprocal tariffs, the US has imposed a penalty in terms of an additional 25 per cent tariff on India for importing Russian oil. India has not been able to resolve the issue. Since the US is India's largest trading partner, with India enjoying a trade surplus of over \$45 billion last year, the issue has been a cause for concern. Given the backdrop, the November trade data, released this week, came as a pleasant surprise for most Indian observers. Merchandise exports increased 19.4 per cent year-on-year (Y-o-Y), the quickest pace in 41 months. Exports to the US also jumped more than 22 per cent. The trade deficit, as a result, narrowed during the month.

Despite the adverse environment, merchandise exports have grown during April-November, though at a modest pace of about 2.6 per cent. However, the merchandise trade deficit has widened during this period, which is also, in part, why the rupee has come under pressure. Therefore, from the broader policy perspective, better than expected trade numbers for November should not distract policymakers from the objective of sealing a trade deal with the US. The government is hopeful of finalising a framework trade agreement soon, which is expected to address the massive tariff differential with competitors. This is extremely critical. It is worth noting that the tariff differential with competitors, which is about 30 percentage points, could push US buyers of Indian products, particularly low-value and high-volume goods, towards suppliers from other countries. Bringing them back might become difficult for Indian exporters if the deal is significantly delayed. Thus, the risk is that part of the demand for Indian goods may be permanently lost. Higher tariffs curtailing export demand are also a constraint for investment, including foreign direct investment.

From a macroeconomic standpoint, the balance of payments turned negative in the second quarter this financial year as India also witnessed capital outflows, particularly from equity markets. Thus far this year, for instance, foreign portfolio investors sold Indian shares worth over \$18 billion. One of the reasons for selling could be that Indian companies are not really part of the global artificial intelligence-related investment boom. Another reason could be trade-related uncertainties. A trade deal with the US in the coming weeks could possibly reduce or reverse capital flows. India is negotiating agreements with several trading partners other than the US, such as the European Union. Positive movement on these will also improve confidence.

Uncertainty on both trade and capital accounts is putting pressure on the rupee, which has fallen about 6 per cent against the dollar so far this year. In this regard, it is worth noting that the Reserve Bank of India has done well to let the rupee depreciate, even in real terms. While it may not fully offset the US tariff disadvantage, it will provide some cushion to tradable sectors, and the November trade data may be reflecting this. Nevertheless, the markets will remain focused on the possibility of a trade deal with the US in the near term, making it one of the key things to watch in the weeks ahead.

## Regulating higher education

The focus must be on improving outcomes

The Union government this week introduced the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025, in Parliament. The Bill envisages replacing the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) with a single apex institution called the "Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan". The new body will function through three distinct but interlinked verticals: A regulatory council, an accreditation council, and a standards council. Significantly, it brings institutions of national importance such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), National Institutes of Technology (NITs), and Indian Institute of Science (IISc), which have functioned under separate parliamentary statutes, within a routine regulatory frame of oversight. However, it does not cover institutions under the Pharmacy Council of India, Bar Council of India, Veterinary Council of India, and National Medical Commission.

At present, the regulation of higher education in India is spread across multiple agencies with overlapping mandates. The UGC oversees non-technical universities, the AICTE is concerned with technical education, while the NCTE is the regulatory body for teachers' education. This multiplicity has often resulted in slow approvals, inconsistent norms, and excessive compliance requirements. In terms of performance, despite hosting over 1,300 universities and nearly 52,000 colleges, India's gross enrolment ratio remains around 28 per cent and scale has not translated into commensurate quality of educational standing. India's higher education system continues to struggle with faculty shortages, uneven funding, and limited research capacity. According to a recent parliamentary panel report, as of January 2025 more than half the professor positions, which are the most senior academic roles, are vacant across India's higher education system, including at premier institutions like the IITs and central universities. Such gaps undermine academic leadership, mentoring, and research output.

The proposed law's attempt to merge multiple regulatory functions into one framework needs detailed rules, a clear division of roles, and close coordination among the Centre, states, and institutions to avoid confusion. On funding, the current system sees the Centre disburse grants to central universities through the UGC, while institutions such as the IITs and IIMs receive funds directly from the Centre. The Bill proposes that grant disbursement be done directly by the Ministry of Education, effectively removing the grant-making role from the proposed regulator. While this may simplify administrative processes, it also raises concerns about greater centralisation of financial control. The Bill is also silent on fee regulation. It does not empower the regulatory council to fix or cap fees, raising fears that greater reliance on institutional self-financing could push up costs for students. At the same time, the proposed commission is given wide enforcement powers, including the authority to impose penalties for violations of the Act, with highest fines reserved for institutions operating without approval from the Centre or the state concerned. For the reform to deliver results, industry link and skill-focused education must be central. As the Bill goes to a joint parliamentary committee, these operational issues must be carefully scrutinised.



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

## Time to raise the bar in services exports

Growth in travel, wellness, and financial services is essential to reduce concentration risk

DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI, ADHISH VERMA & BHAVI SHAH

Global services exports grew at an average 6.1 per cent annually from 2014 to reach \$8.6 trillion in 2024. In the same period, global goods exports rose at a more steady 2.9 per cent to \$24.5 trillion. The upshot of that acceleration? The proportion of services in total global exports climbed up a good 50 basis points to 27 per cent, spurring job creation, especially in developing economies.

According to a 2022 World Bank blog, services exports created 16 million new jobs across a sample of major developing economies between 2005 and 2018, while those supported by goods exports declined 31 million. The trend is expected to have continued in recent years, given the increasing reliance of modern manufacturing on capital-intensive production and highly skilled labour force.

In this milieu, India's services export trajectory has been phenomenal. For instance, while India accounted for only 1.8 per cent of global goods exports over the past decade and ranked 18th globally (with China ranked first), its share of global services exports rose to 4.2 per cent in 2024, from 3 per cent in 2014. That translates into a services export growth rate of 9.1 per cent versus 6.1 per cent globally, positioning India as the eighth-largest services exporter in the world in 2024, with China being the only developing country ahead of India (more on this later).

Nearly half of our exports are in services, which have been less affected than goods trade by the new United States tariff regime that has kicked in, and that has helped navigate the ensuing turbulence. Services used to account for only around 30 per cent of our total exports a decade ago.

Additionally, the composition of services exports is undergoing a rapid transformation. In recent years, the other business services (OBS) segment has emerged as the biggest exporting sector globally, replacing travel

services, which dominated before the pandemic. OBS comprises three categories — research and development services, professional and management consulting (PMC) services, and technical, trade-related services. In 2024, OBS exports of \$2.1 trillion accounted for almost a quarter of total global services exports.

India has been a major beneficiary of this trend. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), in 2024, India was the second-largest exporter of PMC services, which also include information technology-enabled services (ITES) and business process outsourcing (BPO) under the WTO classification, after the United States.

This coincides with the rapid establishment of global capability centres (GCCs) in India, currently estimated at over 1,700 — more than half that exist globally. But there is a flip side to this is concentration risk. PMC and computer services account for over 65 per cent of India's services exports. On the other hand, leading services exporters such as the US, United Kingdom, Germany and China offer a far more diverse palette of services. This means that the current tendency towards increased protectionism, if extended to services, could be disruptive for India.

And herein lies the nub — short of PMC and computer services, India does not even rank among the global top 10 exporters in any other large services categories such as travel, transport, and financial services. These three account for nearly half of the services exported worldwide.

Our share of the trioka? A bare 1-2 per cent. That compares poorly with a roughly 13 per cent slice of PMC services. In addition, while our share in global services exports saw an uptick for most of the last decade, the pie stagnated at 4.2 per cent in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Also, between 2014 and 2024, India has not been able to move up from the eighth position globally, with Singapore, Ireland, and China successfully and

aggressively competing for services exports and raising their spoils faster than India.

To be sure, China is a bigger services exporter than India, but its offerings are different. The country dominates transport services exports (second only to Singapore) and is likely a bigger exporter of technical, trade-related, and research and development services.

What that means is any efforts at diversification of India's services exports basket will run into stiff competition. In any case, we need a two-pronged, layered strategy premised on inherent strengths: Continue to maintain leadership in PMC, while simultaneously raise competitiveness in global exports of other services. For example, globally, travel services have grown the fastest since the pandemic and remain the second-largest services export segment. But for India, this segment is now a net negative for the balance of payments, unlike earlier.

Also, it's time to step up and get the mojo back. India's prowess in medical and wellness tourism is well known. Government initiatives such as the expansion of the e-visa scheme and the development of spiritual tourism circuits should provide further support. Medical and wellness tourism is crucial, as it has greater potential than BMC or computer services to create job opportunities beyond the metros. Other services also appear to be gaining traction. For instance, the maritime push for shipbuilding, ports and waterways could propel transport services exports.

Likewise, Gujarat International Finance Tec-City, or GIFT City, can become a hub for financial services exports. All said, given the global competition and early-mover advantage of other nations, focused efforts are needed for these initiatives to start contributing meaningfully to India's services exports on the global stage.

Yet another flank is vocational professionals. Because of a faster-than-anticipated ageing population, particularly in advanced nations, global demand for plumbers, electricians, welders, machinists, and paramedics/elder care professionals is rising. We must step up to fill the widening skill gap in these services both domestically as well as for external markets. More importantly, these professions are relatively resilient to potential job disruptions from the advent of artificial intelligence.

India's recent free trade agreements focused on reducing restrictions on services exports by allowing easier market access (physical/digital) and professional mobility (permits/visas), recognition of qualifications (mutual recognition agreements for chartered accountants/nurses/architects), and higher commitments for the education, IT and finance sectors should add to its competitiveness. High-value services globally, especially in the IT, business and creative fields.

Enhancing services exports across multiple flanks must become a cardinal priority, given their relatively fast pace of growth, demonstrated stability, and India's inherent advantages, even as we continue to step up targeted efforts to boost manufacturing exports in pharmaceuticals, electronics, and defence.

The authors are, respectively, chief economist, senior economist, and economic analyst at Crisil

## India must treat design as a civic skill

India's cities are expanding upwards, outdoors, and into new forms of daily life. While the urban landscape evolves at extraordinary speed, the institutions shaping it have barely kept pace. The result is a tension visible in every metropolis: Design problems that everyone can see, and a municipal architecture too constrained to respond them at scale. Improving the design of cities, then, requires more than better drawings or clever guidelines. It demands building the design capacity of the state itself, so that good ideas are not defeated by the very procedures meant to deliver them.

The scale of the challenge becomes clearer when one examines who is expected to design India's urban future. A few years ago, UN-Habitat estimated that India has just 0.23 urban planners per 100,000 people, compared with 38 per 100,000 in the UK, and below Nigeria, which stands at around 1.4. The Town and Country Planning Organisation records only 3,945 sanctioned town-planning posts across all states and Union Territories combined. For a country with nearly 8,000 urban centres, the paucity is staggering. NTI Aayog's 2021 assessment found that over half of India's statutory towns have no master plan, and close to three-quarters of census towns have urbanised in the absence of any formal spatial framework. Yet the absence of planners is only part of the story. India's city-making machinery, from budgeting, procurement, maintenance, departmental silos is structured in ways that often override, dilute or reverse design intent. Even when cities know what to build, the how defeats them.

This is why design failures in India cannot be understood purely as aesthetic or infrastructural shortcomings. A dangerous intersection, an unusable footpath, or a metro station hostile to pedestrians is rarely the product of one poor decision. It is the cumulative outcome of processes that were never built to integrate design thinking in the first place. Correcting India's urban form, therefore, requires nurturing design intelligence not just among special-

ists but across the entire governance ecosystem.

Design, in the civic sense, is not about ornamentation. It is about alignment between the built environment and human behaviour, between mobility and safety, between public investment and public experience. The World Bank's work on liveable cities stresses this repeatedly: Infrastructure succeeds only when it is designed around how people actually use it, not how bureaucrats imagine they should. United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) design-thinking frameworks go further, describing public systems that listen before deciding, test solutions before scaling them, and view citizens as co-creators rather than passive recipients.

This approach is needed in India, where municipal routines default to a mid-20th-century logic. Budgets are allocated departmentally rather than by outcome, such as walkability or heat resilience. Procurement frameworks reward the lowest-cost contractor even for complex public-space or transport projects where design quality determines long-term performance. In such a system, design intent disintegrates on contact. The newly built footpath that narrows unexpectedly, the bus stop placed in full afternoon sun, the flyover that channels pedestrians into blind corners are the visible symptoms of a capacity failure. The people making daily operational decisions — engineers, ward officers, contractors, accounts clerks, traffic police — rarely receive training in spatial thinking or user-centred design, yet they shape more of the city than any architect ever will.

Some Indian cities are beginning to experiment with this shift, even if unevenly. Chennai's "Complete Streets" programme, for instance, moved beyond one-off beautification by training engineers, updating street design templates, and piloting corridors that were refined through on-ground observation of pedestrian behaviour. Pune's smart design guidelines similarly offered departments and contractors

a shared framework, modestly improving consistency in implementation. Surati's resilience planning has attempted to integrate climate data, flood patterns and land-use decisions, treating extreme weather as a design and governance issue rather than a purely emergency response. These efforts are far from perfect, but they show what can happen when design principles start entering municipal routines rather than high-value services globally, especially in the IT, business and creative fields.

Enhancing services exports across multiple flanks must become a cardinal priority, given their relatively fast pace of growth, demonstrated stability, and India's inherent advantages, even as we continue to step up targeted efforts to boost manufacturing exports in pharmaceuticals, electronics, and defence.

What would it mean, then, to treat design as a civic skill? It would mean shifting budgets from line items to outcomes — for example, not "X crore for roads" but "X per cent improvement in pedestrian safety". It would mean procurement models that evaluate quality and usability, not just cost. It would mean training ward engineers to evaluate projects by walking them as end-users, reviewing drawings. It would mean that citizens including street vendors, commuters, students, waste workers are invited into the design process because they hold the tacit knowledge planners often miss.

Much of the infrastructure the country will rely on in 2050 has not yet been built. Decisions taken now will lock in mobility patterns, heat exposure, public life and climate resilience for generations. Good design matters, and so does the capacity to deliver good design. India needs more design-thinkers inside its institutions. If it becomes a normal part of governance, then cities will begin to work in ways that feel intuitive rather than exhausting. The challenge is immense, but the opportunity is greater.

The author is chair, Institute for Competitiveness, X@kautilya. With inputs from Meenakshi Ajith

## Malala beyond the icon



VEENU SANDHU

For more than a decade, Malala Yousafzai has existed in the public imagination as a symbol rather than a person. She has been described as heroic, an icon of girls' education, even saintly. Just as often, she has been dismissed as a carefully crafted narrative. *Finding My Way*, her latest book and her most revealing, sets out to answer a quieter question: Who is Malala to herself?

Ms Yousafzai, now 28, writes from a distance that her earlier books did not afford her. *I Am Malala*, co-written with journalist Christina Lamb and published

in 2013 (a year before her Nobel Peace Prize at age 17), was the testimony of a teenager who had survived being shot in the head by the Taliban. *We Are Displaced* (2019) explored the state of refugees and statelessness. *Finding My Way* is something else entirely. It is a coming-of-age memoir that insists on the legitimacy of ordinary speakers — Einstein wanting to fit in at school in Birmingham, at Oxford, and in friendships not defined by a Nobel. It is about girlhood, campus life, first love, and the uncomfortable truth that living fully can feel like a betrayal.

Much of the book unfolds at Oxford, where Ms Yousafzai studies philosophy, politics and economics at Lady Margaret Hall. The details are often funny, enough to make you laugh out loud, but also reflective: Signing up for cricket and badminton because they remind her of Mingora, her birthplace in Pakistan's Swat valley; impulsively joining the

rowing club because boats drifting down the river look "dreamy"; enrolling herself at the Islamic Society, the Christian Union, and the Hindu Society in a bid to understand religious pluralism from the inside. There is a surreal moment at the Oxford Union when, queuing to sign up, she spots her own photograph on a banner of famous past speakers — Einstein, Malcolm X, Queen Elizabeth II, Ronald Reagan... and Malala. It is unsettling, being fossilised into history when she is barely out of adolescence and trying hard to be just one of the students.

She writes about surveillance, about how a photograph of her walking back to college after rowing practice, wearing jeans and a bomber jacket, exploded on Pakistani social media. The reaction is swift and vicious, with accusations of obscenity, and moral collapse. Even her mother, who once visited Prince Harry's hand when he put his arm around Ms Yousafzai's shoulders for a

photo, calls in distress, alarmed by relatives phoning from back home. What makes this episode stand out is Ms Yousafzai's refusal to see it as a simple liberation versus conservatism debate. She understands the bind intimately. If she wants to advocate for girls' education and equality in Pakistan, she has to be "inoffensive in every way". Clothes become political not because she wants them to be, but because freedom, especially a woman's freedom, cannot remain private for long.

Equally unwelcome to her are Western critiques of her headscarf as a symbol of oppression. Ms Yousafzai rejects both denials with equal clarity. Her scarves connect her to a home she has lost; they signal to girls in Pakistan that she has not erased them to become acceptable elsewhere. A girl in a scarf, she insists, can walk alone, row a boat, go to university. It is a quiet, considered radicalism.



Finding My Way by Malala Yousafzai  
Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson  
305 pages ₹699

she is not exemplary. She is a bad student, unconfused, and overwhelmed. The book, which humanises her, challenges another assumption — that Ms Yousafzai's activism is born out of privilege. In one chapter, she explains that her speaking fees are not pocket money but the financial backbone of her family's life in the UK, and of extended

*Finding My Way* is also candid about the costs of "sainthood". Ms Yousafzai writes about PTSD and therapy, about the pressure to be constantly useful — to travel, give persuasive speeches at Oxford, this tension comes to the fore. She skips tortois to fly from Lebanon (touring refugee education programmes with Apple CEO Tim Cook) to Switzerland (to meet Justin Trudeau ahead of the G7), only to be gently but firmly reminded by her tutor that activism cannot replace education. It punctures her self-image. For the first time,

she is not exemplary. She is a bad student, unconfused, and overwhelmed. The book, which humanises her, challenges another assumption — that Ms Yousafzai's activism is born out of privilege. In one chapter, she explains that her speaking fees are not pocket money but the financial backbone of her family's life in the UK, and of extended

obligations in Pakistan. At 20, she is earning more than her family ever had, yet living paycheck to paycheck, funding mortgages, school fees, medical bills, even university education for others.

If the world expects solemnity from Ms Yousafzai, *Finding My Way* gleefully refuses to comply. There are wisecracks, misadventures, and first love, which leads to a wonderfully absurd episode involving Axe body spray (*Anarchy XL7*). She sprays it all over her body as a way to feel better, and so does the capacity to deliver good design. India needs more design-thinkers inside its institutions. If it becomes a normal part of governance, then cities will begin to work in ways that feel intuitive rather than exhausting. The challenge is immense, but the opportunity is greater.



# The Indian EXPRESS

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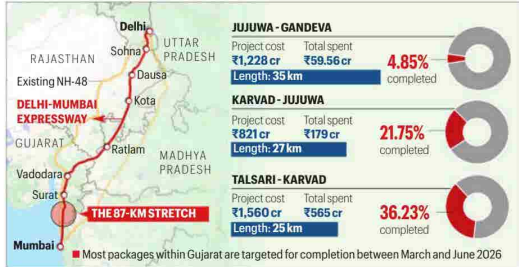
## 1,386-KM ROAD PROJECT TO HALVE TRAVEL TIME

### 4 years of delay, short 87-km stretch derails Rs 1-lakh-crore Delhi-Mumbai Expressway

Project scrapped in March 2023, re-awarded to same Pune firm months later

Dheeraj Mishra  
New Delhi, December 17

THREE SMALL stretches in Gujarat adding up to just 87 km and awarded to a Pune contractor have ended up derailing the massive 1,386-km Delhi-Mumbai Expressway project being built at a cost of Rs 1.04 lakh crore. *The Indian Express* has learnt.



The Pune contractor, Roadway Solutions India Infra Ltd (RSIL), was first awarded all

these three stretches in 2021. Two of these were scrapped in March 2023 due to delays, only

to be re-awarded to the same company in November 2023 after it bid the lowest.

At the end of almost four years now, less than 20 per cent of the 87 km has been completed, raising red flags in the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways. And frustrated at the slow progress, the NHAI is now considering issuing notices to RSIL, that may even result in the termination of the contract.

When contacted, Navjeet Gadhoke, Director, RSIL, attributed the delay to "non-provision of land by NHAI". NHAI officials, however, blamed non-performance by RSIL and contractual disputes and litigations for adversely affecting the pace of execution.

The Expressway, which passes through Delhi, Haryana, >CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## BAN ON ENTRY OF NON-BS VI CARS KICKS IN TODAY

### Air toxic, Delhi govt makes 50% work from home a must

Rs 10,000 to be given to verified construction workers affected by GRAP rules

Drishiti Jain & Devansh Mittal  
New Delhi, December 17

THE GOVERNMENT of Delhi will provide one-time assistance of Rs 10,000 each to construction workers hit by restrictions imposed on building activities under Stage 3 of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) to combat air pollution, Labour Minister Kapil Mishra announced on Wednesday.

Mishra also directed that from Thursday, all government and private institutions in Delhi must mandatorily switch to 'work from home' for 50 per cent of their employees.

The decisions are part of a



## EXPLAINED

**SC suggestions** As Delhi moved to take steps, the Supreme Court called for a long-term plan instead of short-term measures. It called for a plan to do away with toll plazas from October to January 2026.

RELATED REPORT, PAGE 3

The Capital's air quality has been dropping since the beginning of November. GALENDRA YADAV

series of steps announced by the Delhi government in response to the alarming decline in air quality in the Capital since the beginning of November.

On Tuesday, it announced a ban on the entry into Delhi of private vehicles that are registered outside the Capital and are not compliant with the >CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## HASINA'S SON SAJEEB WAZED JOY

### 'Threat to India very real, Yunus trying to bring Islamists to power via rigged poll'

'I speak to my mother (Sheikh Hasina) regularly on the phone. I have been to Delhi once and plan to go again'

EXPRESS  
exclusive

Ritu Sarin  
New Delhi, December 17

IN FIRST remarks on the announcement of elections in Bangladesh next February and the ban that rules out participation of Awami League, Sajeeb Wazed Joy, son and advisor of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, said the interim government in Dhaka, headed by Muhammad Yunus, was attempting to appoint an Islamic regime. He also warned that the security situation in Bangladesh posed a heightened threat to India.

Fifty-four-year-old Wazed, who lives in the US, made these remarks in an email interview with *The Indian Express* on the day Delhi summoned Dhaka's High Commissioner to convey India's "strong concerns" over the deteriorating security situation in Bangladesh and activ-



Sajeeb Wazed Joy is son and advisor of ousted Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina

ities of extremist elements threatening the Indian High Commission there.

These are excerpts from the interview with Wazed:

**You and your mother Sheikh Hasina are in exile. Begum Khaleda Zia is critically ill and her son Tarique has not returned to Bangladesh. Could this be the end of the two most powerful dynasties in Bangladesh politics?**

I cannot speak for the Zia family, but my mother did not >CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



## In Conversation With The J&K Chief Minister

Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah in conversation with *The Indian Express* National Opinion Editor Vandita Mishra at the Express Adda in New Delhi on Wednesday. HANDEKA PURI

## Stand-up comic, poet, storyteller Zakir Khan is guest at Adda today

Heena Khandelwal  
Mumbai, December 17

ZAKIR KHAN dons many hats — stand-up comedian, writer, poet, lyricist and actor — and has emerged as one of the most recognisable voices of contemporary Indian storytelling. Over the last decade, he has built a loyal following through a deeply personal brand of humour that blends romance, heartbreak, family, ambition and quiet resilience. Most recently, in August 2025, he became the first Indian comedian to headline a full-length Hindi stand-up show at the iconic Madison Square Garden in New York.



>CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## CHARGESHEET FILED, TRIAL BEGINS DECEMBER 22

### Zubeen was made to go to sea, not enough done to save him: Police

Sukrita Baruah  
Guwahati, December 17

FROM ALLEGEDLY encouraging Zubeen Garg to venture into the sea while drunk to not doing enough to save him — the chargesheet submitted last week in connection with the death of the Assamese superstar in Singapore on September 19 details why the state government believes murder charges should be invoked against the accused, *The Indian Express* has learnt.

This is in line with what Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma has said more than once — that the singer's death was not an accident but a murder. Zubeen was in Singapore as a cultural brand ambassador



Zubeen died on September 19

for the North East India Festival. Before the festival began, he went for a yacht outing, reportedly organised by members of the Assam Association in Singapore, and lost consciousness while swimming. He was declared dead at Singapore General Hospital. The death certificate issued by Singapore authorities stated that the cause of death was drown-

ing, while the Assam Police found that he was intoxicated at the time.

Police have charged four persons with murder: festival organiser Shyamkanu Mahanta, Zubeen's manager Siddharth Sharma, and co-musicians Shekhar Jyoti Goswami and Amritprava Mahanta. His cousin and Assam Police Service officer Sandipan Garg has been charged with culpable homicide. Mahanta was in Singapore for the festival while the other four were on the yacht when the incident happened.

It is learnt that Zubeen's manager Sharma has been accused of "causing the state of intoxication" which impaired his coordination and reflexes >CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

## Business as Usual

By EP UNNY



## THE WORLD PAGE 14

MUNIR MAY VISIT WASHINGTON TO DISCUSS TRUMP'S GAZA FORCE

## Happening today

INDIA AND THE UAE will begin a joint military exercise to enhance interoperability and foster deeper cooperation. Exercise Desert Cyclone will be held until December 30.

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## POLITICS PAGE 5



PM MODI IN OMAN, TO SIGN TRADE DEAL TODAY

## BOOK BY ASHOK TANDON, A MEMBER OF VAJPAYEE'S PMO, SHEDS NEW LIGHT ON THE GOINGS-ON WITHIN THE RULING COALITION AND THE OPPOSITION

### When NDA considered govt minus Vajpayee, and BJP suggested he be President

Vikas Pathak  
New Delhi, December 17

WHEN ATAL Bihari Vajpayee's 13-month government fell by one vote in April 1999, there were murmurs in the NDA that the alliance should try to stake fresh claim with the support of some new parties after replacing Vajpayee.

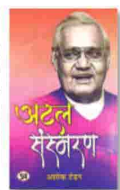
However, the move was stone-walled by Trinamool Congress chief Mamata Banerjee and MDMK leader Vaiko, who also had the support of BJD chief Naveen Patnaik. Vajpayee survived, and the NDA returned to power

for five years once fresh elections were ordered. Ashok Tandon, a member of Vajpayee's PMO as in-charge of media relations, writes about this little-known anecdote of 1999 in his book *Atal Sansmaran*, which was released on Tuesday.

The argument was that "if the United Front government (which preceded the NDA's) could replace H D Deve Gowda as Prime Minister with I K Gujral, why could the NDA not do the same" to explore forming an alternative government. Tandon writes, "But Banerjee and Vaiko re-



A B Vajpayee being sworn in as PM for a third time on October 13, 1999, months after his government fell by one vote. ARCHIVE: Atal Sansmaran, published by Prabhat Prakashan, was released Tuesday



jected the idea straightaway, saying there would be "No NDA government without Vajpayee". Patnaik also took the same line. Tandon says, "Mamata Banerjee and Vaiko could go

to know that even as CPI(M) leader Harkishan Singh Surjeet encouraged her to stake claim to form the government after Vajpayee's coalition fell, he goaded Samajwadi Party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav to say he would not support her as PM.

Tandon cites from Gujral's book *Matters of Discretion* to say that Surjeet wanted Jyoti Basu to be PM. Gujral also wrote that he had cautioned Gandhi on April 20, 1999, to not be "naive" and trust the Left, saying it would betray her at the last moment. In Tandon's words, Surjeet shared with Gandhi a list of 288 MPs apparently ready to sup-

port the Congress, asking her to stake claim. Accordingly, she met President K R Narayanan on April 21, 1999, and told him she had the support of 272 members, and more would join. The next day, Mulayam and the Left bloc's Revolutionary Socialist Party and Forward Bloc vetoed the name of Gandhi, indicating their 28 MPs would not support the Congress if she was the PM. According to Tandon, while Surjeet wanted Basu as PM, he also had a plan-B in the case of West Bengal Chief Minister refused — President Narayanan, whose candidature would have >CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



• WEB EXCLUSIVE

'When Tyla wore a Nancy Tyagi: A revolution is underway in Indian fashion.' — By Nirbhay Rana  
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## The Indian EXPRESS

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IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

### A nuclear step towards energy security

**I**N RECENT years, the government has promoted nuclear power as a key component in the country's efforts to achieve energy security. It's a relatively clean source of electricity that doesn't have the uncertainties associated with renewables, and can, therefore, fulfil the need for baseload power. However, nuclear energy accounts for only 3 per cent of the overall power generation today. The country has set a short-term goal to increase its nuclear power capacity to 22.5 GW by 2032, and a long-term target to reach 100 GW by 2047. Implementing this ambition will require unlocking private capital and opening up one of India's most closed sectors. The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India Bill, 2025 (SHANTI), tabled in Parliament on Monday, attempts to do that. It allows 10 per cent foreign direct investment (FDI) in certain nuclear activities. The Bill does away with a contentious clause in the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act (CLNDA), which held suppliers liable for accidents and was a deterrent for foreign vendors — it was among the reasons for the country's inability to leverage the full commercial potential of its nuclear deal with the US, nearly two decades after it was inked. The lack of clarity about the term "supplier" in CLNDA was a cause for worry for Indian sub-vendors as well.

Foreign investors, including foreign firms in West Asia, have reportedly expressed early interest in part-financing the country's objectives to scale up nuclear power, including entering the manufacturing value chain of small modular reactors (SMRs). These reactors address the limitations of traditional nuclear plants — they are less expensive, have shorter construction times, require less fuel and have enhanced safety features, including the ability to shut down in emergencies without human intervention. The government's commitment to increasing nuclear capacity to 22,480 MW in the next five years makes SMRs a compelling option within India's broader energy strategy. They feature in India's partnerships with nuclear powers, including the US and Russia. The congenial milieu envisaged in the SHANTI Bill could also pave the way for a greater role for Indian players and the deployment of this state-of-the-art technology at scale.

Under SHANTI, all entities involved in nuclear production will be required to obtain safety authorisation under the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board. In the last decade, multiple features, especially those stewarded by the International Energy Agency after the Fukushima tragedy of 2011, have led to major improvements in plant safety. The opening up of its nuclear value chain will allow India a greater say in such conversations.

### In insurance sector, let the market work

**O**N Tuesday, the Lok Sabha passed the Sabko Bima Sabko Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, 2025. It seeks to reform India's insurance framework through changes in three Acts: The Insurance Act of 1938, the Life Insurance Corporation Act of 1956, and the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) Act of 1999. The move is expected to be a step towards achieving the IRDAI's goal of "Insurance for All by 2047".

India has seen an improvement in insurance metrics over the past decade. For instance, the number of insurance policies rose from 54 in 2014-15 to 74 now. Similarly, insurance density — the average insurance premium paid per person in a year — has gone up from \$55 to \$97 over the same period. Insurance penetration — measured as the percentage of insurance premiums to GDP — has gone up from 3.3 per cent of GDP to 3.7 per cent. However, the country is still a deeply underserved insurance market. India's insurance density, primarily driven by life insurance, is 0.6 per cent of the world average. Most of the world's top 25 insurance companies do not operate in India. This Bill is an attempt to address these gaps. Its standout feature is to increase the limit for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Indian insurance companies from 74 per cent to 100 per cent. The hope is that this move will attract more foreign investment, facilitate technology transfer and increase the penetration of insurance and social protection. To deepen the market, apart from further liberalising the FDI norms, the Bill also provides spots for foreign reinsurers by reducing the requirement of their "net owned funds" (including equity capital and free reserves) from Rs 5,000 crore to Rs 1,000 crore. The easing of norms could draw smaller and new insurers to the Indian market, boosting competition and improving service.

The bill also bolsters the IRDAI's role. The punitive powers it provides to the agency are akin to those of the SEBI (the securities regulator). For instance, the regulator will now have the authority to disgorge wrongful gains made by insurers or intermediaries. These steps are welcome. The key will be to ensure that the regulator's increased powers do not stifle the sector's growth.

### IPL's nurseries, Test cricket's loss

**I**T SAYS much about the affinity of the youth for the T20 format that the Chennai Super Kings decided to give up its traditional reliance on experienced players and opt for youngsters in the just-concluded IPL auction. CSK picked two uncapped players — Rajasthan wicketkeeper batsman Karthik Sharma and Uttar Pradesh's all-rounder Prashant Ver — for a record Rs 14.2 crore apiece. The trend was noticeable across teams. Delhi Capitals picked J&K pacer Aqub Nabi, another player who hasn't played international cricket, for Rs 8.4 crore.

Such is the craze for the young that 20-year-old leg-spinner Izzat Sawariya, who has not even played domestic cricket but uploaded his bowling videos on Instagram, made his way to the auction. He didn't get picked as there weren't slots in the mini auction. But it won't be a surprise to see him play domestic T20 leagues soon. His presence in the auction also says a lot about talent scouting for the IPL.

The domestic T20 leagues and the Syed Mushtaq Ali T20 tournament have become platforms that nourish talent for the IPL. Gone are the days when players required a long grooming period in domestic cricket. An outstanding season in a domestic T20 league is often a passport to the IPL. Like in the case of Veer and several others, it can even catapult a cricketer into the IPL. These T20 leagues have democratised cricket and removed several entry barriers for budding talents. The flip side is that with the focus of parents and young cricketers almost exclusively on the IPL and T20, the longer form of the game gets a hit. It's no coincidence then that India has lost two Test series at home in about a year.

# SC advisory opinion on Governor's role is flawed, let it stay advisory

**F**OR SEVERAL decades, we have had instances of governors "sitting" on bills, and often, they aligned with the ruling party at the Centre, and the bills that are held up almost invariably belong to Opposition-ruled states.

Governor of Tamil Nadu R N Ravi had been sitting on several bills for quite some time. So, earlier this year, Chief Minister M K Stalin took the matter to the Supreme Court (SC). On April 8, a two-judge bench of the SC declared the bills as passed and ruled that, in general, governors had to act on bills passed by legislatures within three months or there would be deemed assent by the Governor.

Aggrieved by this decision, on May 13, the President asked the SC for an advisory opinion under Article 143 of the Constitution. The question: Could the courts lay down a time limit by which governors (and the President) are obliged to act on bills passed by the legislatures? On November 20, a five-judge bench of the SC, in a unanimous (but surprisingly unsigned) opinion, held that the SC cannot impose timelines on governors to clear bills.

The good news: This advisory opinion is not binding on any court. The bad news: It is a flawed opinion.

Not wanting to inflame the 111-page judgment on the reader, let me quote from the summary on page 108: "165.1 The Governor has three constitutional options before him, under Article 200, namely — to assent, reserve the Bill for the consideration of the President, or withhold assent and return the Bill to the Legislature with comments."

Fine. But what about the time taken by the Governor — the main issue at hand? There, the summary of the judgment goes on to say: "165.2... However, in glaring circumstances of inaction that is prolonged, unexplained, and indefinite — the Court can issue a limited mandamus for the Governor to discharge his function under Article 200 within a reasonable time period, without making any observations on the merits of the exercise of his discretion."

Excuse me, your Lordships, so what you are saying is that the Governor cannot sit indefinitely on a bill (which is exactly what the two-judge bench also said), but we thought you were going to define "glaring circumstances of inaction that is prolonged, unexplained, and indefinite" and you were going to specify "a reasonable time period" but 165.3 only leaves us where we were. There is a bill in West Bengal pending for nine years. Is that prolonged enough? Or is Governor Ravi's three-year "sit"?

I think a lot of this confusion could have been avoided if the judges had sought, in these uncharted waters, the views of the framers of our Constitution, just the way the US Supreme Court often relies on the Federalist Papers to derive the intent behind the Constitution.

The issue of the role of governors, the kind of quality of persons who should occupy the position and whether they should be elected or nominated and their emoluments, was discussed in great depth and at great length by members of the Constituent Assembly on May 31, 1949 but their



DORAB R SOPARWALA

In the SC advisory opinion, the Governor, whose role according to Ambedkar was 'ornamental', has been elevated to Olympian heights. I am sure the King of England would envy the powers of our governors

consensus on what the Governor can and cannot do has been totally ignored in this SC advisory judgment.

So, let me quote from the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, B R Ambedkar. Speaking on May 31, 1949, he said: "The Drafting Committee felt, as everybody in this House knows, that the Governor is not to have any kind of functions — to use a familiar phraseology, 'no functions which he is required to discharge either in his discretion or in his individual judgment.' According to the principles of the new Constitution he is required to follow the advice of his Ministry in all matters." (emphasis added)

Ambedkar also summed up his views on why the Governor should be nominated rather than elected and his position in the constitutional scheme of things.

"Having regard to this fact it was felt whether it was desirable to impose upon the electorate the obligation to enter upon an electoral process which would cost a lot of time, a lot of trouble and I say a lot of money as well. It was also felt, nobody, knowing full well what powers he is likely to have under the Constitution, would come forth to contest an election. We felt that the powers of the Governor were so limited, so nominal, his position so ornamental that probably very few would come forward to stand for election. That was the reason why the Drafting Committee thought the another (sic) alternative might be suggested." (emphasis added)

In this SC advisory opinion,

• WORDY EXCLUSIVE

Atoms for peace and atoms for war are Siamese twins.  
— Hannes Alfvén

however, the Governor, whose role according to Ambedkar was "ornamental", has been elevated to Olympian heights. I am sure the King of England would envy the powers of our governors.

In a parliamentary democracy of the Westminster model with a written constitution, it would be extremely iniquitous and an affront to democratic principles to allow an unelected Governor to impose his views on an elected legislature, except if the bill is believed to be unconstitutional and needs to be referred to the Judiciary.

Let this advisory opinion stay as it is — advisory. And let the Supreme Court or Parliament set out with total clarity the powers of an unelected and nominated Governor.

Let me end with an interesting quote in the debate on governors in the Constituent Assembly. The quote is from Biswanath Das. Under the 1935 Act, Indian provinces had prime ministers, and Das had been the Prime Minister of Orissa. Here is his direct quote: "Sir, it has been stated that the Governor has very few functions. If he has very few functions under the set up that we have laid down in the new Constitution, then why have him? The Governor is getting a decent salary, and he is getting allowances, and if the functions prescribed for him are not very useful and necessary and not worth the money that we pay, I think it is time that we give the go-by to the Governor."

Perhaps Dr Ambedkar should have listened to Biswanath Das.

The writer is an adviser at DeKoder. Views are personal

### On quality control orders, a welcome regulatory reset



PRAVIN KRISHNA AND MONIL SHARMA

**I**NDIA'S DECISION to withdraw quality control orders (QCOs) on a wide basket of industrial raw materials marks one of the most meaningful regulatory resets in recent years. In a manufacturing economy where delays and compliance costs can quietly determine competitiveness, the rollback is both timely and necessary. It acknowledges what industry has long argued: Mandatory certification is a blunt instrument when applied to low-risk, widely traded inputs.

As detailed by NITI Aayog's recent report, over the past few years, QCOs have grown from a targeted instrument of quality assurance into a sprawling system of mandatory certification, growing from 70 a decade ago to over 790 earlier this year. Intended to keep substandard imports out, they increasingly swept in a wide range of industrial inputs: Polymers, fibre intermediates, aluminium and copper products, and even steel grades that pose no direct safety risk.

No major manufacturing economy regulates such raw materials through compulsory audits. In the EU and US, conformity requirements overwhelmingly apply to finished goods and safety-critical items, with quality for intermediate inputs managed through voluntary technical standards and contractual testing.

India's approach carried high costs. When foreign suppliers — including those in Japan, Korea and the EU — declined to undergo factory inspections for low-volume shipments, Indian manufacturers were left with fewer sourcing options and higher input prices. MSMEs in particular struggled with the paperwork, delays and limited BIS testing capacity. For export-facing sectors like man-made fibre textiles, engineering goods and electronics assembly, the QCO regime became a barrier, eroding the price-competitiveness India needs to hold its own against Vietnam, China and Bangladesh.

Against this backdrop, the recent rollback is a sensible reset. It acknowledges that quality cannot be legislated by expanding the list of items under mandatory certification. Quality depends on identifying the right risks and regulating where safety or consumer harm is genuinely at stake. The NITI Aayog report argued, persuasively, that India's standards regime must follow global practice: Regulate construction steel, pressure vessels, electrical equipment and other

high-stakes products, but allow market mechanisms and voluntary standards to govern bulk raw materials.

The withdrawal, notified on November 13, removes compulsory BIS certification for 14 products under the chemicals and petrochemicals department and six under the mines ministry. These include some of the most commonly used intermediates in the country's manufacturing value chain. For manufacturers across textiles, plastics and engineering goods, this is a real easing of pressure, not a symbolic gesture.

This signals a maturing regulatory philosophy. A country that can unwind over-regulation is one that understands the complexities of modern supply chains. For industries targeted under the PLI schemes — electronics, specialty steel, technical textiles — the decision offers much-needed breathing room. Manufacturers cannot build globally competitive products if they cannot reliably source globally competitive inputs.

None of this means India should dilute its quality ambitions. On the contrary, a sharper, risk-based framework will make quality enforcement more credible. Mandatory certification should be strengthened in areas with clear consumer or public-safety implications. At the same time, the government should invest in expanding testing capacity, speeding up certification timelines and conducting impact assessments before adding new products to the QCO list.

The lesson is straightforward: Competitiveness and quality must advance together. Regulation that raises costs without raising safety standards undermines the very manufacturing strategy India is trying to build. In an era where global manufacturers value reliability as much as cost, India's willingness to recalibrate sends a positive signal to investors and trading partners alike.

The revocation marks a clear shift toward a more pragmatic, globally aligned quality regime. If India continues on this path — with quality regulation that is risk-based, proportionate and grounded in capacity — it will be better positioned to compete in the industries that will define the next decade.

Krishna is distinguished professor of International Economics and Business at Johns Hopkins University. Sharma is research associate, International Economics at NCAER

### Holding judges accountable strengthens democracy



SALEM DHARANIDHARAN

**DEAR EDITOR**  
**I disagree**  
A column in which we invite readers to tell us why, when they differ with the editorial positions or news coverage of The Indian Express

**A** RECENT *Indian Express* editorial (DMK move to impeach HC Justice is disquieting), December 13 suggests that the DMK's move to impeach Madras High Court Justice G R Swaminathan amounts to the party shutting itself in the foot. I disagree. The move, far from undermining judicial independence, strongly asserts the role of parliamentary oversight of the judiciary. Checks and balances are vital in any democracy. Impeachment is a constitutional safeguard against judicial misconduct. While it is the judiciary's job to keep the executive and legislature in check, it is also the legislature's job to keep the judiciary and executive in check. This delicate balance ensures no one has unbridled power.

Under Articles 124(4) and 217 of the Constitution, any Justice found to have had proven misbehaviour or exhibited a lack of capacity can be impeached. While the editorial suggests that the Tamil Nadu government should simply accept the order, it overlooks the broader issue: The impeachment initiated by the INDIA bloc is not about one order alone, but about the conduct of this Justice over the past two years. The motion signed by 120 MPs has stated that he has consistently decided cases based on a particular political ideology, violated secular principles and shown undue favouritism to lawyers from certain sections of society.

In cases involving the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments department, Justice Swaminathan made observations undermining its framework. During proceedings on non-Brahmin priests' appointments, he openly identified as a Smartha Brahmin and questioned non-Brahmins' fitness for priesthood. He has regularly shared the stage with leaders of one political ideology. In 2024, on stage with BJP leader H Raia, he came down heavily on the political ideology of the DMK and ridiculed former leaders of the party. In 2023, he stated that the Constitution's survival depends on maintaining India's "demographic profile" and people adhering to "Bharatiya dharm". Rajya Sabha MP Kapil Sibal remarked that such a mindset endangers the Constitution.

Another powerful omission in the editorial is how four months before the Thiruppurambakuram row, MPs of the INDIA bloc wrote separately to President Droupadi Murmu and then Chief Justice of India B R Gavai about the conduct of Justice Swaminathan, accusing him of favouring advocates from the Brahmin community and those associated with "right-wing ideologies".

The judiciary cannot be above scrutiny. A judge cannot have an ideological bias or act in a partisan manner. Such an ideological position is not unique to Justice Swaminathan. In December last year, Allahabad High Court Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav, while speaking at a Vishva Hindu Parishad meeting, stated that the law should be what the majority of people in the country desire. In such situations, it is the job of the legislature to keep a check on the judiciary. Parliamentarians are the voice of the people. When any institution goes against the Constitution of the country, it is the job of representatives to voice the people's opinion on their behalf. Neither the Chief Justice nor the Prime Minister, in a democracy, is above the people of the country. The DMK's action is, therefore, a step towards strengthening, not weakening, the constitutional framework.

The writer is spokesman, DMK and deputy secretary of the DMK IT wing

### 40 YEARS AGO December 18, 1985



### AGP leads in Assam

THE NEWLY FORMED Assam Parishad (AGP) was leading in 40 out of 100 constituencies by constituencies from where trends were available. Congress (I) candidates were ahead in 27 constituencies and the United Minority Front (UMF) in 12. The CPI(M) was leading in five and the Regional Plains Tribal Council of Assam in four. But the trends were not necessarily indicative of the final outcome, as in several constituencies, only 20 per cent of the votes polled had been counted till 9 pm.

### Gavaskar crosses 9,000 runs

THE FIRST cricket Test of the Indian tour of

Australia ended in a draw at the Adelaide Oval. India were all out in their first innings for 520 — their highest total against Australia — in reply to Australia's first innings total of 381. The match was again interrupted three times by rain during the day's play. Sunil Gavaskar made an unbeaten 166 and became the first player to score more than 9,000 runs in Test cricket. It was also his 31st Test century.

### Rajiv and Zia's commitment

A MUTUAL commitment not to attack each other's nuclear installations and a series of high-level meetings over the next two months to quicken the process of normalisation, both in political and economic

fields, were announced by President Zia-ul-Haq of Pakistan and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at a joint press conference in New Delhi after the conclusion of their six-hour talk.

### MP winds up gas leak inquiry

THE MADHYA Pradesh government has wound up the judicial commission headed by Justice N K Singh, which had been inquiring into the Bhopal gas leak for the past year. In a dramatic announcement made in the Madhya Pradesh Assembly, the Chief Minister, Motilal Vora, said the government had decided not to extend the judicial commission's term. Opposition members staged a walkout in protest.



# The marital rape exception in criminal law is a colonial relic. It needs to go



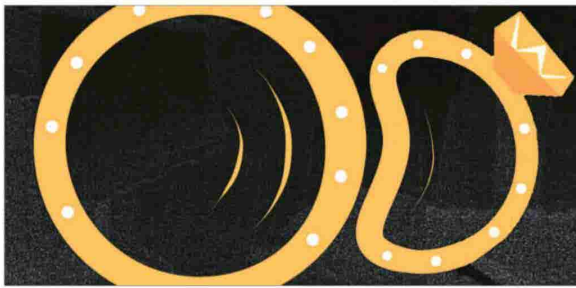
**THAROORTHINK**  
BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE FOUNDATIONAL promise of India's democracy rests on the commitment to equality, dignity, individual agency, privacy and bodily autonomy for all its citizens. The Constitution provides these; the Supreme Court has repeatedly reaffirmed them. Every Indian should be able to take these rights for granted.

Yet, a glaring anomaly persists that undermines these very principles for countless women: The marital rape exception in the Indian Penal Code (IPC), now carried over in Section 63 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023. This exception, which exempts a husband from punishment for engaging in non-consensual sexual intercourse with his wife who is not under 18 years of age, is a tragic anachronism — a stubborn remnant of colonial-era patriarchal mindsets that view a wife as her husband's property. It is a legal and moral failing that we must rectify.

In the ongoing session of Parliament, I have introduced a private member's Bill in the Lok Sabha to remove this archaic provision. I did so because the continued failure to criminalise marital rape leaves married women legally defenceless. The arrogant presumption that marriage voids the necessity of consent directly undermines a woman's fundamental rights to dignity, safety, and bodily autonomy, all guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The urgency of this is validated by alarming national data. The National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) reveals that 83 per cent of women aged 18 to 49 years who faced sexual violence named their current husband as the perpetrator. The pervasive nature of sexual violence within marriages highlights the inadequacy of our legal system. The marriage



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licence was never intended to be a waiver of the right to say no. Very often, separated husbands come by to assert their conjugal rights by force. For too many women, home is not a sanctuary, but a space of potential violation, legally sanctioned by a patriarchal state.

The demand for criminalising marital rape is not new; it has been strongly supported by authoritative legal bodies within India. The Justice Verma Committee Report (2013), in the aftermath of the horrific Delhi gang-rape case, unequivocally recommended the removal of the marital rape exception. The committee recognised the inherent contradiction in a law that aims to protect women from sexual violence yet creates a loophole for the most frequent perpetrators — their husbands. A wedding ring does not turn a bedroom into a battlefield, nor a partner into property.

Furthermore, international treaties and conventions mandate this reform. India is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which requires state parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations. The continued exception for mar-

Resistance often stems from a deeply ingrained, old-fashioned patriarchal attitude — the notion that a woman's identity, especially within the confines of marriage, is secondary to that of her husband and the sanctity of the family unit

ital rape is in direct violation of this commitment. Article 253 of the Constitution empowers Parliament to legislate in alignment with international conventions, and Article 51 enjoins the state to respect international law. These constitutional provisions clearly mandate the removal of the marital rape exception to uphold both domestic and international commitments to human rights.

The law's core error lies in the assumption that the "sanctity of marriage" provides an all-encompassing grant of sexual access. This is fundamentally wrong. Consent is a fundamental human right, regardless of marital status. Allowing a husband to force sex upon his wife converts "I do" into "you must." Legal protection for a husband who rapes his wife sends a dangerous message: That a woman's control over her body is surrendered upon taking her vows.

Marriage should be an institution of love, companionship, and choice, not a licence for violence. What should be a partnership grounded in mutual respect, consent, and love is violated by compulsion and violence. The screams of women victims should not be stifled by the weight of the law.

The resistance to this reform often stems from a deeply ingrained, old-fashioned patriarchal attitude — the notion that a

woman's identity, especially within the confines of marriage, is secondary to that of her husband and the sanctity of the family unit. We must overcome this mindset in a modern society. We need to give women the right to be able to protect their own bodily autonomy — their own agency to say no.

Concerns are often raised that criminalising marital rape will lead to misuse of the law, creating a new avenue for vengeful wives to file false cases. While the potential for misuse in any law cannot be entirely dismissed, it cannot be a justification for denying justice and safety to genuine victims. If we accept the possibility of misuse as a reason not to legislate, then no law protecting women — from domestic violence to dowry prohibition — could ever be enacted. We must tackle misuse through robust investigation and judicial procedures, not by denying a fundamental right to protection from sexual violence.

The time for deliberations is long past. The continued existence of the marital rape exception is a national shame and a grave injustice. It is a provision that stands contrary to our constitutional values, our international obligations, and our moral compass.

We must recognise that violence, regardless of who the perpetrator is or their relationship to the victim, is a crime. By retaining the marital rape exception from the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, we will take a monumental step towards restoring a woman's agency over her own sexual rights within marriage and ensure dignity for all individuals, truly embodying gender-based equality in India's society.

I was shocked when a succession of women ministers feebly defended the male-majority cabinet's view on this question and allowed the marital rape exception to stand. We should instead stand up for justice, consent, and the fundamental human rights of every married woman. Let us pass this bill and bring our laws into the 21st century.

I have done my part. It is now time for women to rise and speak up for their own sisters.

The writer is MP, Thiruvananthapuram, Lok Sabha, and chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

# In Bihar, MP funds have paved way for knowledge hubs



HARI VANSH

LAUNCHED IN 1993, the Members of Parliament Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS) allows every MP to recommend works that create durable community assets at local levels. While Lok Sabha MPs are mandated to spend the funds in their constituency, Rajya Sabha MPs can spend them across the state they represent. Some have questioned the scheme, but when used well, MPLADS allows MPs to make unique interventions that nudge the state in the right direction.

Bihar has a long road ahead to catch up economically with the rest of the country. As an MP from Bihar, it was a personal commitment for me to utilise the MPLADS fund to strengthen the state's knowledge systems and institutions. There were two motivating factors. First was the experience of visiting leading universities in the US as part of a study visit for journalists in the early 1990s. It was a lesson that policy solutions are not to be found overnight, but require quality education. Back home, this was also when southern states were gaining momentum with the rise of the IT sector. States' investments facilitated the development of technical institutes that nurtured homegrown talent. In contrast, Bihar was focused on opening Charwarha Vidyalayas (Shepherd's Schools) in the 1990s.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar was focused on correcting these legacy factors since his first term and prioritised the development of educational institutions to reduce outward migration for higher education. The revival of Nalanda University and the growth of engineering, management, and medical institutes were notable steps in this direction.

Across the author's two terms in the Rajya Sabha since 2014, over Rs 50 crore out of the available Rs 54.5 crore from the MPLADS fund has been allocated to the development of knowledge hubs in Bihar. The allocation of nearly Rs 12 crore between 2016 and 2018 led to the creation of the Centre for Earthquake Engineering Research (CEER) at IIT Patna and the Centre for River Studies at Aryabhata Knowledge University.

Eight districts in Bihar fall under a Category V (very high risk) seismic zone and 27 under Category IV (high risk). Earthquakes by themselves do not kill as many people as poorly built structures, which makes better construction practices essential. The CEER faculty have launched courses in structural engineering and developed a state-of-the-art laboratory. It has helped in improving the design of new buildings and creating a

checklist to evaluate existing constructions. Bihar's dense river network has led to frequent floods, and the state spends about Rs 10,000 crore annually in flood management and relief measures. The Centre for River Studies works on research and developing practical solutions to address the state's geographical challenges.

These centres are already collaborating with other institutes and working with the Bihar Disaster Management Authority. With the ability to attract grants and partnerships, and some support from the state government, these institutes are operationally self-sufficient in the long run. It is the young minds of Bihar who are actively involved in solving the state's problems. The socio-economic return for the state is much greater than the monetary allocation for the projects.

Alongside these, a Centre for Endangered Language Studies — inspired by Rahul Sanitryayan, who brought back ancient scriptures and artefacts from Tibet that once belonged to Nalanda's libraries — is already operational at IIT Patna. Three more institutes are in the pipeline in Gaya and Patna with a cumulative allocation of nearly Rs 30 crore. These include an Artificial Intelligence Centre at Magadh University in Gaya, a Centre for Public Policy, and a Business Incubation and Innovation Foundation at the Chandragupt Institute of Management Patna.

In the Rajya Sabha's MPLADS Committee, of which I am chairman, we have focused on addressing various administrative concerns of the members, and the ministry has streamlined the process with an integrated digital platform. Whether through the Union Budget, state budgets, or MPLADS, public finances spent must be directed towards the country's development. In the journey towards the Prime Minister's vision of Kites Bharat, every elected representative can play a key role in strengthening the institutional and development capacity of their state and constituency for a better future.

The writer is Deputy Chairman, Rajya Sabha, and an MP from Bihar. Views are personal

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### For clean air

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'Stop AQI blame games, Delhi is choking on its own emissions' (IE, December 17). Delhi is the hub for its public transport infrastructure. It is now time to use it to its full potential. The three main pillars are the Delhi Metro, DTC buses, and the rickshaw network. There must be a transition from private transport to public transport — not instantly, but beginning with hotspots and then progressively extending to other areas. The Metro now covers a distance of 400 kilometres, and the rest can be managed by DTC buses and rickshaws. There must be a combined effort from the government and the people.

Priyam Singh, Haridwar

### Disrupting education

THIS REFERS to the article, 'Dear students, wait, your teacher is on election duty' (IE, December 17). It raises a quiet but serious concern about how routine election work disrupts teaching in government schools. While teachers have long contributed to democratic processes, the repeated diversion of classroom time places an unequal burden on students who already face learning gaps. 'Treating teaching as a dispensable service weakens both educational outcomes and professional respect. Democracy must function, but not at the cost of children's learning.'

K Sakunthala, Coimbatore

### Protect values

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'In terror's wake, Australia's diversity is its strength' (IE, December 17). It rightly argues that terrorism targets not only lives but also the open character of public spaces. The Bondi Beach attack underscores the challenge democracies face in balancing robust security with civil freedoms. While intelligence gaps, if any, must be addressed with urgency and care, the response should avoid politicisation or collective blame. Australia's multicultural fabric, built on trust and inclusion, remains its strongest defence.

Amylssami, Coimbatore



SHEBA TEJANI

THE NEW labour codes have been heralded as bringing "transformational change" for workers' rights. Among the many claims are that the codes will extend social security to all unorganised sector workers, empower them through greater alignment with global standards, and formalise employment.

Despite the claim that unorganised sector workers will get social security for the first time, in the Social Security (SS) Code, there are no explicit entitlements to this end. Section 109 of the SS Code states that the central and state governments "shall frame and notify, from time to time, suitable welfare schemes for unorganised workers", with a similar provision for gig and platform workers in Section 114. Entitlements are thus left to the discretion of respective governments rather than being encoded in law, effectively "socialising" workers' rights. It is also unclear how these schemes will be funded. A centralised Social Security Fund has been created, but the sources of funding remain vague and may include government budgets, employer contributions or CSR funds. Past attempts by both UPA and NDA governments to operationalise such funds have yielded little. Only in the case of gig and platform workers are aggregators required to contribute 1-2 per cent of annual turnover, subject to a ceiling of 5 per cent. This mirrors contributory models such as the Employees' Provident Fund and Employees' State Insurance,

According to the ILO, most countries restrict fixed-term contracts to genuinely temporary activities. India's expansive approach is therefore likely to further erode permanent employment

which do not rely on large budgetary allocations. Extending this approach to all unorganised workers would have strengthened the reform.

The second claim is that the codes will empower workers and improve labour standards. However, the Industrial Relations Code (IRC) makes it more difficult for unions to remain registered and restricts the right to strike, signalling a further retreat from principles embodied in ILO conventions on freedom of association and the right to organise, which India has not ratified. The Registrar of Trade Unions has been given wide powers to deregister unions. Section 95(ii) allows the registrar to cancel registration based on information about any contraventions of the code, its rules, or even a union's constitution — an extremely broad standard that places the burden of proof on unions. Deregistration automatically renders strikes illegal, giving the registrar indirect but decisive influence over collective action. Strikes and lockouts are now prohibited without a 14-day notice, valid for 60 days, a restriction that earlier applied only to public utility services.

This would allow employers to intervene and potentially undermine planned strikes, exacerbating the disparity in bargaining power between the labour and capital.

The third claim is that the codes formalise employment through mandatory appointment letters. Section 6(f) of the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code obliges employers to

# Labour codes are rollback of key workers' protections

issue appointment letters, which is a step in the right direction. However, the absence of enforcement mechanisms or penalties suggests this provision may remain largely symbolic. Formalisation depends not only on documentation but also on the nature of the employment being offered. In this respect, the IRC risks formalising informality through the expanded use of fixed-term employment (FTE). While fixed-term workers are entitled to the same wages and benefits as permanent employees, they cannot claim retrenchment compensation. Initially introduced for seasonal work in the apparel sector and later expanded to manufacturing, FTE has now become a universal category that allows successive fixed-term contracts without restricting the scope of work.

According to the ILO, most countries restrict fixed-term contracts to genuinely temporary activities. India's expansive approach is therefore likely to further erode permanent employment. Fixed-term workers may also be dissuaded from unionising or participating in strikes due to the threat of non-renewal, weakening unions and the labour movement.

The labour codes may be transformational, but not in the manner suggested by the government. Rather than expanding workers' rights, they represent a rollback of key protections and advance industry demands for labour flexibility and reduced statutory obligations.

The writer is senior lecturer of International Development, King's College London



GUNJAN SINGH

JAPAN-CHINA ties have continued to deteriorate for over a month following a statement by Japan's Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, asserting that Tokyo would intervene in the event of Chinese military invasion of Taiwan. The remark marked the first time since World War II that a Japanese PM has openly linked the Taiwan crisis to a potential deployment of the Japanese Self-Defence Forces (SDF). China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, responded sharply, underscoring that "China must resolutely hit back — not only to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also to defend the hard-won post-war

achievements secured with blood and sacrifice". Beijing has maintained that Tokyo crossed a red line, and the dispute has since reached the United Nations.

China has responded in a manner consistent with past confrontations, leveraging both economic and military pressure. Beyond Taiwan, longstanding territorial disputes with Japan have once again become theatres for Chinese displays of strength. In a recent incident, Chinese and Japanese vessels were involved in a tense encounter near the Senkaku Islands. Japan has also lodged complaints that Chinese fighter jets directed fire-control radars at Japanese aircraft near Okinawa. An article in *China Daily* asserted that "it is crucial for Takaichi to retract her misguided remarks, especially at this highly sensitive time, as they risk paving the way for a revival of mili-

tarism that can threaten regional peace".

The economic repercussions have been swift. China is Japan's second-largest export destination, accounting for exports worth approximately \$125 billion in 2025. Beijing has postponed the release of two Japanese films and cancelled several Japanese musical performances, including one by Maki Otsuki that was halted mid-song. Japan, meanwhile, is a major destination for Chinese tourists, and the period following Takaichi's remarks has seen a noticeable decline in tourist flows. China has also issued a travel

Beyond Taiwan, longstanding territorial disputes with Japan have once again become theatres for Chinese displays of strength

advisory urging its citizens not to visit Japan.

Trade has been similarly affected. China and Japan had only recently resumed seafood trade following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident. In response to the current dispute, however, Beijing has imposed a ban on Japanese seafood imports. A spokesperson for China's foreign ministry remarked that "there would be no market for Japanese seafood in the current climate even if Japan were able to export to China" — a clear attempt to exert economic pressure on Tokyo.

For President Xi Jinping, Taiwan remains a "sacred territory", with reunification framed as central to the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Beijing has forcefully demanded a withdrawal of Takaichi's statement — a demand Tokyo has refused. While the Japanese PM has characterised

her remarks as "hypothetical", they nonetheless signal a willingness to support Taiwan's assertion of greater sovereignty. More importantly, they change Beijing's insistence that tensions across the Taiwan Strait are purely an internal Chinese matter.

Even as a hypothetical, the statement raises the possibility that, in the event of Chinese aggression, regional powers may no longer remain passive. It reflects the broader shifts underway in East Asian geopolitics, where China's increasingly assertive posture under Xi has generated growing unease among its neighbours. The more Beijing seeks to impose its will on Taiwan, the greater the risk that it will fuel regional instability.

The writer is associate professor, O P Jindal Global University

# Over Taiwan, China and Japan are playing a risky game



DEFENCE

## Navy inducts 2nd Seahawk chopper squadron in boost to anti-sub combat



The commissioning ceremony at INS Hansa on Wednesday.

Sushant Kulkarni  
Pune, December 17

THE INDIAN Navy Wednesday commissioned its second MH 60R helicopter squadron, INAS 335, at the INS Hansa naval base in Goa. The squadron has been nicknamed 'Ospreys' after the fish-hunting bird. The US-origin Seahawks — maritime versions of the Black Hawk (and distinct from the Bell Boeing V-22 Osprey, an American military transport aircraft) — will strengthen India's anti-submarine and surveillance capabilities and boost blue-water operations.

Fully integrated

The first squadron of these submarine-hunting helicopters, Indian Naval Air Squadron 334, was inducted at INS Garuda in Kochi in March 2024.

The aircraft has been fully integrated with the Navy's fleet operations and can operate from shore bases as well as aircraft carriers and large ships. The helicopter is designed for a wide range of operations: Anti-submarine warfare, anti-surface warfare, search and rescue missions, and medical evacuation. It can be used for vertical replenishment, a naval logistics operation in which supplies are transferred by helicopter between ships at sea or from shore to ship without the ships having to dock or come next to each other.

Twenty-four of these helicopters have been acquired by India from the US for over Rs 15,000 crore. These are replacing the ageing British-origin Sea King helicopters, which have been in service for long.

Features of MH 60R

The MH 60R was primarily developed as per US Navy specifications by Sikorsky, a Lockheed Martin company. A special version of these Blackhaws was used in Operation Neptune Spear, in which Osama Bin Laden was killed.

The on-board mission system processes data from sensors to create a comprehensive situational picture of the sea surface and underwater domain. This helps the crew monitor and target ships or submarines. These helicopters can be armed with torpedoes, air-to-ground missiles, rockets, and on-board guns, officials added.

Can counter conventional, asymmetric threats

The Navy has said the MH 60R is a versatile asset that can counter both conventional and asymmetric threats.

Among the conventional threats, the helicopter can detect, track and counter submarines — its core role — using tools such as dipping sonar, sonobuoys and torpedoes. It can target ships, undertake mine-related reconnaissance, and participate in sea denial operations, extending the strike range of warships in the deep sea.

The asymmetric threats it can counter include maritime terrorism, piracy and smuggling, sea-borne infiltration, supply chain disruptions, sabotage of ports or offshore infrastructure, and unmanned threats like drones. Such threats are called asymmetric or non-conventional because they use concealment tactics by non-state actors.

Last month, the Ministry of Defence signed a five-year "sustainment" pact with the US to maintain the MH 60R fleet. The Rs 7995-crore package covers maintenance-related aspects such as spares, repairs and technical support.

ECONOMY

## Nov exports to US surge, but a trade deal is still key



RAVI DUTTA MISHRA

A COMBINATION of factors led to a 22% surge in India's exports to the US market in November after two consecutive months of decline in September and October.

This made November one of the strongest months on record despite the 50% US tariffs that have left a broad range of products uncompetitive in the American market. While exporters seem resilient, data suggests that the boost could be based on short-term factors and a trade deal could still be necessary for sustained growth.

Cumulatively, goods exports increased 20% in November. This surge was not only for the US but other markets as well, particularly China and Hong Kong.

While this may be a sign of diversification, exporters are also likely to have benefited from the recent tensions between China and Japan. Indian exports, particularly seafood, have surged to China as Beijing has begun restricting imports from Japan. Overall Indian exports to China and Hong Kong jumped 90% and 35%, respectively, last month.

Exports to European countries have also been on the rise ahead of the implementation of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) from January 1. The new tax will raise the duty on Indian engineering products from next year. This typically triggers stocking. Indian exports of engineering goods grew by 23.76% in November.

Exporters absorbing costs to retain US access

One of the prime reasons for the surge in Indian exports to the US is that exporters are bearing the tariff-related cost to maintain market access in anticipation of a trade deal. The deal's first part — under which the US will revoke 25% tariffs — is expected as India has stepped up US crude imports, agreed to source 10% of its LPG imports from the US as part of an



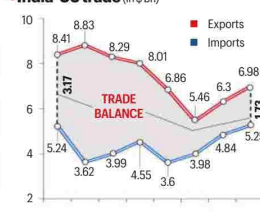
Cumulatively, goods exports rose 20% in November. The increase was not only for US but other markets as well.

Exports of tariff-exempt items (in \$ mn)

	NOV 2024	NOV 2025	RISE (%)
Electronic goods	3,464.13	4,813.66	38.96
Petroleum Products	3,521.28	3,931.52	11.65
Drugs & Pharma	2,156.06	2,606.79	20.91
Spices	317.34	358.46	12.96
Coffee	100.39	134.83	34.31
Tea	78.27	91.91	17.42

SOURCE: COMMERCE & INDUSTRY MINISTRY

India-US trade (in \$ bn)



energy deal, and it set to open its nuclear sector for private participation (a major demand by the US).

Exporters, however, say that they are no longer receiving fresh orders and most existing ones will end by December. Competitors such as Vietnam and Bangladesh have begun receiving orders. At the same time, exporters from Tiruppur said they have lost nearly Rs 7,000 crore

Keeping the faith

Hoping for trade deal, exporters are bearing tariff costs to maintain market access

in winter orders from the US. This will have a long-term impact on the manufacturing hub.

Base effect and the Red Sea challenge

The nearly 20% surge in cumulative goods exports in November is on a low base. Exports in November last year began bearing higher costs owing to the Red Sea

Despite US tariffs, November was one of India's strongest months for exports to the country. The boost may not be sustainable

crisis that started in October 2024. The attacks carried out by the Houthis rebels had brought shipping through the crucial region to a standstill within weeks, resulting in shortages of containers and elevated costs as ships were forced to take a longer route via the Cape of Good Hope.

Notably, large shipping companies continue to avoid the Red Sea shipping routes, but the ceasefire agreements in Gaza have resulted in hope for reduced Houthi attacks. The Suez Canal Authority had said in a statement last month that Maersk container ships will resume transit via the canal on a partial basis starting December. However, a Maersk spokesperson said the company had not set a date. Reuters reported last month.

Growth in electronic & engineering exports

Tariff-exempted goods such as electronic and drugs & pharmaceuticals grew 38% and 20%, respectively, likely resulting in a growth in exports to the US in November (see chart). This is expected to continue going forward. Moreover, the US added more items such as tea, coffee and spices, to the exempted category. Exports across these categories also logged sharp growth.

Even engineering goods exports seem to have stabilised in November, growing at 23.76%. This is the largest category of Indian exports, and India has been seeing an export surge to European countries in the last few months. Overall exports to Germany, Spain, and Belgium surged 25%, 180% and 30%, respectively.

Rupee depreciation is aiding exporters

The sharp rise in exports in November also came amid a rapid weakening of the rupee against the US dollar, with the 90-mark being breached earlier in December. A weaker rupee is good for exporters as it makes Indian goods and services cheaper for foreign buyers.

The rupee, which hit a fresh all-time low on Monday after it fell as low as 90.79 per dollar during the day, was 5.6% lower in November against the US dollar compared to the same month last year. This is despite the greenback having weakened sharply by almost 8% over the last 12 months.

LAW

## National Herald case: Why special court ruled against ED

Aparna Vishwanath  
New Delhi, December 17

A SPECIAL court in Delhi on Tuesday declined to take cognizance of the Enforcement Directorate's (ED's) prosecution complaint filed in the alleged Rs 2,000-crore National Herald money laundering case against senior Congress leaders Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, and five others. Special Judge Vishal Gogre of Rouse Avenue Court essentially declined to start judicial proceedings based on the ED's complaint.

Case against Gandhis

The ED's primary allegation is that the Gandhis, along with a few other office-bearers of the Congress, entered into a criminal conspiracy to usurp Rs 2,000-crore-worth assets of Associated Journals Limited (AJL), a public unlisted company and the publisher of the National Herald newspaper. The All India Congress Committee (AICC) had loaned Rs 90.21 crores to AJL. Subsequently, Young Indian, a private not-for-profit company in which Sonia and Rahul Gandhi together held 76% of shares, purchased from AICC the right to recover the loan for Rs 50 lakhs.

The ED's case is that AJL simultaneously converted the outstanding loan of Rs 90.21 crore into 9.02 crore equity shares of face



The ED alleges that Rahul and Sonia Gandhi, among others, planned to usurp assets of National Herald's publisher worth Rs 2,000 crore.

value Rs 10 each in favour of Young Indian, thereby defrauding the shareholders of AJL as well as the public donors of AICC. These allegations were made by BJP leader Subramanian Swamy in a private complaint to the ED in 2014. On April 9 this year, the ED filed a prosecution complaint.

Special court's order

In a 117-page order, the court declined to take cognizance of the money launder-

Reasons for refusal

- The court held that PMLA deals with complaints by investigating officers from law enforcement agencies, and not by public persons.
- The court's ruling reaffirms that a money laundering probe cannot be launched without a predicate offence.

ing offence primarily on two grounds.

**Private complaint.** The ED's case was built on the basis of a 2014 order by a magistrate that summoned the accused to appear before the court based on a complaint by Swamy. On Tuesday, the court held that the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA) only contemplates complaints by an investigating officer from a law enforcement agency, and not by public persons.

**Lack of a predicate offence.** The PMLA states that "Whosoever... assists, is a party or is actually involved in... activities connected with the proceeds of crime including its concealment, possession, acquisition or use... shall be guilty of an offence of money laundering."

Here, "proceeds of crime" is "any property derived or obtained, directly or indirectly, by any person as a result of criminal activity relating to a scheduled offence." These "scheduled offences" are listed in two schedules attached to the PMLA, and also called predicate offences. The court on Tuesday declined to take cognizance of ED's complaint as there is no FIR against the Gandhis for a predicate offence.

In July 2014, the ED had dispatched a letter to the CBI for appropriate action based on Swamy's complaints; this was reiterated by the ED Director in a letter to the CBI Director in 2015. But the CBI did not

file an FIR. The court, in its order, revisited annual reports of the ED and Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and landmark Supreme Court rulings to reiterate that "the registration of a FIR qua the scheduled offence was a sine qua non for prosecution under the PMLA."

Although the ED has, in recent years, argued that money laundering is a stand-alone offence and can be investigated independently, this ruling reaffirms that a money laundering probe cannot be launched without a scheduled offence.

What happens next?

Apart from the ED case, the Income Tax Department has been investigating a case of alleged tax fraud by Young Indian since 2017. However, IT cases are not categorised as scheduled offences under the PMLA.

The stringent PMLA has onerous bail conditions and reverses the burden of proof, and gives the agency a long rope to attach properties. Therefore, in November, the Delhi Police Economic Offences Wing (EOW) also filed an FIR in the same case, to perhaps create another window for a money laundering probe. However, the complainant in that case is Shiv Kumar Gupta, Assistant Director of the ED, and the complaint is based on the aforementioned 2014 summoning order.

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GLOBAL

## Philippines island visited by Bondi shooters has a history of violence beyond IS

Rishika Singh  
New Delhi, December 17

THE FATHER-SON duo behind the Bondi Beach shooting had travelled to the Philippines weeks before the incident. On November 1, Sajid Akram, 50, and Naveed Akram, 24, flew from Sydney to the capital, Manila, and then visited Davao City on the southern island of Mindanao. There, they "underwent military-style training" before returning on November 28, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation quoted a senior counterterrorism official as saying.

History of conflict in South Philippines

Mindanao, the Philippines' second-largest island, has a large Muslim population and numerous ethnically diverse groups. Its composition differs from the rest of the country, the only Christian nation in Asia. Around 80% of the Philippines population is Roman Catholic, and roughly 6% practices Islam, according to the 2020 Census.

Mindanao has been a hotbed of separatist and militant activity for decades. The book *Asia-Pacific Perspectives on International Humanitarian Law* (2019) traces the emergence of Islamist groups back to a complex history.

"The core issue behind the conflict is what is called the Bangsamoro (literally, Moro nation) problem. This is the religious and systematic marginalization and minoritization of the Islamized ethno-linguistic groups or tribes, collectively called Moros, in their own ancestral homeland in much of the Mindanao island," it says.

After Spanish colonial rule (16th to 19th century) and the US colonising it in the first half of the 20th century, the Philippines achieved independence in 1946.

Both American colonial leaders and the modern administration pursued policies that contributed to the marginalisation of the Moros, the loss of their land resources, and the resettlement of Christian groups in the south. The government itself pointed out an "intimate and symbiotic relation-

CONFLICT ZONE

Mindanao has been a hotbed of extremist activity for decades. The Islamic State is the latest iteration of jihadist militancy in the island.



ship between terrorism, poverty and the illegal drug trade."

Rise of militant groups

Amid these issues, groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) emerged to demand self-determination in the 1960s and '70s. The book noted that they defined their struggle in "Islamic terms of reference", such as the idea of jihad. Key among these groups was the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). Its tactics included "terrorist bombings and kidnappings that have often ended in beheadings, which have also been employed against government soldiers and even... Christian civilians." Such incidents have added to Muslim-Christian polarisation.

In a 2019 research report, the non-profit organisation International Crisis Group (ICG) called the Islamic State (IS) "only the latest avatar of jihadist militancy in Mindanao." In the 1980s, some in the Philippines went to Afghanistan to join the mujahideen in their fight against the Soviet Union.

Upon their return, they shared their learnings with domestic militant groups.

ICG wrote: "The Daulah Islamiyah Wilayahul Mashriq (Islamic State-Eastern Region), an alliance of ISIS-affiliated groups, formed in late 2015 with the aim of establishing an ISIS wilayah (province) in Mindanao. It united militant groups dominated by the three largest ethno-linguistic groups in Muslim Mindanao: a faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group... the Maute Group... and a faction of the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters."

A city under siege

In May 2017, this alliance seized control of Marawi city, triggered by the attempted arrest of a militant leader. ICG wrote: "Over the course of a five-month battle, the Philippines armed forces conducted airstrikes on militants lodged in Marawi's fortress-like homes, built to withstand the violence of clan feuds. By the end of the siege, the city centre was heavily damaged... More than 1,130 people had been killed... The

fighting forced some 600,000 residents from Marawi and nearby towns to flee."

Australia and a few other countries assisted the Philippines' military forces, at the time. Australia has also proscribed the Islamic State East Asia and the ASG.

The Australian National Security website notes: "While there are no known links between IS and Australia, there have previously been links between Australians and terrorist groups in the Philippines."

Islamic State's decline, and a precarious siege

Though the Marawi siege led to the killings of key militants, lone wolf attacks (a central part of the IS strategy) have been recorded. The government has engaged with some groups over the decades, which has brought some peace. In 2014, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front signed a peace pact in exchange for enhanced autonomy. Five years later, the Bangsamoro region was accorded some regional autonomy, though elections scheduled for 2025 are delayed.



# Play Moneyball: Buy Quality at Fair Prices

IPL's smart player pickings tell a bigger story. The latest round of auctions for IPL players dips heavily into a value investor's playbook. Relatively obscure players are crashing into the million bucks category alongside established names. Warren Buffett's investment philosophy is based on the principle of buying high-quality businesses at fair prices. Effort goes into determining the quality of a business and its fair price. IPL auctions are taking this idea forward by determining prices on select performance parameters in anticipation of supernormal profits. This style of investing is also common in PE that chases alpha in startups with an uncommon risk-reward ratio. The objective is the same for value investors. VCs and IPL team owners: market-beating returns.

The long-term investor is more than likely to be a patient bloke, having done his homework before stumping up the cash. In an efficient market, value discovery becomes sophisticated to the point where passive investment may be the most productive approach. But startups — and IPL players — do dwell in deep markets and there is scope for active selection. Done right by professionals, this investment style delivers outsized returns on capital employed.

The gains accrue from discovering value before the broader market arrives at the same conclusion. Value investing has never quite gone out of fashion since it was expounded by Benjamin Graham in the 1930s. Its most famous proponent, Buffett, has consistently outperformed the market with this strategy over a long career in investment. The idea is to 'simply' distinguish price from value and take an investment position accordingly. In the 2011 film Moneyball, a baseball team's manager says that after making one bad decision based on money, he won't make a money-based decision any more. His deputy wisely remarks, 'No. You're doing it for what the money says... That they're worth it.' Investment strategies have evolved beyond Graham's insights. But the concept remains a vital building block in finance. Its spread beyond the financial community speaks of its abiding value.

# Nuclear is Atomic! But It's Not Enough

With Lok Sabha passing Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHAANTI) Bill 2025, a major step has been taken towards finally leveraging the India-US civil nuclear deal formalised in 2008. This is a long-overdue reform that will open one of India's most closed sectors, making it possible for private players to take minority equity in new nuclear power projects, and for investments by foreign companies and global sovereign wealth funds.

Packaged as a trade and investment outreach, it could grease wheels for clinching the India-US trade deal and bring in capital critical to cleaning 'n' greening the energy system. But nuclear isn't a silver bullet to be tom-tommed in announcements and unplanned projects, with other options left by the wayside. GoI must provide clear vision of India's energy system, including a decarbonisation roadmap that is in line with its net zero by 2070 goal. This plan must be more than just capacity-addition targets like 100 GW of nuclear by 2047. It should consider the role and share of different energy sources and their implications, be it costs, access or supporting ecosystem requirements.

The blueprint should also set out an implementation roadmap to provide clarity on rollout of the proposed decarbonised energy system, and give the right signals for investment. While NITI Aayog has taken several stabs at a long-term strategy, it now must engage in a wider and time-bound public consultation. As a growing economy that's still energy-poor, India has been a sponge, agnostically soaking in every new plant. But such an approach has its limits. A proper plan will ensure that India's clean energy transition augments energy security and improves access for all.

# JUST IN JEST

Aag-e badho, give up your flame, old and new, and clear the air

# NY Resolution No. 3: Boycott Fire

This New Year, in your not-to-be-coughed-at attempts to drive toxicity out of air — not to be confused with attempts to drive out air with toxicity — as part of 2025 HonesTET List of Resolutions (HETL), boycott fire. Every tandoor, every open flame at weddings, every ceremonial puja fire, snuff it out and exile that silly idiom. 'Where there is smoke there is fire,' into linguistic jhamam. Inspired by Delhi government's ban on tandoors in restaurants and eateries under Section 31(A) of the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981, put an end to all coal- and firewood-fuelled flames, matchsticks included. Frankly, do away with gas-based or other cleaner-based appliances as well.

Fire has had a good run — millennia of dominance, endless caecos in mythology and movies, and a starring role in every dhaba and Mughlai joint. It's time for a color revolution. At weddings, couples can circle a battery-powered LED lamp, its flicker powered by three AA cells. Pujas can be conducted around induction cooktops, while tandoori chicken can be re-branded as 'USB-heated poultry surprise'. Progress is microwaving fire goodby. Humbugs will say this is absurd, and you'll release into your ageepath before the first week of the new year is done. But you'll be surprised what you can achieve by turning off aag. Old flames were always overrated anyway.

Does Jeff Bezos' redefinition of being wealthy as how much wealth you create for others hold up?

# The Billionaire as Marxist



Santosh Desai

Last December, Jeff Bezos offered an interesting redefining of wealth: think of it not as the money one accumulates, but as the value one creates for others. It is an elegant thought. It makes wealth a shared asset, something virtuous and inclusive, with the added advantage of skipping over the somewhat inconvenient fact of enormous wealth for the few. If wealth is simply a byproduct of making life better for millions, then the billionaire becomes a kind of accidental altruist.

There is something about this formulation that catches attention. To think of wealth generated rather than only wealth accumulated does shift the meaning we usually attach to it. To conceptualise businesses as agents of good, distributing social benefits in the name of enterprise, warms the hearts of those engaged in it. But for all its surface appeal, the idea does not really stand up to scrutiny. For one, this is hardly the dominant mental model of wealth in the West. Western capitalism still venerates the individual accumulator; the heroic, untold, brilliant investor, solitary architect of personal fortune. Bezos is not describing how the West thinks.

He is offering Silicon Valley's **India has always believed in creating value for others — just not in the way Bezos imagines.** Our 'others' are highly specific, based on a feudal reading of belonging, rooted in a long-term idea of reciprocity



Spread the joy

preferred self-portrait, a moral alibi for sudden and overwhelming wealth. The deeper issue, however, is conceptual. Is wealth really outward-facing as Bezos argues it should be? If that were true, professions that distribute the greatest benefit to others — teachers, caregivers, farmers, nurses — would not sit at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Wealth would naturally flow to those whose contribution is greatest, not to those whose position is most advantageous. Using this logic, Karl Marx should have been a billionaire.

But modern markets do not reward contribution. They reward leverage, capital, proximity to money and timing. They reward being in the right place, with the right insulation, at the right moment. To turn outcomes of this system into a moral metric is to read the scoreboard as if it were the rulebook. Hedge funds offer the clearest demonstration of this conceptual problem. Hedge fund managers can become extraordinarily wealthy. Some of the richest people on Earth belong to this tribe. And, yet, what value do they create for others, beyond their own investors? They do not build industries, create products, generate employment at scale or solve collective challenges. They redistribute, rather than create. Their gains come from the losses, or limitations, of others.

groups; education for employees' children, medical support for retired staff, credit for old vendors, quiet sponsorship of local festivals.

But this generosity flows inward, not outward. It strengthens the circle, rather than expands it. It is based on a feudal reading of belonging, rooted in a long-term idea of reciprocity. The price of being wealthy in India is perpetual obligation. Wealth does not free you. It binds you more tightly to the world.

Even for the newly wealthy startup founders, wealth appears to carry no meanings. But scratch the surface and familiar patterns emerge. Startups rely on family capital, teams reflect social hierarchies, and success depends on networks that predate the venture. Startup founders have a startlingly common point of origin, whether in terms of community or educational credentials. Just look at the surnames of a lot of these new founders, and the story becomes clear.

Seen in this light, Bezos' formulation becomes revealing not for what it claims but for what it obscures. By equating wealth with value created for others, it invites us to overlook economic, cultural and historical structures that determine who gets to create wealth at all, and whose contributions remain invisible. Simply renaming a certain kind of social good as wealth does not change how the world works.

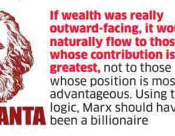
Wealth does not arise from helping others lead better lives. That is governed by an entirely different set of structural factors. It's the kind of idea that looks good from a distance, but shrivels when examined up close. Even if we were to accept it at face value, it changes very little, except to help some billionaires feel better about themselves.

Bezos, then, is articulating a *desirable* fiction, rather than an economic principle. It is a plea for how wealth should be understood, not a description of how it actually arises. And when this fiction travels to India, where the architecture of wealth is entirely different, it arrives in a landscape that neither fits its premise nor directly contradicts it. Instead, it reveals an alternate logic altogether.

Indian wealth has never been an individual affair. The Indian HNI is not a solitary peak, but a densely connected node. Wealth here is embedded inside a network of expectations: family kin, caste, community dependents, loyalists and the many who become quasi-kin over time. Western wealth promises concentrated autonomy; Indian wealth promises diffuse continuity. In India, wealth is not a story one tells alone. It's a hive of interconnections.

Ironically, this means India has always been in creating value for others — just not in the universalised way Bezos imagines. Our 'others' are highly specific: extended family, trusted employee, old supplier, home village, religious community... Indian business routinely creates value for these

**IF wealth was really outward-facing, it would naturally flow to those whose contribution is greatest, not to those whose position is most advantageous.** Using this logic, Marx should have been a billionaire



NOT SANTA

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The writer is co-founder, Think9 Consumer Technologies

# THE SPEAKING TREE

# Overcome Fear

SANDHYA VASUDEV

Fear is a primal instinct of a living species, whether animal or human. The fear of predators is prominent for animals, whereas fear of the unknown is common to the human mind. Where there is ignorance, there is fear; leading to beliefs in uncertainty superstitions and viral videos based on speculative knowledge.

Ignorance may bliss when particular knowledge is of no practical use, but it is imperative to learn correctly about matters that either interest us, Marie Curie said. 'Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less.'

She said this almost a century ago, and it still holds special significance today when access to knowledge is at our fingertips and just a tap away.

Fear sometimes consumes a person, not only in the present, but in the future, advancing career, education, children, or the fear of being alone. It is said that the time-tested names of Vishnu, as in the Vishnu Sahasranam, removes all fear of disease, old age and death.

Another elementary solution is to fear the unseen. Rob one of your day's equanimity. Yet another way is to remember, *que sera, sera* — what will be, will be — and that the future is not ours to see.

# Chat Room

# Measuring The Ruler

Apropos American Pie Slice Thinning by Swaminathan S Anklesaria Ramesh (Dec 17), the US has facilitated formation of a rules-based world order, creating global institutions that enabled a vast majority of poverty, illiteracy, ill health, and disease in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America to concentrate on promoting welfare of teeming millions. In the same breath, one must acknowledge the wisdom and sagaciousness of the leaders of the Non-Alignment Movement who constantly acted as a check against not only economic and military hegemony of the US, but also aggressive ideological push of the Communist regimes of USSR and China. Persistence of the US saw Redding World empires crumble, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger in late '60s-early '70s did not blot this record to some extent.

Angara Venkata Girija Kumar Chennai

# Try Expenditure Of Expenditure

This refers to the Edit, 'Get a Fix on Rural Employment Scheme' (Dec 17). The proposed restructuring of MGNREGS, shifting nearly 40% of the funding onto states, is a major alteration of our consequential social safety net. The Bill warrants scrutiny by a parliamentary standing committee, given its implications for rural livelihoods, fiscal federalism and constitutional balance. States differ vastly in fiscal capacity; transferring expenditure without assured revenue devolution risks hollowing out rural programs where it is needed most. The Finance Commission must append clear recommendations on compensatory devolution, either through enhanced tax shares or a dedicated fund pool for employment guarantees.

Narayanan Nani Mumbai

Changing the name of a flagship programme is not mere linguistic adjustment, it requires reprinting official documents, updating legal notices, revising signboards, altering stationery, modifying communication material, testing bureaucratic systems and ensuring new guidelines across districts. All this costs public money that could, instead, be used for clearing MGNREGS wages, expand workdays, or fund vegetable/dumplings that still hover below minimum wage levels in many states. The nation does not need renamed schemes. It needs renewed commitment to the poorest citizens. Gandhi spent his life defending.

Pradeep Kumar Surat

Letters to the editor may be addressed to: [edit@timesofindia.com](mailto:edit@timesofindia.com)

# ChatGPT SHAIRI OF THE DAY

There once was a voter quite keen,  
Who showed up all scrubbed and serene.  
The SIR list said, 'You're gone,'  
Like a political con,  
So, he voted by shouting obscene.

# Municipal Solid Waste a Health Risk

Poorly managed solid waste is driving a public health crisis, a new WHO report has warned. Solid waste — especially municipal solid waste — affects health through polluted air, water, soil and food. When waste is not collected, or is dumped, burned or not properly treated, it can release hazardous chemicals, contaminate drinking-water sources and create breeding grounds for insects.



# Bell Curves



All our regular flights are cancelled. Would you like to go fly-by-night, sir?

# Untaxing Days Ahead?



Lubna Kably

In 2025, India ushered in a new direct tax framework, marking the most significant rewrite of IT law in over six decades. The objective of the IT Act 2025 was to reorganise India's IT law to make it simpler, clearer and easier to comply with.

► Terms like assessment year and previous year, which were confusing for individual taxpayers, have been replaced with the concept of a tax year, defined as a 12-month period beginning April 1.

► Exemptions and deductions linked to salary income such as gratuity, HRA, leave encashment, pension and retirement compensation have been consolidated under the salary chapter. While this is largely a structural clean-up, it should make salary taxation easier to navigate for employees.

► Several compliance-related provisions have been consolidated to improve understanding. The new Act also empowers GoI to frame schemes aimed at improving efficiency, transparency and accountability in tax administration that is increasingly powered by technology. With this framework in place, perhaps the forthcoming budget can introduce policy changes that have been tried and tested in other countries and are in sync with the needs of modern-day taxpayers.

► That joint taxation for couples has been proposed by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India (ICAI) in its pre-budget memorandum. Under the current system, each spouse is taxed separately even though incomes, expenses and financial responsibilities are often shared.

► Joint taxation would have a higher exemption threshold and allow couples to file a single consolidated return, combining incomes and deductions. Tax pro-

visions would retain the option to continue filing individually if that is more beneficial.

For single-earner families or dual-earner couples with modest incomes, joint taxation could significantly reduce tax liability by better utilising exemption thresholds and deductions. It could also simplify compliance by reducing paperwork and duplicative filings. Several countries, including the US, Germany, Spain and Portugal, allow joint filing.

► The Taxpayers' Charter, unveiled in August 2023, was a welcome recognition that taxpayers deserve fairness, transparency and respect. But years later, it remains a statement of intent, not a statutory guarantee. There has been progress — refunds for many have been much quicker, feeless mechanisms have helped taxpayers — yet, the charter needs to be legally enforceable.

► For instance, in Britain, if the taxpayer feels that services provided haven't met standards outlined in the charter (which are wide-ranging and include being treated fairly, being responsive and keeping data secure), they can file a complaint, which His Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) assures will be dealt with quickly and fairly.

In case of disagreement over the decision, a statutory review is also possible, which is more cost-effective than appealing to the tribunal. HMRC states that three-quarters of disagreement are settled during a review, which is carried out by an officer not involved in the original decision.

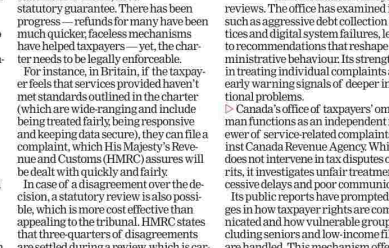
► In India, a supposedly low level of complaints and emergence of digital alternatives like e-Nivaran portal led to abolition of the tax ombudsman system in early 2019. However, as tax processes become more digital and enforcement more automated, the risk of feeless errors grows. Ombudsman institutions do not weaken tax collection; they do not weaken tax compliance by reassuring citizens that when the system goes wrong, there is a fair and independent place to turn.

► Australia's inspector-general of taxation and taxation ombudsman combines complaint resolution with systemic reviews. The office uses complaints such as aggressive debt collection practices and digital system failures, leading to recommendations that reshape administrative behaviour. Its strength lies in treating individual complaints as early warning signals of deeper institutional problems.

► Canada's office of taxpayers' ombudsman functions as an independent reviewer of service-related complaints against Canada Revenue Agency. While it does not intervene in tax disputes on merits, it investigates unfair treatment, excessive delays and poor communication.

Its public reports have prompted changes in how taxpayer rights are communicated and how vulnerable groups, including seniors and low-income earners, are handled. This mechanism offers a credible alternative to litigation for individuals caught in procedural limbo.

Across jurisdictions, benefits are consistent: the ombudsman provides a check-and-balance for individuals facing hardship, lower the cost and complexity of redress, and shine a light on recurring administrative failures. Reviving the ombudsman office — with greater independence, clear jurisdiction and time-bound resolution mandates — would provide an essential balance in the tax ecosystem.



**Iron out the crinkly bits**

lubna.kably@timesofindia.com





A thought for today

The notion of directing a film is the invention of critics - the whole eloquence of cinema is achieved in the editing room

ORSON WELLES

It'll Be Happy Ending...

...If I&B ministry lets film festival preview committees be sole arbiters of what can or cannot be screened

On Oct 19, 1980, you could have walked into Delhi's Vigyan Bhawan at 3pm, and watched a screening of Sergei Eisenstein's silent film, Battleship Potemkin, for all of ₹2, which was the price of a bread loaf those days. It was organised by our own I&B ministry that, 45 years later, initially appeared to display great reluctance to let a younger audience watch this classic at the ongoing International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK).

The ministry's late clearance of censor exemption for 19 foreign films in IFFK's lineup made headlines the past few days. Potemkin, the cause celebre in the list due to its age - it will turn 100 on Sunday - and multigenerational impact, eventually got exemption on Wednesday evening. But what preceded it once again shows why you should let film festivals function autonomously, like Cannes, Berlinale, Sundance, and many others.

It was to this end that govt changed rules in 2006, cutting out the Censor Board from the screening process for film festivals. Until then, the Board's role in clearances had been causing delays. The revised rules laid down a 15-day time frame to clear lists submitted by fest organisers. Clearance could be withheld on grounds of national security, law and order, and relations with other countries, but the existence of a preview committee among the organisers ensured 'problematic' titles weren't included.

The preview committee rule followed the global model. For instance, at Cannes, the world's biggest film fest, 1951's Swiss entry, Four in a Jeep, was denied screening, only to avoid hurting Soviet feelings in the Cold War - Soviet soldiers were called 'bloody Russians' in the film. Reciprocally, the Soviet entry, Liberated China, was also banned. Likewise, at the 20th Berlinale in 1970, Michael Verhoeven's anti-war film o.k. was 'neutralised' by the jury because it didn't appear to encourage 'understanding between nations' - it was inspired by the 1966 rape of a Vietnamese girl by American soldiers, which was problematic for the jury's American chairman. But there was no govt involvement in these decisions. And so it should be in India in 2026.

India aspires to be a cultural soft power, and as the world's biggest film factory - over 2,500 of the 8,511 films made in 2023 were Indian - it needs greater exposure to global cultural milestones, not less. Let I&B ministry get out of clearing film festival entries altogether.

Do Let It Sleep

We work, we have fun late into night, work again...and stress out our bodies. We aren't infinitely adaptable

On weekdays, you wake up to a shrill alarm. On weekends, you sleep in late. This is you living your best life. Except...is your body protesting? Is office on Monday full of pain? No amount of coffee gets rid of the brain fog or nagging headache. Or irritability and heartburn. Interestingly, these are all symptoms of jet lag. You haven't travelled across continents. But your body experiences the difference in sleep timings between weekdays and weekends as if it were hurtling through time zones. Travel-induced jet lag is a short-term problem. Social jet lag, on the other hand, can be chronic.

Tumble out of bed and stumble to the kitchen, pour yourself a cup of ambition, and yawn and stretch and try to come to life - that Dolly Parton sang, is how the 9 to 5 day begins. Sometimes, it's even 9 to 9. So Friday night you let loose. Maybe laugh with friends well past midnight, to feel connected, to feel lost in music, conversation, them. Dinner parties, dancing, movies. OTT bingeing - the list is not exhaustive. This Nicki Minaj song explains the weekend vibe: "The night is still young and so are we...How dare we sit quietly and watch the world pass us by?" As does Badshah's Saturday, Saturday.

The scientists who have diagnosed 'social jet lag' for us, also have some good ideas for healing it. Minimise circadian disruptions. One late night here and one short sleep there is OK, but avoid yo-yoing all the time. When you sleep late, try to get some bright sunlight upon waking up. Stay hydrated. And remember, zzzing until 2pm makes the jet lag worse. As Peter Gluckman and Mark Hanson write in Mismatch: Why Our World No Longer Fits Our Bodies, while humans have evolved to be able to live in a broad range of environments, we are not infinitely adaptable. Let's listen to our bodies more, abuse them less.

Grammar RIPPED

Parts of speech are dumbfounded

Bachi Karikaria



A visitor tells a boy who answers the bell that he's come to meet his mother, and gets the sulky reply: "She was in, she is out!" The aghast man says, "Young man, where's your grammar?" To which the lad points upstairs and says, "She's takin' a nap." This old joke again reminded me about Rajiv Gandhi throwing the threatening Hindi rhymed at his opponents, 'unki nani yaad dila denge' - because no one's been remembering their 'grammar'. Too many think that Wren & Martin's textbook is strictly for the birds.

Our PM-ji recently resurrected the old charge that we were Maoist-led by colonial masters. This provoked much to and fro between pro and no, leading to the congratulatory conclusion that we hoisted them by their own petard. Meaning we used the English they taught us to teach them a lesson.

I'm a 'grammar Nazi', but colleagues now dismiss my corrections as just Goebbelsdy-gook. No one wants to be dictated to by spelling. SMS was the OG, then WhatsApp emerged from slangy 'What's up?' or, worse, 'Wassup?'. Both reduced phrases, even whole sentences, to alphabets. Y r u ROTFL? This cancer is no longer BS; in fact it has metastasised.

But hey! Wow! Outlier interjection is now the commonest part of speech. This, when comma's gone into a coma, apostrophe atrophied, and Mark Twain's 1992 No Full Stops in India unintendedly validated. Ouch!

Grammar hars-kiri is relentless. No nouns have suffered ID, though, now tasked with becoming verbs. Pronouns are forcibly gender-reassigned, turning 's/he' into a confusing 'they'. But then, crazy angrezi itself makes plural a singular conundrum. An erudite figure never figured out why normally plural 's' is paired with singular nouns, not plural ones: 'The boys stands' but 'Boys stand'. Now a new problem has dawned with the new 'they'.

Despair over my building 'Whats-App group's' shourly request - "Does anyone has... but shouldn't it be singularly correct?" Looks like 'grammar' is not napping; often, she's simply not alive to logic.

Alec Smart said: "The devout may think 'GRAM' is a jap-incantation not a job-guaranteee."

Race To The Gateway Of Bombay

Stakes are high, but Mumbai's civic polls are touch-and-go for both coalitions. Allies' hyperlocal networks and organisational depth may decide the battle

Sumeet Mhaskar

Ahead of BMC polls, cousins Uddhav and Raj Thackeray have united on the platform of Marathi asmita (pride) - at stake is the Thackeray political legacy. The two face NDA, the BJP-Shinde Sena alliance, for control of India's wealthiest civic body. Since the 1980s, the undivided Shiv Sena, in partnership with BJP, has controlled BMC.

Today, this dynamic has reversed. BJP aims to be the dominant force in the civic body, employing aggressive manoeuvres to bolster its position. It even attempted to undercut partner Shinde Sena, before electoral pressures forced it to contest the elections together.

Meanwhile, Brothers Thackeray are reclaiming their status as sole heirs to Bal Thackeray's legacy. Ideological battle lines were drawn well before the polls - Uddhav and Raj came together in July 2025 on the Marathi language question. Mahayuti alliance anticipated the UBT Sena and MNS alliance for BMC polls and criticised the move as opportunistic.

MNS had influence over 123 of BMC's 227 wards during last Nov's assembly elections. Given that Mahayuti allies countered both the Thackerays, but their focus has mainly been on Uddhav.

BJP has consistently sought to de-legitimise Uddhav's Hindutva credentials by highlighting his support among Muslims. At Vijay Sankalpa Melava in Sept 2025, BJP's Mumbai president explicitly warned against "infiltration", suggesting that a "Khan" could become mayor.

Uddhav has countered this by framing his party as the custodian of "authentic" Hindutva, contrasting it

with BJP's "transactional" version. His slogan, "Ram on the lips, Adani in the pocket," frames BJP's ideology as a cover for corporate favouritism.

Further, UBT Sena and MNS cadres have proactively countered BJP's narrative on social media, circulating images of Mahayuti leaders at Eid celebrations to blunt attacks on their own secular alliances. While BJP has also accused Uddhav of "looting" Mumbai's treasury, these allegations have struggled to gain traction as the former has been an alliance partner in running BMC for decades.

Politics of Marathi asmita received a fresh lease of life following the controversial introduction of Hindi as a mandatory third language in primary schools. The Thackerays have leveraged this momentum to portray BJP as a 'Gujarati party' intent on siphoning development projects to neighbouring Gujarat. This narrative has been bolstered by allegations of 'vote theft' via fake voters.

that became a rallying point for UBT Sena and MNS cadres to reach out to their constituencies and convey the message that such practices enable outsiders to exploit Maharashtra.

Marathi media has played a pivotal role in this consolidation. With few exceptions, the vernacular press has echoed fears about the future of the Marathi manooos should the Thackerays lose BMC. BJP has found it a challenge to de-legitimise the Thackeray brand in Mumbai in the Marathi press.

Beyond the headline clash between Mahayuti and Thackerays, the election remains a multi-layered contest with razor-thin margins. Mahayuti has roped in BR Ambedkar's grandson Anandraj Ambedkar, via Shinde Sena's alliance with Republican Sena, to woo

neo-Buddhist Dalit constituency BJP attempts to tap into Matang and Charnak constituencies through sub-categorisation of reservation policies. However, it remains unclear whether these groups will align with Mahayuti's broader platform.

In recent elections, UBT Sena has gained substantial support from neo-Buddhist Dalits and Muslims. While this is likely to continue, Athawale's RPI (A) and Ambedkar's VBA are likely to retain influence in specific pockets.

Similarly, Samajwadi Party and AIMIM pose a significant challenge for the Muslim vote, complicating the math for the major alliances.

Ultimately, these hyper-localised elections will be decided by candidates' local networks and by party cadres' both-level micro-management.

Even minor shifts in turnout could alter the results...But, beyond the headline battles, will the city's crumbling infra find some space?

Amidst this verbal warfare, one hopes some space will be given to discuss the city's crumbling public transport, housing shortage, inadequate healthcare, pothole-ridden roads and water scarcity. These systemic failures affect millions daily.

The writer teaches at OP Jindal Global University



To Build A Safe Gig, Follow The Baba

How to secure rights for gig workers - with no single employer, fixed hours of work, or common workplace? K'taka gets a new law whose foundation was laid over 50 years ago by a young doctor

Aruna Roy and Nikhil Dey



Karnataka's legislation for gig workers kicked in in Nov, more weeks before the man who built the timeless foundation for such a law, passed away at age 95. A tall, taut union leader, it is Baba Adhav's work of 70 years that has become first principles to secure the labour rights and dignity for contemporary India's unorganised sector - over 90% of the workforce.

It all goes back to the early 1950s, when a young 22-year-old doctor with socialist ideals began working in Pune. One of the first groups Adhav set out to organise were 'hamals' - headloaders who carried heavy sacks on their heads and backs. Migrants from surrounding rural areas, they had no fixed employer, moved from shop to shop negotiating rates, and had extremely short working lives due to the physical nature of their work. In a crisis, there was no fallback. The three cornerstones of workers' rights, fair wages, safe working conditions, and social security, were entirely absent.

Organising hamals was extraordinarily difficult. Yet through years of persistent organising, struggle and negotiation, Adhav and the Hamal Panchayat achieved a breakthrough that would permanently alter the imagination of labour rights in India. They evolved a legal and institutional framework that brought workers, employers and the state onto a common platform through what later became the Mathadi (Headloaders) Board.

This tripartite structure solved what many had believed to be an unsolvable problem: how to secure rights for workers with no single employer, fixed hours of work, or a common workplace. Hamals who had lived on individually negotiated piece-rate payments were now registered en masse with employers who had long evaded responsibility. Instead of being paid cash per sack, workers collected coupons and received composite monthly payments at rates fixed through tripartite negotiations. A levy on each sack, funded social security in kind, provided fund for workers' workers' compensation, bonus, and administrative costs. It was a stroke of institutional genius, and

remains the most influential model for unorganised sector welfare boards in India.

Over time, it became clear that Adhav's work with the hamals shaped a far wider vision of workers' rights. The model inspired waste pickers, domestic workers, auto-rickshaw drivers, and street vendors to demand recognition and collective structures of their own. Central to this imagination was Adhav's early articulation that pensions and social security are the composite burden of every employer, of the entire sector, and of society. This principle continues to sit at the heart of ongoing debates on universal social protection.

The transformative impact of this kind of creativer trade



challenged caste inequality in rural Maharashtra by fanning out to rural areas, demanding a single, state-managed drinking water source in every village - 'ek gaon, ek panghat'. This arrangement should inspire us to demonstrate how the state can scale what was once done manually, enabling auto-registration, tracking of worker rights, and more transparent, worker-oriented boards. With adaptation, this model could extend to and empower much of India's unorganised workforce.

The conceptual roots of this architecture lie in Adhav's pioneering work and hamal unions of Pune, beginning 76 years ago. None of this came easily. The workers' 'Baba' was jailed 52 times in independent India advocating causes that only demonstrated ways of putting constitutional values into practice. Even at age 94, he undertook a successful hunger strike to protect the Mathadi Act.

Baba Adhav's contribution shows justice for workers requires perseverance, structural imagination, institutional creativity and collective action by working people themselves.

The workers are social activists and founder members of Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan

Calvin & Hobbes



Sacred space

Every reform means awakening. Once truly awakened, the nation will not be satisfied with reform only in the department of life.

MK Gandhi

Jesus Chatbots & Other Religious Tech-Practices

Narayani Ganes

A 15-year-old Carlo Acutis who died of leukaemia in 2006 - popularly known as 'God's influencer' and the 'Patron Saint of the Internet' - used digital media to promote Catholicism. A website he created documented Eucharistic miracles recognised by the church. With his finger on the pulse of the digital world, the Vatican led by Pope Leo XIV on Sept 7, 2025, canonised Acutis, acknowledging the vital role of 'info-tech' in spreading the faith and keeping the flock together in an increasingly social media and internet dependent demographic.

Brian Owens writes in Nature that "the work of a saintly teenager tech wizard is just one way that new technologies are finding their way into religious practice: artificial intelligence (AI) chatbots and ritual-performing robots are already taking on spiritual roles that are conventionally filled by humans."

Some chatbots claim to establish direct connection between devotee and god, but not all of the faithful are convinced about this. In the 1998 Bollywood film 3947 Earth directed by Deepa Mehta, Aamir Khan plays a street-smart character who carries a dial-up telephone in his bag, promising devotees to connect on their behalf even as he dials the numbers 7-8-9 and holds an imaginary conversation with the divine. Today, the faithful may not for all other religious figures.

What is worrying is that these chatbots are hosted by private outfits that have no religious background and no one is sure as to what kind of scriptural or other information is being fed into these

AI tools to make them spout so-called religious truths or conduct rituals, or even claim to speak in the voice of god.

Jesus chatbots are fertile ground for getting scammed, say experts. "It's difficult to know if they're really about religion or are just milking money from the faithful," says Anne Verheef, North West University, Potchefstroom. South Africa, who analysed five popular Jesus chatbots by asking them questions about themselves and basic theology. Verheef says the possibility for abuse is huge, as seekers tend to be vulnerable and gullible. Believing a chatbot to be divinity itself, they may follow its instructions faithfully.

Other major religions are using generative AI tools to conduct automated rituals. Some Hindu temples are known to use robotic arms to perform the lamp ritual before a deity (aarti). People for the

Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) donated a robotic (animatron) elephant to a temple in Kerala for its rituals to avoid the use of real-life animals. Certain spiritual websites offer virtual services like conducting puja, havan and abhishek, offering prasad, adorning the deity with flower offerings, and so on, from remote locations. But these are mild uses of hi-tech as compared with large language models and AI tools like Jesus chatbots that could be an alarming trend, because of the possibility of followers getting misled or duped.

In the early days of the Internet, rumours were rife that the next appearance of Jesus Christ or the next Hindu avatar would emerge in the digital world. A medium is a medium, whether human or digital, so one cannot rule out these possibilities, if you are a devout follower of a faith. Safeguards like prudence and caution need to be exercised. ganesnarayani@yahoo.com



DECCAN Chronicle 18 DECEMBER 2025

I.N.D.I.A. bloc must decide on issues, Cong. can't take call

It's not necessary that all political parties in an alliance share their opinions on every issue that confronts them...

The opinion of Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Omar Abdullah that it does not share the opinion of the Congress on their an issue the latter has focused all its energies on late, betrays lack of consensus on issues of critical importance within the I.N.D.I.A. bloc...

The NCP, too, has indicated its aloofness from the Congress agenda of questioning the use of electronic voting machines...

The NCP, too, has shown its aloofness from the Congress agenda of opposing the use of EVMs. It in fact proposes that the I.N.D.I.A. bloc rather concentrate on issues that affect people's day-to-day lives...

It may be remembered that the Congress has been spending most of its energies of late on this single topic of vote theft as the party feels it amounts to undermining the very idea of electoral democracy...

The Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal would largely vouch for this initiative of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc and have vowed to stand by it, and so have the Left parties...

It cannot be that Mr Abdullah does not understand the importance of the issue that the Congress has been raising...

Taken together, the responses of the alliance partners of the I.N.D.I.A. bloc portray a picture of a house unnecessarily divided. It now falls upon the shoulders of no party other than the Congress to take the lead in instilling a sense of unity of purpose within the alliance...

Spotlight on ISIS sleeper cells

The role of a terror-indoctrinated Indian, Sajid Akram, in the recent mass shooting that killed 15 people at Bondi Beach in Sydney is a worrisome development and hints at steadily growing radicalisation in the country...

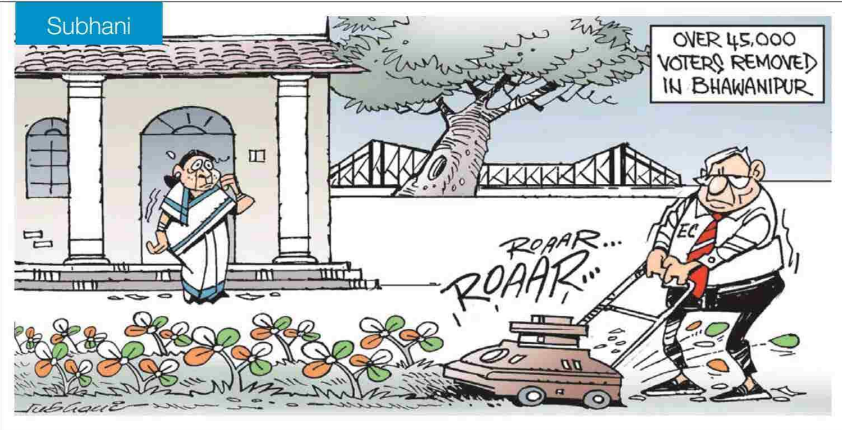
Though initially Sajid was suspected to be a Pakistani, his Indian passport established his Indian links to Hyderabad. The Telangana police swiftly investigated his roots in Hyderabad and revealed all his details...

The Islamic State or ISIS is a transnational Salafi jihadist militant organisation founded in 2006. Many Muslims living around the world joined it, but Indian Muslims were the least affected by its propaganda...

The recruitment strategy of ISIS in India clusters around online radicalisation, small modules, IED experimentation, handlers and fund-raising channels. In most cases linked to ISIS in India, the sleeper cells consisted of fewer than 10 persons...

Kaushik MITTAR Editor DECCAN CHRONICLE K. SUDHAKAR Printer & Publisher

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Justice or vengeance? No end to violence in B'desh



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray Reflections

When the hall in Dhaka exploded in applause because Sheikh Hasina Wazed, the ousted Prime Minister now living in exile in India, was sentenced to death...

never out of office, Mr Yunus is a permanent chief adviser. Is he now the sole incumbent or does he share the crown with the former Chief Justice, Shahabuddin Ahmed...

Gen. Ershad had a controversial presidential election in 1980 after ousting the civilian incumbent, but was ultimately ousted by the two Begums of Bangladesh politics...

Gen. Ershad tried one last ploy. He appointed Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to form an acceptable neutral caretaker government and prepare for democratic elections...

Gen. Ershad tried one last ploy. He appointed Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to form an acceptable neutral caretaker government and prepare for democratic elections...

Mr Yunus is a permanent chief adviser. Is he now the sole incumbent or does he share the crown with the former Chief Justice, Shahabuddin Ahmed, on whom the honour was bestowed in 1990?

ground. Mujib's key colleagues — home minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, A.H.M. Qamruzzaman and Muhammad Mansur Ali — were bayoneted to death in Dhaka Central Jail three months after the Dhamondi carnage...

Formal democracy was restored under another death sentence. When Fazlur Quader Chowdhury, a former Pakistan National Assembly Speaker, was elected in 1975, his son, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, a leading light in the BNP, warned Tajuddin and his colleagues to have air-conditioners and other comforts installed in the jail as their time would also come...

So, it goes on. Trials are conducted under another British laws. Evidence is based on concepts that locals may not comprehend. Questions are more intelligible to lawyers than to respondents...

LETTERS

G RAM G BILL

In unsatisfied thrust to renaming, the Narendra Modi government at the Centre decided to replace the world's largest rural jobs programme MGNREGA with Viksit Bharat Guaranteee Rojgar Ajeevika Machine Gramin after changing Planning Commission as Niti Aayog (G Ram G Bill for rural jobs in Lok Sabha, Dec. 17). Among others, it changed the Centre and state ratio of financial commitment from 90:10 to 60:40 and also capped the Budget support. The Centre confines to supervisory role while states have to execute and take accountability of the programme.

Pratapa Reddy Yaramala NTR district

INVALID VOTERS

All political parties should realise that the nation's security is more important than the political power game (EC deletes 82.21 invalid voters from Bengal rolls, Dec. 17). It is pertinent that the EC deleted over 58 lakh fake voters in West Bengal under SIR which includes 34 lakh Rohingya mostly from Bangladesh. Under the alarming situation the predominant Rohingya will have to be deported to their homeland immediately.

B.V. App Rao Simlachalam

The results of the first phase of SIR in West Bengal's voter rolls is apparently an anti-climax to the BJP's ongoing propaganda against the illegal Bangladeshis or Rohingya voters. In fact, the Murshidabad violence against Hindus last year was the flashpoint for the NDA government mandating EC to undertake SIR. It is however surprising to note that there are 24 lakh dead voters in the deleted list. Media reports indicated that illegal Bangladeshis and Rohingya left West Bengal as the exercise of SIR commenced. There were more illegal voters among 60 lakh+ detected in Bihar when SIR was conducted there. But then in West Bengal where illegal Muslims were more in number, the deletions post SIR should be more. There is something more than meets the eye in as the system has apparently been compromised.

Govardhana Myneedu Vijayawada

Email your letters to editor@deccanmail.com, info@deccanmail.com.



Kamal Davar

Terror has to be fought globally: Will world learn from Bondi hit?

For the last few decades terrorism has, unquestionably, become the scourge of the modern world. The latest major terror incident has been the horrific attack in Australia's iconic Bondi Beach in Sydney, with two Islamist terrorists gunning down 15 innocent civilians celebrating the first day of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah.

While the United States, Britain, France, Canada and the Middle East region, including Israel and Syria, have been afflicted with terror activities, off and on, the South Asian region, comprising India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, has been regularly plagued by continuous acts of terrorist violence. Most security analysts are clear that a majority of terror strikes, starting from the horrendous 9/11 attacks in the US and later the November 2008 Mumbai attack and those elsewhere in India and Afghanistan, are all Pakistani-sponsored and executed. Pakistan, which is now afflicted with home-grown terror, is still, whether from the Afghan Taliban or the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or Baloch rebels, is now reaping all the evil it had sown, especially in its neighbourhood.

the international community, very little has been done collectively due by the global community, and its toothless watchdog, the United Nations or its Security Council. Unfortunately, instead of striving for a peaceful law-abiding global order, many nations remain in pursuit of their own selfish interests and thus are fixated on their brand of selective terrorism. It's not for nothing that the world, or the UN, has been unable to agree on a definition of terrorism or a terrorist. While the latter, to most people, is an evil person pursuing violence against unarmed civilians, amazingly, to some people the same person is a freedom-fighter! His opponent has to end before the world can unite in the fight against global terror.

If the US does not do so, it should not be taken by surprise if there is a repeat of the 9/11 attacks on its soil. Many in the US who fully comprehend the nuances of the global security paradigm are surprised at the Trump administration's new-found love for Pakistan, forgetting the latter's relentless pursuit of terror activities in the past. How can America now conveniently forget that the world's most dreaded terrorist, Osama bin Laden, designated as such by both the US and the UN, was captured and killed by US special forces after he was found hiding in the Pakistani garrison town of Abbottabad, with Islamabad supposedly ignorant of this fact? India, which was consistently targeted by terrorism emanating from Pakistan, will have to further strengthen its counter-terror structures. It must work in tandem with all nations afflicted by terror to shape global counter-terror narratives, including using platforms like the UN, FATF, etc. Pakistan needs to be isolated before its relentless pursuit of military rule, Field Marshal Asim Munir, runs amok exporting terrorism, which comes naturally to him, being a former chief of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. India needs to be militarily strong to serve as a deterrent to any mischief emanating from Pakistani soil.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, was the first head of India's Defence Intelligence Agency, and is a strategic analyst



### quick BITES

INDICATORS	%
Sensex	84,559.65 -0.14
Nifty 50	25,818.55 -0.16
S&P 500*	6,795.93 0.042
Dollar (₹)	91.02 0.31
Pound Sterling (₹)	121.79 0.26
Euro (₹)	106.99 0.41
Gold (10gm) (₹)	134,734.325 0.24
Brent crude (\$/bbl)	59.80 1.49
IN 10-Yr bond yield	6.601 0.43
US 10-Yr T-bill yield*	4.176 0.027

\*As of 8:30 PM IST

### Trai sets Feb. 15 deadline for using 1,600-series

Telecom regulatory authority of India (Trai) has mandated that entities regulated by the insurance regulatory and development authority of India (Irdai) should adopt, by February 15, 2026, the '1600' series numbers for making service and transaction calls to consumers. Trai said the direction has been issued with the objective of enhancing consumer trust, curbing spam, and preventing fraudulent calls.

### Amazon to allow biometrics for payments

Amazon Pay on Wednesday launched unified payments interface (UPI) biometric authentication feature, which enables users to make payments using fingerprints or face scans. There will be no need to re-enter a PIN code to execute a transaction, the company said, claiming this to be an industry first. The feature is limited to transact up to ₹5,000, and a PIN will be needed for payments beyond the limit.



### Tesla launches charging station in Gurugram

Electric vehicle major Tesla on Wednesday said it has launched its first charging station in Gurugram at DLF Horizon Centre. This significant step reinforces Tesla's commitment to building a robust charging infrastructure in India, it said. "Our mission is to accelerate transition towards sustainable future and EV adoption is largely dependent on ecosystem around EVs, Tesla India general manager Shrad Agarwal said.

### BMW sells out first batch of Mini Convertible

BMW, the German luxury car maker, on Wednesday said the first batch of the all-new Mini Cooper S Convertible has been sold out within 24 hours since it was launched in India on December 12. It did not share numbers. "The speed at which the all-new Mini Convertible got sold underscores how strongly our community resonates with design," said Hardeep Singh Bhatia, president and CEO at BMW Group India.



# Interest rates to stay for long: RBI gov

## Deflationary trend seen over past few months among key reasons

**FALAKNAAZ SYED**  
MUMBAI, DEC. 17

Reserve Bank of India (RBI) Governor Sanjay Malhotra said the interest rates are to remain low for a long period of time as India continues to post strong economic growth, which may further accelerate once India concludes trade pacts with the US and the European Union. Rates may also stay low due to the deflationary trend seen over the past few months.

Malhotra said the central bank's economic projections for the US trade deal to be as much as about half a percentage point," he said in an interview.

He said the recent headline GDP growth was surprising and that the RBI, which had predicted 7 per cent annual growth in Sept. quarter, had to raise its forecasting. "Inflation is well below the lower end of our target range. Growth will moderate but remain robust," he said.

According to Malhotra, the repo rate cuts by the RBI since February had helped ease inflation. He said the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee has reduced the repo rate by 125 basis points cumulatively in 2025, bringing the benchmark rate down to 5.25 per cent from 6.50 per cent a year ago.

For the September quarter,

### GROWTH PACT

#### IMPACT OF US trade deal to be about half percentage point.



RBI's MPC reduced repo rate to 5.25% from 6.5% a year ago, cumulatively 125 bps in 2025.

ter, India's GDP expanded 8.2 per cent, beating both market and central bank forecasts. RBI expects year-on-year GDP growth to moderate to 6.7 per cent in the first quarter of FY27. Malhotra said maintaining financial stability and strengthening the financial system were his twin priorities.

Meanwhile, chief economic adviser (CEA) V Anantha Nageswaran on Wednesday said at an event in New Delhi that India is at a demographic and economic inflection point and higher education will play a decisive role, as millions of youngsters get ready to enter the workforce over the next two decades.

"Industry can co-design curricula, offer credit-bearing internships, support and applied research, share infrastructure," he further said.

Rupee opened at 91.07 but ended at 90.38, again of Rs 1.04 pause from previous close of 91.02

RBI intervenes around \$18 bn in forex market during June-Sept, and by another \$10 bn in Oct.

RBI projects inflation to rise to 2.9% for quarter ending March.

INFLATION is well below the lower end of our target range. Growth will moderate but remain robust. The last GDP number was surprising.

— SANJAY MALHOTRA, RBI governor

## RBI sells \$5-6 billion to stabilise weak rupee

FALAKNAAZ SYED, MUMBAI, DEC. 17

Rupee Wednesday staged a sharp turnaround snapping its five-day losing streak against the dollar, recovering 1.04 intra-day from its previous close as Reserve Bank of India (RBI) sold around \$5-6 billion during the day to prevent the rupee's slide.

This was rupee's sharpest intra-day recovery in more than seven months.

"The opening today was lower at 91.07 but RBI sold dollars to halt further depreciation in the rupee beyond the 91-mark, helping the rupee to hit an

intraday high of 89.99. It ended at 90.38, up 64 paise from its previous close.

With high year end premiums, the importer's hedging cost was also higher. The rupee is expected between 90 to 91 on Thursday, said Anil Bhanisali, head treasury at Finviz Trading Advisors.

"RBI stepped in to curb excessive volatility and prevent a disorderly move, signaling its discomfort with rapid depreciation. Today's action reinforces the RBI's role as a stabiliser rather than a defender of fixed levels," said Abhishek Goenka, chief executive officer, IFA Global.

# Global trade not fair, free; tariffs weaponised, says FM

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO, NEW DELHI, DEC. 17

Globally trade isn't fair or free. India faces lectures on being inward-looking or a 'tariff king', but tariffs are weaponised. India safeguards against dumping, yet others face no criticism. This reality requires India to negotiate cautiously while leveraging its growing economic strength, said finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman.

On growth, she said India's growth momentum and global aspirations hinge on disciplined fiscal management, competitive manufacturing, and policymaking rooted in domestic priorities.

"The RBI documents and studies show worrisome debt-to-GDP in some States. Unless managed within fiscal responsibility and budget management (FRBM) limits and high-intensity debt audit, States borrow to service loans, not development, a poor fiscal policy, the finance minister said.

On trade and global economic engagement, Sitharaman said that India must chart its own course amid shifting global norms. Countries like India must mark their own growth by chalking their own growth story.

"We can aspire for an India that contributes 25 per cent to the world trade. Achieving this would require reviving manufacturing, agriculture, sustaining growth services by chalking tourism and hospitality," she added.



— NIRMALA SITHARAMAN, Union finance minister

INDIA'S growth momentum hinge on fiscal management, manufacturing.

GOVT'S focus will on debt levels along with fiscal deficit from next fiscal year.

CENTRE nudges States to lower their debt levels to become a developed nation.

On growth, she said "The RBI documents and studies show worrisome debt-to-GDP in some States. Unless managed within fiscal responsibility and budget management (FRBM) limits and high-intensity debt audit, States borrow to service loans, not development, a poor fiscal policy, the finance minister said.

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"We can aspire for an India that contributes 25 per cent to the world trade. Achieving this would require reviving manufacturing, agriculture, sustaining growth services by chalking tourism and hospitality," she added.

## Silver price touches ₹2.06 L a kg on MCX

SANGEETHA G., CHENNAI, DEC. 17

Silver prices crossed ₹2,06,000 per kg at Multi Commodity Exchange (MCX) as international silver touched a new high of \$66 per ounce. Having risen 130 per cent in 2025, silver carries the potential to move 20-25 per cent more in coming months.

On Wednesday, silver extended its remarkable rally, breaking above the \$66 per ounce level for the first time on record, driven by a combination of physical supply conditions, rising safe-haven demand, strong inflows into silver-backed ETFs, and auto components, the commerce ministry said.

The comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA), formally began in November 2023 and the negotiations concluded this year.

"The FTA offers immense opportunities in a number of sectors, including textiles, footwear, automobiles, gems and jewellery, renewable energy and auto components," the commerce and industry minister Piyush Goyal said, while speaking at the Oman-India Business Forum in Muscat.

Meanwhile, in an event, Kirit Bhanisali, chairman, GJEPC, said the FTA will expanding India's gem and jewellery exports to Oman. "It opens opportunities for polished diamonds and gold jewellery, while creating new avenues in silver, platinum," he said.

attract buying interest. Momentum further amplified by reports that China plans to restrict silver exports from 2026, a development that could disrupt a key supply source amid intensifying pressure on global market, said Kaynat Chainwala, AVP commodity-IT Research, Kotak Securities.

With Chinese silver inventories already at their lowest levels in a decade, any curbs risk worsening the physical squeeze, reinforcing the bullish narrative of a potentially sustaining elevated prices in near term.

"Looking ahead to 2026, the outlook remains positive for silver more volatile than gold. The metal carries further upside potential of 20-25 per cent, with MCX prices seen in the ₹2,45,000-₹2,80,000 range," said Ajay Kedia, MD, Kedia Commodities.

## PFRDA raises NPS withdrawal limit to 80% from 60%

New Delhi, Dec. 17: Pension regulator PFRDA has revamped the exit and withdrawal rules, allowing non-government subscribers of national pension system (NPS) to withdraw up to 80 per cent of the fund accumulated at the time of exit from 60 per cent of accumulated pension wealth.

The remaining was expected to be utilised for buying an annuity providing for a monthly or any other periodical pension.

Besides, Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) has also raised exit age to 85 years from 70 years.

It has also increased the number of partial withdrawals from earlier limit of 3 to a total of 4, with a gap of 4 years between each interval. After retirement, partial withdrawals are permitted 3 times with a gap of 3 years.

With regard to government sector subscribers, exit age has been increased from 75 to 85. They can withdraw 60 per cent of accumulated pension wealth, upon exit. — PTI

## Tax buoyancy, compliance to offset some revenue loss

SANGEETHA G., CHENNAI, DEC. 17

Goods and services tax (GST) rationalisation is likely to result in net negative impact of about ₹47,700 crore to States, finds the government. However, the impact will not be static due to tax buoyancy and increased compliance.

The broader rate rationalisation initiative is expected to lead to a negative revenue implication of around ₹93,300 crore to States. Based on the data of consumption patterns and the entire value chain for FY24, the items that moved from 28 per cent

### GST

40 per cent tax bracket are projected to account for additional revenue of approximately ₹45,570 crore.

"Taken together, these two figures are likely to result in about ₹47,700 crore of net negative, the finance ministry informed the House.

"However, these figures should not be viewed as definitive since tax collection is not static and there is buoyancy. Moreover, lower rates are likely to lead to improved compliance and fewer disputes," it added.

Replying to a query, the government said that the consumption pattern in Kerala is such that the majority of items consumed attract a higher rate of tax. Therefore, the revenue loss to the State on account of rate rationalisation is likely to be higher.

Kerala had undertaken its own estimates of its revenue loss. State is expected to lose around ₹2,500 crore annually and the total annual revenue loss is about ₹8,000 crore.

## INDIA, OMAN AGREE TO SIGN FTA TODAY IN MUSCAT

MADHUSUDAN SAHOO, NEW DELHI, DEC. 17

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## Nations to fall short of deal at talks for reforming WTO

Geneva, Dec. 17: Countries are making progress on reforming the World Trade Organization (WTO) but risk falling short of clinching a deal at a major meeting early next year, the ambassador leading the talks said in a confidential document.

Observers say reforms at the 30-year-old trade watchdog are urgently needed, with some believing the future of the organisation is at stake.

In particular, the consensus rule whereby all 166 members must agree to pass new trade deals has gridlocked negotiations for years, blocking even those that enjoy near universal support.

Norway's WTO ambassador Petter Oberg said in a note that the range of ideas for reforming decision-making meant that issue cannot be resolved at a ministerial meeting in March 2026.

The US voiced frustration in a communication to members that blockages in consensus-based system were system members from joining plurilateral agreements. These deals allow groups of interested members to strike deals among themselves and others to sign on later. — Reuters

## OpenAI in talks to use Amazon chips

MORE | POWER | ChatGPT maker looking to raise \$10 billion to broaden presence in AI

San Francisco, Dec. 17: OpenAI is in initial discussions to raise at least \$10 billion from Amazon.com and use its chips, a potential win for online retailer's effort to broaden its AI platform presence and compete with Nvidia Corp.

The deal under discussion could value OpenAI north of \$90 billion and see it adopt Amazon's Trainium chip, a person with knowledge of matter said. Talks, however, are at a preliminary stage and terms could change, the person added.

For Amazon's fledgling semiconductor division, the deal would open the market for the powerful chips required to create artificial intelligence (AI) platforms, developers such as Meta Platforms are starting to explore rival offerings from the likes of Alphabet's Google.

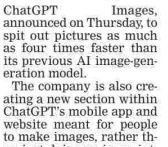
The Trainium chip is a key element of Amazon's strategy to stand out in AI, complementing its cloud division, Amazon Web Services, which is the largest seller of rented computing power and data storage, but it has struggled to

replicate that dominance among AI developers given intense competition from the likes of Microsoft. Meanwhile, OpenAI is rolling out an update to ChatGPT that's intended

to generate images better and faster, the latest move by the AI developer to bolster its flagship chatbot amid heated competition from Alphabet's Google. The new version of

Images, announced on Thursday, to spot out pictures as much as four times faster than its previous AI image-generation model. The company is also creating a new version within ChatGPT's mobile app and website meant for people to make images, rather than just doing so in an interface with the chatbot.

The updated software aims to let users make a number of edits to the 24 images all without losing the track of details in the earlier versions. — Bloomberg





## THE CITY ESTRANGED

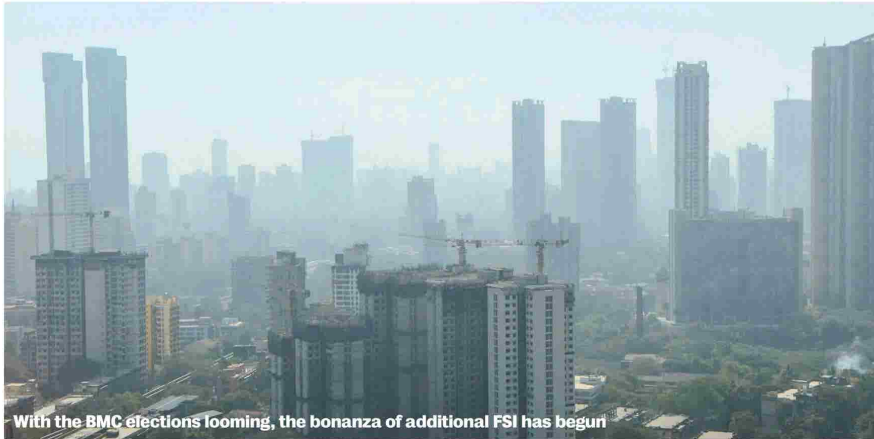
NOTES ON URBAN AFFAIRS



Hussain Indorewala

mirrorfeedback@timesofindia.com

# Mumbai's magic wand: Incentive FSI



With the BMC elections looming, the bonanza of additional FSI has begun

## How floor space index (wrongly) came to be seen as the solution for all of the city's ills

Mumbai's retired urban planner, VK Phatak, once joked that Mumbai may have smart people, but it has a smarter government. The government has devised a "magical" formula to create housing and social infrastructure for all - without spending from the budget. The formula is to keep FSI low and then give landowners and

developers more FSI to solve all manner of problems.

In 1991, the government gave landowners "incentive FSI" to acquire their land for open spaces. In 1995, they awarded it to rehouse slum dwellers. In 1999, to rebuild chawls. Later, it became the means to create jobs in the IT sector. In 2004, it was granted to build amenities and star hotels. In 2010, for building public parking lots. It got so absurd that Phatak envisioned FSI as an award for meritorious students, or paid as salary to government officials (10 sqm to the Chief Secretary and 1 sq cm for a peon). And why stop there? It is quite likely, he quipped, that Mumbai's fabled FSI will someday replace the Indian Rupee.

With the BMC elections looming, the bonanza of additional FSI has begun. Last week, the government handed out extra FSI for redevelopment of pagdi buildings, incentive FSI for redevelopment of chawls on mill lands, and additional incentives for redevelopment of buildings on defence land or affected areas.

The goal, we are told, is to provide "relief to Mumbaiers dreaming to live in an affordable home". The question is: how did this humble built-up area-to-land ratio assume the magical power to solve the city's most intractable problems?

To understand this, we must go back to the origins of this concept. The idea of Floor Space Index (FSI)

was introduced in Bombay's first Development Plan of 1964, as a device to regulate land development. Before that, regulations were based on "volume controls" like setbacks and height restrictions to regulate light, air, open space, and tenement sizes. With FSI, planners found a simple numerical ratio to control development intensity - to "limit concentration of people and their activities, thereby limiting the loads on traffic, utility and social services". The 1964 plan had variable zonal FSI, and planners assumed that by setting limits on FSI they could control population densities.

The problem was that in many cases, the plan's zonal FSI was lower than the existing built-up area. Therefore, soon after the first plan was sanctioned, an exception was allowed for one class of buildings (rent-controlled) which could be reconstructed with additional FSI - exceeding the zonal limits. Later, in the 1970s, FSI was given as a "compensation" to landowners who surrendered land for road widening.

By the time the 1991 development plan was sanctioned, the idea of granting developers "additional FSI" as compensation and "incentive" for public purposes had become deeply entrenched. Curiously, the FSI in the 1991 plan was set lower than the 1964 plan; but at the same time, it allowed the FSI limits to be breached for a range of categories of buildings. All of these categories were listed under one section of the development regulations, called DCR-33.

The DCR-33 section granted special exceptions to categories such as institutional buildings, MHADA schemes, rent-controlled structures, slums, etc. In 1991, the DCR-33 consisted of 12 crisp sub-sections, and was two pages long. Since then, it has ballooned with innumerable periodic amendments and modifica-

tions - at the behest of the builder lobby - to become what it is today: a sprawling regulation with 26 sub-sections exceeding 130 pages.

Notably, while the original DCR-33 allowed more FSI primarily for reconstruction of existing units, the expanded DCR-33 has morphed into a section that facilitates redevelopment by offering additional FSI as an "incentive". Today, it is probably impossible to find a single category of building in Mumbai that is not allowed extra FSI for redevelopment.

In effect, a system that permitted some deviations from the norm became the norm of deviations. The exceptions enlarged to become the rule. All the standard planning concerns - population density, traffic loads, utilities, social infrastructure, services, evaluation of local or cumulative impacts - quickly vanished. Today, there is no "planning" in Mumbai; there are only exemptions from planning.

Why has this happened? Because there is now a close entanglement of the goals of government with the interests of the developers. When citizens demand something, the government waves the magic wand of extra FSI to make schemes more profitable for developers. Some of the "benefits" fall as crumbs in the public plate as amenities, built-up area or revenue. The aggregate outcomes are ruinous for the city - but who cares?

Property prices will continue to rise, so forget about affordable housing. Selective and unplanned FSI incentives create what are called "collective action problems" - so forget about clean air, green cover, light and ventilation, decongestion, affordable mobility, or access to basic services. If more FSI for developers can't solve your problems, you're asking the wrong questions.

Hussain Indorewala is a teacher and urban researcher at KR VIA, Mumbai. Views are personal

# Let's not idolise AI. That would be an age-old mistake

Andrew Klavan, Spencer A. Klavan  
mirrorfeedback@timesofindia.com

In every generation, some advanced piece of machinery comes to seem like a model of the human mind. When the written word was the cutting edge in information storage, Plato had Socrates compare the human mind to a wax writing tablet in his "Theaetetus." In the era of the steam engine, Sigmund Freud began to think of the mind as a dynamic pressure chamber in which repressed energy returns with gathered force. And for the past several decades, we've come to picture the mind as a computer, hardwired to run certain kinds of software.

By using machines as metaphors for our minds, we fall prey to the illu-

sion that our minds are nothing more than machines. So, it's not surprising that now, when the possibilities of AI are enthralling Silicon Valley, those who think programs can become conscious are telling us that consciousness is a program.

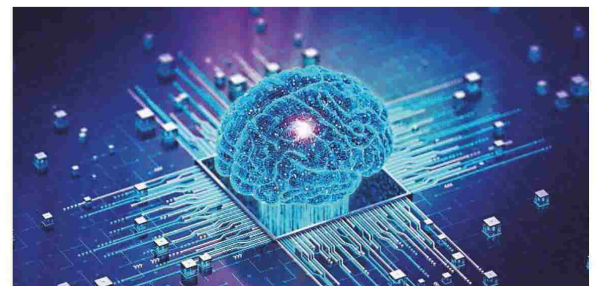
Here's computer scientist Stephen Wolfram in a recent interview, discussing the large language models, or LLMs, that enable AI chatbots to generate humanlike sentences: "In terms of consciousness, I have to say, you know, the idea that there's sort of something magic that goes beyond physics that leads to sort of conscious behaviour, I kind of think that LLMs kind of put the final nail in that coffin."

To rephrase it more succinctly: If AI can produce language via algorithmic patterns, then that's what

human beings must be doing as well. Our words, in that case, have no more inherent meaning than those produced by AI. Our sentences are simply patterns that we falsely experience as self-expression.

Our machines are products of our minds. It doesn't follow that our minds work like machines. LLMs are trained to imitate the outward forms of human speech - the sounds and sequences of the words we say - but they're not capable of understanding the subjective thoughts and experiences behind those words.

The defining feature of human language is what ancient philosophers called "the inner logos" - the unique interior apparatus we have for structuring and understanding our experience of the world. LLMs - probability functions designed to



detect and mimic patterns in words - are coded to reproduce our exterior language. They have no access to the inner logos.

A person who says "How do you do?" or, for that matter, "I am going to punch you in the face," means something by it, even if it's not exactly what the words express. An AI that says these things means absolutely nothing at all.

We have frittered away too much of human history toying with the fantasy that there is no self and no

truth to which the self is privy. The idea that LLMs dispel the metaphysical mystery of consciousness works only if we are deceived by the psychological quirk that causes us to view ourselves as "like unto" the machines we make.

We are not. We are not machines at all, in fact, but organic unities - brain, heart, loins and senses - animated by spirit and collaborating with creation on unique but interconnected experiences of life.

The Washington Post



# ONE YEAR OF TRUMP

As US President Donald Trump approaches one year in White House, his second term is marked by expanded presidential power, controversial enforcement tactics and growing voter discontent

Amber Phillips  
 mirrorfeedback@timesofindia.com

President Donald Trump is coming up on a full year in office for his second term. It's been a period defined by his attempts to make the presidency more powerful than at any time in modern history. He has touted his deportations, bragged about billions raised from tariffs and promised an economic revival that is right around the corner. "We're getting inflation - we're crushing it," he said last week, "and you're getting much higher wages." Yet polls regularly show that a majority of the country disapproves of his presidency and most of his major policies.

"The question then becomes whether the growing discontent, does that translate to meaningful political checks on his actions," said Rosa Brooks, a national security expert at Georgetown University Law Centre, "either in Congress or at the voting booth?"

Here's what the end of Trump's first year is looking like.

## Mass deportations accelerate despite legal challenges

His mass deportations are picking up. There are about 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, and Trump has set a goal to deport 1 million by his first year in office.

That's a major logistical challenge, and some courts have ruled that some of his rapid deportations and removal tactics are illegal. Yet the raids show no signs of stopping. He has moved from targeting largely liberal cities to more politically mixed areas such as Charlotte, as well as farm workers and major employers. The Trump administration recently signed a contract to purchase its own planes to deport people quickly. And the Supreme Court

also said immigration officials can use race as a reason to stop someone.

"By the end of this, almost everyone is going to know someone who had a friend or family member or colleague affected, or who witnessed an arrest happening," said David Bier, director of immigration studies at the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute.

Trump and his administration say they are targeting "the worst of the worst." But Bier calculates that about 5 per cent of those detained had a violent criminal conviction. In D.C., more than 80 per cent of the immigrants arrested don't have a prior criminal record, according to a Washington Post analysis of federal data. There's little evidence that migrants commit crimes at a higher rate than Americans.

## Tariff gamble

Most of his tariffs could get knocked down by the Supreme Court

Trump's signature economic policy is a big

gamble. He has imposed the highest tariffs in about a century, saying it will revive US manufacturing, yet goods from pretty much every country in the world now cost more to import because of them.

Tariffs are essentially a tax at the border, and the Constitution vests Congress with the power to impose taxes. The Supreme Court is considering the legality of most of his tariffs and could issue a ruling in the coming weeks or months.

It's also getting harder for American companies to avoid raising prices (in some cases, again) as they pay the tariffs to bring goods and raw materials into the country. By one estimate, Americans are expected to spend \$1,800 extra a year because of tariffs.

Still, the pro-tariff side sees early signs of a manufacturing boom returning to the United States. "Prices and costs are rising, but it has nothing to do with tariffs," said Nick Iacovella of the Coalition for a Prosperous America, a conservative, pro-tariff group. "They can be done without causing harm to the U.S. economy and could lead to a lot of great benefits," he said.

Prices are going up, not down

But electricity is becoming

There are about 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, and Trump has set a goal to deport 1 million by his first year in office

unaffordable for many, homeownership is out of reach for several Americans, inflation remains high, and grocery costs keep going up - in part because Trump deported farm workers. Trump touts his work to lower some drug prices, but health insurance costs are going up for millions of Americans next year if Congress doesn't act soon.

## Rising unemployment

There have also been recession-like layoffs in white-collar jobs, and the unemployment rate is at its highest level since 2021. Even basics are a pain point for many: A majority of Americans say they are spending more on groceries and utilities than they were a year ago, according to a recent Washington Post-ABC News-Ipsos poll.

"In early December, half of Americans say they were worse off financially than a year ago," said Claudia Sahm, chief economist at the investment management firm New Century Advisors.

He's pushing for peace deals while escalating military action in Venezuela

Some in Trump's base have accused him of focusing too much on foreign affairs.

He has spent much of his first year in office pushing for peace deals around the world, to mixed results, as he openly campaigns for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The biggest potential for peace comes between Hamas and Israel, a deal Trump helped negotiate that has largely held, The Post reports, though Gaza's future remains uncertain. After promising to end the war in Ukraine on his first day in office, he said this week that a Ukraine-Russia peace deal is "closer than ever," though there is fierce criticism in Europe that this deal largely echoes Russian talking points. He's also announced peace deals in Southeast Asia and Africa, yet those conflicts escalated shortly after he took credit for them. "Peace is not a pretty process," White House spokesperson Anna Kelly told The Post last week.

Amid all that, Trump has bailed out Argentina and is bombing suspected drug smugglers off the coast of Venezuela - actions that some Republicans are criticising and even scrutinising.

Trump has accused Venezuela's president of sending drugs and violent criminals to the United States, but no expert I talked to said they understood why Trump was singling out Venezuela. "Trump doesn't like big, scary wars, so we don't want to pick on someone our own size," Brooks, with Georgetown University Law Centre, theorised, "but if we can find a nice adversary that can't effectively strike back and engage in strikes, that makes us look tough."



MATT MCGLAIN/THE WASHINGTON POST



THE ASIAN AGE

18 DECEMBER 2025

INDIA bloc must decide on issues, Cong can't take call

It's not necessary that all political parties in an alliance share their opinions on every issue that confronts the nation; there will be differences between parties on some topics. The key lies in the ability of the leadership to find common points of agreement so that it can put up a cohesive argument before the people.

The opinion of Jammu and Kashmir chief minister Omar Abdullah that it does not share the opinion of the Congress on vote theft, an issue the latter has focused all its energies on late, betrays lack of consensus on issues of critical importance within the INDIA alliance. Apparently, the Congress' view is at complete variance with the position of several of the alliance partners. Mr Abdullah's reference came a day after the congress held a massive rally in the capital and alleged that the Election Commission is colluding with the Union government in facilitating vote theft and undermining the electoral process.

The NCP, too, has indicated its aloofness from the Congress agenda of questioning the use of electronic voting machines. The party is alright with the EVMs and proposes that the INDIA bloc rather concentrate on issues that affect people's day-to-day lives.

The NCP, too, has shown its aloofness from the Congress agenda of opposing the use of EVMs. It in fact proposes that the INDIA bloc rather concentrate on issues that affect people's day-to-day lives.

It may be remembered that the Congress has been spending most of its energies of late on this single topic of vote theft as the party feels it amounts to undermining the very idea of electoral democracy. The party also feels that the special intensive reference (SIR) of the electoral rolls which is being carried out across the country is also part of a grand scheme that will cumulatively disenfranchise a massive number of people. Defending the integrity of the electoral process is the toughest challenge of the time and hence should top the Opposition agenda, according to the party.

The Samajwadi Party and the Rashtriya Janata Dal would largely vouch for this initiative of the INDIA bloc and have vowed to stand by it, and so have the Left parties. The DMK, a key partner in the alliance, is also part of the Congress campaign on vote theft. But the Trinamul Congress is fighting its own war against SIR.

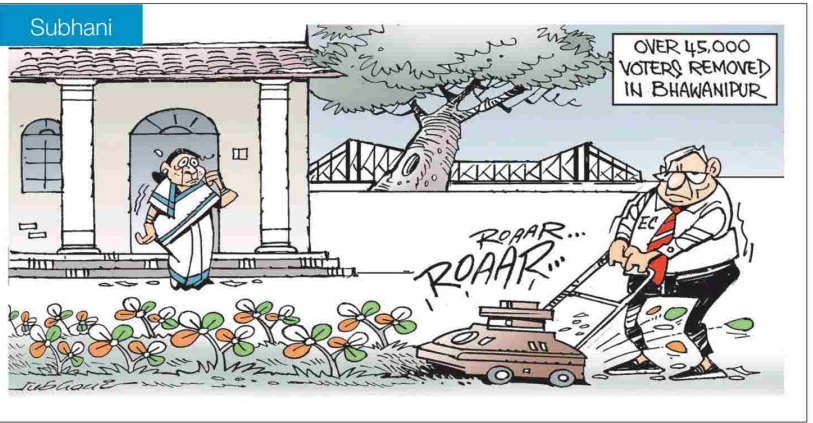
It cannot be that Mr Abdullah does not understand the importance of the issue that the Congress has been raising. So his dissent must be seen as an expression of the disappointment that has set in inside the Opposition bloc on the lack of a consultation process before arriving at a decision on the continuing strategy and programmes to be adopted by the bloc. Mr Abdullah's previous reference that the INDIA bloc was on a life support system must in fact be read in conjunction with the latest outburst. One should not lose sight of the lone battle the National Congress has been fighting for the restoration of the statehood of Jammu and Kashmir. Indeed, that should have been on the INDIA bloc's agenda.

Hasina Wazed, the ousted Prime Minister now living in exile in India, was sentenced to death. It was reminded of Sir Edward Pender Moon, a British member of the Indian Civil Service and a historian, arguing in his book Strangers in India that Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence was unsuited to the subcontinent. His argument was that more Brits had little understanding of India's moral values, historical legacy and traditional ethic, although they had copied the Westminster system lock, stock and barrel.

Muhammad Yunus' call for parliamentary elections next February confirms that Bangladesh remains a 'riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'. The 86-year-old economist, entrepreneur and politician is Bangladesh's 'fifth chief adviser' since 2024. He has four simply disreputable politicians after him who have been murdered or executed. Perhaps an even more lofty authority whom 'advisers' advise and in whom vests ultimate power is lurking somewhere.

Realising that the system was not best suited to their needs, Gen. Hussain Muhammad Ershad, the dictator from 1983 to 1990, enacted the 17th constitutional amendment to elevate Islam's status. In the same spirit, he changed 'Dacca' to Dhaka which suits Muslims to Bengali phonetics. He should also have revised the justice system, especially crime and punishment and rules of evidence.

It's said in Pakistan, no matter who wins the polls, the military remains in power. No wonder Gen. Ershad was considering how to involve the military in governance, as in Suharto's Indonesia. Meanwhile, Bangladeshis may wonder if like Pakistan's ISI, which is



Justice or vengeance? No end to violence in B'desh



Sunanda K. Datta-Ray Reflections

When the hall in Dhaka exploded in applause because Shaheed Hasina Wazed, the ousted Prime Minister now living in exile in India, was sentenced to death, it was reminded of Sir Edward Pender Moon, a British member of the Indian Civil Service and a historian, arguing in his book Strangers in India that Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence was unsuited to the subcontinent. His argument was that more Brits had little understanding of India's moral values, historical legacy and traditional ethic, although they had copied the Westminster system lock, stock and barrel.

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never out of office. Mr Yunus is a permanent chief adviser. Is he now the sole incumbent or does he share the crown with the former Chief Justice, Shahabuddin Ahmed, on whom the honour was bestowed in 1990?

often-tantalising acrobatics of democratic ministry-making. Initially intended to support the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the caretaker system was institutionalised in 1996 by the Sixth Parliament as the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League took over. The present adviser for foreign affairs, Mohammed Touhid Hossain, for instance, was a career diplomat and Bangladesh's deputy high commissioner in Kolkata before becoming foreign secretary. If he offended India by denying allegations of illegal migrants in N-E India and by blaming New Delhi for stagnant India-Bangladesh relations, he could also be ousted.

Along with Mrs Wazed, a former home minister, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, was sentenced to death in absentia. A third accused, ex-Inspector General of Police Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun, was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Mr Yunus thought the verdict 'historic', while Mrs Wazed called it 'biased and politically motivated'.

This is not the end. It's not the beginning either for that lay in the Partition riots of 1947, compounded by the 1971 war that created Bangladesh.

Another grim road followed in 1975 when Sheikh Mujib and his extended family were murdered in their Dhaka home. The Bangladeshis were unable to agree on a definition of terrorism or a terrorist. While the latter, to most people, is an evil person pursuing violence against unarmed civilians, amazingly, these people are the same person as a 'freedom-fighter'.

This anomaly has to end before the world can unite in the fight against global terror. Most security analysts agree that both the US and China are not doing enough globally to contain terrorism and conveniently cast a blind eye on nations clearly fostering these evil activities. UN-designated terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen and their many splinter groups roam free inside Pakistan masquerading as charitable groups.

ground. Mujib's key lieutenant, home minister Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, A.H.M. Qamruzzaman and Muhammad Mansur Ali — were banished to death in Dhaka Central Jail three months after the Dhamondi carnage, apparently on the orders of Mujib's erstwhile colleague, Khondaker Mustaq Ahmad, who immediately stepped into his murdered boss' shoes to become President.

Brigadier Khaled Mosharraf's abortive counter-attack against Mosharraf was crushed and Col. Abu Taher's loyal troops freed Ziaur Rahman from house arrest, whereupon he appointed himself the chief martial law administrator. But Gen. Zia was also gunned down, whereupon Gen. Ershad took over.

Formal democracy was restored. But the cycle of death continued. When Fazlur Quader Chowdhury, a former Pakistan National Assembly Speaker, was jailed in 1973, his son, Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, a leading light in the BNP, warned Tajuddin and his colleagues to have air-conditioners and other comforts installed in their homes. Evidently, it also came. It did. Fazlur Quader Chowdhury died behind bars. Tajuddin and the others were butchered. Then Salahuddin and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujibid were hanged after being convicted of genocide and rape — charges that they denied.

So, it goes on. Trials are conducted under antiquated British laws. Evidence is based on concepts that locals may not comprehend. Questions are more intelligible to lawyers than to residents. Who knows what the latest killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, chief of the right-wing 'Inquilab Manchha, will lead to? Few can tell where justice ends and vengeance begins. Partly because of the judicial punishment system and the Anglo-Saxon code of right and wrong, Bangladesh is still wallowing in blood. It's not the only aspect of Bangladesh that needs reviewing in light of indigenous requirements.

The writer is a senior journalist, columnist and author

LETTERS MARKET OVER CRICKET

The recent IPL auctions, where franchises spent astronomical sums on a handful of star players, once again exposed cricket's uneasy relationship with money. Names like Rishabh Pant and Shreyas Iyer dominated headlines, while price tags overshadowed performance and team balance. The league, meant to celebrate competitive cricket, increasingly resembles a financial arms race. Supporters are left shell-shocked as young domestic talent quietly slips into the background, eclipsed by glamour signings and aggressive bidding wars. Is cricket turning into a marketplace where price dictates prestige rather than skill? What message are we sending to the countless players who rely on talent, patience and performance?

Hasnain Rabbani Mumbai

GRAP-4 NOT ENOUGH

AFTER AQJ crossed 60 and up, GRAP-4 has been imposed in NCR which is experiencing a mix of pollution and cold weather, resulting in persistent fog. This increases the risk of road accidents and one such mishap did take place on the Delhi Gurgaon expressway, claiming several lives. The changing weather has also led to a surge in respiratory illnesses. Therefore, all must take practical steps to protect themselves. But are taking emergency measures enough to contain what has now long become a yearly phenomenon? Shouldn't states affect jointly formulate a policy to curb stubble burning and control vehicular emissions? After all, there can be no compromise when it comes down to protecting citizens' lives.

Yugal Kishore Sharma Faridabad, Haryana

OPTIC WIN FOR CONG

A DELHI COURT declined to take cognizance of the ED's money-laundering case linked to the National Herald showing that the government is weaponising Central agencies to harass the Opposition. The court order had exposed the "big bosses of Gandhinagar". The court also observed that since Delhi Polio's Economic Offences Wing has already registered an FIR in the matter, it would be premature to examine the ED's case on merits at this stage. The BJP's campaign of political vendetta, carried out over the past decade, now stands exposed before the entire nation.

Bhagwan Thadani Mumbai

Spotlight on ISIS sleeper cells

The role of a terror-indoctrinated Indian, Sajid Akram, in the recent mass shooting that killed 15 people at Bondi Beach in Sydney is a worrisome development and hints at steadily growing radicalisation in the country.

Sajid, who was born in Hyderabad around 50 years ago, left home to work overseas at a young age. His work took him to West Asia and Pakistan, where he was indoctrinated into radical ISIS ideology. Sajid, in turn, influenced his son Naveed, who was captured and is being interrogated by the Australian police.

Though initially Sajid was suspected to be a Pakistani, his Indian passport established his Indian links to Hyderabad. The Telangana police swiftly investigated his roots in Hyderabad and revealed all his details, without giving any scope for speculation.

Ever since he left Hyderabad in 1988, the police said Sajid visited the city only six times and had no record of criminal antecedents there. His radicalisation appears to be the result of his interaction with people in West Asia and Pakistan — a modus operandi being followed by ISIS to enrol Indian Muslims into its terrorist agenda.

The Islamic State or ISIS is a transnational Salafist jihadist militant organisation founded in 2006. Many Muslims living around the world joined it, but Indian Muslims were the least affected by its propaganda — forcing ISIS to tap Indian Muslims working overseas. The recruitment strategy of ISIS in India clusters around online radicalisation, small media, EDI or electronic dissemination, hand-drawn fundraising channels. In most cases linked to ISIS in India, the sleeper cells consisted of fewer than 10 persons. However, the key concern is the proliferation of sleeper cells in the country. Indian Muslims must guard against being dragged into a foreign war, and the government must extend all the help they need for this purpose.

THE ASIAN AGE

KASHMIRIETTER Editor

K. SUBHAKAR Prime of Publisher

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Kamal Davar

Terror has to be fought globally: Will world learn from Bondi hit?

For the last few decades terrorism has, unquestionably, become the scourge of the modern world. The latest major terror incident has been the horrific attack in Australia's iconic Bondi Beach in Sydney, with two Islamist terrorists gunning down 16 innocent civilians celebrating the first day of the Jewish festival of Hanukkah. Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese described the attack as a "devastating" event, clarifying that it was a "targeted attack on Jewish Australians on the first day of Hanukkah, which should be a day of joy, a celebration of faith". India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, while strongly condemning this incident and expressing solidarity with Australia, declared that "India has zero tolerance towards terrorism and supports the fight against all forms and manifestations of terrorism".

While the Australian Islamist father-and-son duo who gunned down the holidaying Jews, according to reports till now, may have been radicalised in Islamic State ideology while on a visit to Pakistan many years ago, the father — had his origins in Hyderabad and still carried an Indian passport. The son is fighting for his life in a Sydney hospital. According to the police, both had travelled recently to the Philippines, where they may have got weapons training. That the number of those killed in the horrific attack was not larger was thanks to the efforts of a Muslim convenience store owner who bravely got

hold of the killer father and handed him over to the local police. Unconfirmed reports also suggest that several Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) were found near the site of the attack. Ever since the Israeli retaliation against Hamas terrorists in Gaza, over two years back, a few isolated incidents, relatively less violent in intensity, have occurred targeting the Jewish community Down Under. In August this year, Australia had accused Iran of masterminding two anti-Semitic arson attacks in Sydney and Melbourne, and had directed the Iranian ambassador to leave the country.

While the United States, Britain, France, Canada and the Middle East region, including Israel and Syria, have been afflicted with terror activities, off and on, the South Asian region, comprising India, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, has been regularly plagued by continuous acts of terrorist violence. Most security analysts are clear that a majority of terror strikes, starting from the horrendous 9/11 attacks in the US and later the November 2008 Mumbai attack and those elsewhere in India and Afghanistan, are all Pakistani-sponsored and executed. Pakistan, which is now afflicted with home-grown terrorism itself, whether from the Afghan Taliban or the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan or Baloch rebels, is now reaping the evil it had sown, especially in its neighbourhood.

As the footprint of terror activities is spreading all across the civilised world, despite many warnings by

the international community, very little has been done collectively due by the global community, and its toothless watchdog, the United Nations or its Security Council. Unfortunately, instead of striving for a peaceful law-abiding global order, many nations remain in pursuit of their own selfish interests and thus are fixated on their brand of selective terrorism. It's not for nothing that the world, or the UN, has been unable to agree on a definition of terrorism or a terrorist. While the latter, to most people, is an evil person pursuing violence against unarmed civilians, amazingly, these people are the same person as a 'freedom-fighter'.

This anomaly has to end before the world can unite in the fight against global terror. Most security analysts agree that both the US and China are not doing enough globally to contain terrorism and conveniently cast a blind eye on nations clearly fostering these evil activities. UN-designated terror groups like the Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Harakat-ul-Mujahideen and their many splinter groups roam free inside Pakistan masquerading as charitable groups. Pakistan, universally, stands out as the epicentre and citadel of global terror, but unfortunately it derives part of its strength and largesse from the US and China to continue its evil endeavours both among neighbours, such as India and Afghanistan, but even within its own country. It is high time that these two powerful nations end their support to Pakistan as a major sponsor of terror activities.

If the US does not do so, it should not be taken by surprise if there is a repeat of the 9/11 attacks on its soil. Many in the US who fully comprehend the nuances of the global security paradigm are surprised at the Trump administration's new-found love for Pakistan, forgetting the latter's relentless pursuit of terror activities in the past. How can America now conveniently forget that the world's most dreaded terrorist, Osama bin Laden, designated as such by both the US and the UN, was captured and killed by US special forces after he was found hiding for years in Pakistani garrison town Abbottabad, with Islamabad supposedly ignorant of this fact?

India, which was consistently targeted by terrorism emanating from Pakistan, will have to further strengthen its counter-terror structures. It must work in tandem with all nations afflicted by terror to shape global counter-terror narratives, including using platforms like the UN, FATF, etc. Pakistan needs to be isolated before its current de facto military ruler, Field Marshal Asim Munir, runs amuck exporting terrorism, which comes naturally to him, being a former chief of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. India needs to be militarily strong to serve as a deterrent to any mischief emanating from Pakistan's soil.

The writer, a retired lieutenant-general, was the first head of India's Defence Intelligence Agency, and is a strategic analyst



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# Chicago Tribune

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## EDITORIALS

### The sausage making in the City Council's Finance Committee wasn't pretty. But a budget thankfully is in sight

Tuesday's marathon City Council Finance Committee session, as mind-numbing as it could get at points, was a remarkable moment in the history of Chicago government.

We saw a City Council, in the face of a mayoral administration relentlessly driven by ideology, for the first time wrest control of Chicago's budget in the name of pragmatic solutions to a crisis. The committee's 22-13 approval of the alternative revenue package forged by Aldermen Scott Waguespack, 32nd, and Nicole Lee, 11th, and shepherded by panel chair Ald. Pat Dowell, 3rd, was a critical step in signaling to the broader world that Chicago recognizes it exists in a competitive landscape and isn't a progressive bubble unto itself.

A majority of the council has made it abundantly clear to Mayor Brandon Johnson that his proposal to revive the city's corporate head tax — a monthly tax on each worker employed in Chicago by large private-sector firms — is a non-starter. But with a year-end budget deadline looming, the opposition bloc looked to garner more support by making concessions to the mayor. They scrapped a proposed increase to the city's monthly trash-collection fee of \$9.50, and they allowed for a \$6 million increase in summer jobs for teens, a top priority for Johnson.

We'll state upfront that the document the committee produced and approved isn't perfect.

Chicago's garbage fee, for example, is far lower than nearly all peer cities and doesn't come close to covering the cost of the service; we believe a reasonable increase is more than warranted. As it stands, Chicagoans who live in multifamily housing must pay for private garbage collection and are subsidizing through their property taxes or rents their fellow Chicagoans who live in single-family homes or two- or three-flats.

For those, including the mayor, who derided the trash-fee increase as an attack on working people, we would encourage them that lots of poor and working residents of this city live in apartments and condos. And they are effectively paying twice over for trash services thanks to the refusal to allow for any fee increase — an argument Gate Plys so effectively made earlier this month in our pages.

We also have misgivings about opening the door to video wagering in bars, a major expansion of legal gambling that would affect lower- and middle-income Chicagoans far more than the tourists and conventioners who are the primary target of the Bally's casino now under construction at the former Chicago Tribune Freedom Center. The aldermanic opposition bloc projects \$7 million in net revenue from video terminals in bars in 2026, but far more than that in later years.

We think it makes more sense to modestly increase a highly subsidized garbage fee than it does to expand gambling so aggressively into the neighborhoods. But politics are what they are, and the demagoguery on the trash fee unfortunately has been effective.

It also was disappointing to see the lion's share of the record \$2.8 billion in new bonding authority the Johnson administration requested. The panel cut \$1 billion from \$2 billion the mayor's financial team wanted for money-saving refinancing. But it approved \$449 million to cover \$166 million in back pay owed to firefighters

South and West side neighborhoods. We met in March with representatives from Reclaiming Chicago working on solving this problem. They outlined their mission: To build modest single-family homes in neighborhoods such as Roseland, North Lawndale, Back of the Yards and Chicago Lawn and sell them at an affordable price to people with modest incomes who are prepared to become homeowners and invest in their neighborhoods. Back then, they'd already gotten off to a strong start, having raised money for construction from an assortment of big banks, foundations and other deep-pocketed contributors since 2018. They showed us photos of the very solid homes they're building and told

us stories about the people living in them who wouldn't otherwise have been able to realize the dream of homeownership. Their enthusiasm and clear vision made us feel hopeful then, and still does today.

This is a problem the private sector is better positioned to solve, in coordination with housing officials, of course. We much prefer Reclaiming Chicago's approach to some of the recent city-led affordable housing efforts. Consider the Fifth City Commons project, a brand new 43-unit development in East Garfield Park on the West Side that opened earlier this year. The \$38 million project cost amounted to an eye-popping \$884,000 per taxpayer-subsidized rental unit. As longtime affordable housing

developer and advocate David Doig claimed in a LinkedIn post, "That's more than it costs to build a luxury unit in Fulton Market or the Gold Coast."

Doig is also part of the Reclaiming Chicago effort which operates far more efficiently.

Chicago needs more housing, and it needs that housing to be affordable. The Chicago Prize investment in Reclaiming Chicago shows what's possible when private capital, local knowledge and public goals align.

\$10 million is enough money to have a substantial impact on an effort such as this, modest as it now may be. Yet more importantly, it will encourage investment by others and help write a blueprint for an idea worth expanding.



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

under a labor contract finalized earlier this year as well as more than \$280 million for current and future legal settlements — mainly for past police misconduct. And the panel endorsed another \$1.3 billion for future capital projects despite the fact that the city has \$2.4 billion in unused bond authority for infrastructure from past issuances. Ald. Bill Conway, 34th, vice chair of the Finance Committee, tried to eliminate that \$1.3 billion from the ordinance, but he was overruled by his fellow committee members.

Chief Financial Officer Jill Jaworski said that needed projects would be delayed if the council didn't vote on the new capital plan. But here's the thing: The city's credit rating is teetering; it may well be downgraded once this budget is finalized, especially with the council now appearing set on debt-financing operational costs — a major fiscal no-no for credit rating agencies. Now is the time to err on the side of caution,

not behave as if Chicago is in a business-as-usual situation vis-à-vis the bond markets. We're sure to have more to say on debt and the bond markets as the city looks to tap investors again early next year. Despite our misgivings, we believe the opposition alders, who have performed remarkably well in hashing together an alternative in the face of a mulish and unhelpful administration, deserve support from the full council as this budget makes its way through the process in the next few days. As Ald. Lee pointed out to the Finance Committee, the tax and fee increases in the alternative budget are overwhelmingly being levied on businesses rather than individuals — and that's without passage of the toxic head tax. Businesses are shouldering 84% of that load while residents are absorbing 16%.

For the sake of the city, the mayor ought to make this easier for all involved and declare he

will not veto this plan if it ends up being the will of the council majority, which it appears it will be.

After all, it's not just his future electoral prospects that are at stake in this moment. Chicago's budgetary circus slowly but surely is drawing unwanted notice around the country. Editorial boards in cities far away are pointing to our example as a cautionary tale. We are rapidly becoming the poster child for how not to govern a city.

Credit analysts, of course, also are lurking. "The level of brinkmanship we are seeing in Chicago is uncharacteristic of many other rated local governments," Michael Rinaldi of Fitch Ratings told Bloomberg News. In the cold-eyed world of municipal finance, cities don't want to be "uncharacteristic" in that sort of way.

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### This year's Chicago Prize selection highlights how private investment can build affordable housing

We love seeing the immense fiscal power of nongovernmental resources wielded for good in Chicago.

We've seen this many times recently, including \$100 million in collective donations from the business community to bolster public safety through community violence intervention. Now there's another moment to celebrate: a \$10 million investment, and that's the word, from a family foundation. It's aimed at expanding affordable homeownership in Chicago neighborhoods that need it most.

Chicago's problem with housing is that there simply isn't enough, especially when it comes to options ordinary people can actually manage to buy. We need to build affordable homes,

plain and simple. And we need to encourage homeownership, allowing people to build equity.

So Tuesday brought good news on all those fronts. The Pritzker Traubert Foundation announced that it has awarded its huge (\$10 million!) 2025 Chicago Prize to Reclaiming Chicago, a community-led coalition working to expand affordable homeownership on the South and West sides. The substantial investment will help finance new single-family and two-flat homes, beginning with a large-lot development in Chicago Lawn that is expected to deliver about 125 new affordable homes. Beyond that initial project, the funds then will see a revolving loan program designed to lower construction costs and speed development across four

South and West side neighborhoods. We met in March with representatives from Reclaiming Chicago working on solving this problem. They outlined their mission: To build modest single-family homes in neighborhoods such as Roseland, North Lawndale, Back of the Yards and Chicago Lawn and sell them at an affordable price to people with modest incomes who are prepared to become homeowners and invest in their neighborhoods. Back then, they'd already gotten off to a strong start, having raised money for construction from an assortment of big banks, foundations and other deep-pocketed contributors since 2018. They showed us photos of the very solid homes they're building and told

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#### ON THIS DAY 55 YEARS AGO THE POLISH RIOTS

The most serious rioting against the Communist government since the bread and freedom riots of 1956 has left six persons dead and several dozen wounded in street battles in three Polish cities on the Bay of Danzig. The disorders were triggered by government announcement that food and fuel prices will go up 20 per cent. A meat shortage was also a contributing factor.

Damage ran to millions of dollars as public buildings

were burned and cars, trucks and shops damaged or set afire. There was extensive looting, and chants were raised against Wladyslaw Gomulka, the Communist Party boss, and Communist officials in the three cities.

Fighting began Sunday when 600 students and workers engaged in a sitdown in the streets of Gdansk. The Polish students, unlike campus revolutionaries and other young activists here, have no illusions about Communism. They

do not see it as a salvationist cause ... They know it to be a repressive system, based on the guns of police, army and militia, and an economic failure.

The minority of American youth that looks to totalitarianism to produce the millennium would be obliged to revise its sights if it lived under the realities of Communism, as the youth of Eastern Europe has been obliged to do ...

Tribune editorial board, Dec. 17, 1970



## OPINION

# Chance the Rapper's CTA campaign is fun but won't soothe our fears



Laura Washington

The CTA has teamed up with famed Chicago musical artist Chance the Rapper as the agency urges us to "enjoy the ride."

That's the slogan for a new collaboration to promote the CTA.

It features two announcements by Chance that are playing at rail stations across the system. The recorded messages plug the CTA to the tune "Ride" from Chance's latest album.

As he reminisces in one greeting, "Growing up in Chicago on the South Side, I took the CTA Red Line from 79th almost every day," he said. "I won't ever stop loving the CTA, and I encourage you to keep supporting public transit and its workers. Be safe and just enjoy the ride!"

Acting CTA President Nora Leershen touted the collaboration as "a unique partnership between two Chicago icons — CTA and Chance — that allows us to celebrate the special meaning they both have for our great city."

Chance, an international celebrity and multiple Grammy winner, is a welcome evangelist for Chicago. I am delighted that he is assisting the CTA. I am also a native South Sider who grew up on the Red Line. I still take the CTA daily, sometimes several times a day.

So, as I slide into my seat on the "L," I could be jamming to his "Ride."

I may also have to jump out of my seat to keep from getting robbed or worse. Growing up, I was never nervous on the CTA. But in the wake of the pandemic-fueled disruption of the system, the ride can be nerve-racking.

Enjoy the ride? I regularly encounter passengers who are disruptive, aggressive or even violent.

In November, violent crimes on buses, platforms, stations and trains increased by 6.6% from the yearly average over the three prior years, ABC affiliate WLS-Ch. 7



A CTA Brown Line train leaves the Addison station on Dec. 14 in Chicago. ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Chicago reported.

"Over the past year and a half, there have been bullet holes in CTA bus windows, people standing with long guns on public transportation and weapons recovered," the station reported.

That's why the Donald Trump administration is right to call out Chicago's CTA safety issues.

On Dec. 8, Marc Molinaro, administrator of the Federal Transit Administration, wrote Mayor Brandon Johnson and Gov. JB Pritzker to demand that the CTA deliver a "verifiable security enhancement plan." The agency threatened to withhold federal funds from the CTA if it does not comply.

Molinaro highlighted the recent horrific attack on Bethany MaGee, which he said "reflects systemic failures in both leadership and accountability on all

levels."

Last month, MaGee was riding a Blue Line train when Lawrence Reed approached her, poured gasoline on her and set her on fire, according to the Chicago police and federal prosecutors. Reed, 50, who was arrested, "has violated the conditions of his home confinement and has previously been arrested 72 times," Block Club Chicago reported.

"Reporting to FTA shows CTA's violent crime rate is nearly four times the national average, with four homicides in the past 18 months," Molinaro wrote.

On Monday, the CTA wrote to ABC 7: "The Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) has submitted its response to the FTA Special Directive with the requested timeframe." The CTA has released no details. Johnson pledged to comply

with the federal request but said he is already working on the issue.

"As I've said repeatedly, we do have to look at what the security apparatus looks like for public transportation. (The Chicago Police Department) plays a role in that. The city Department of Public Health plays a role in that. All of us play a role in ensuring that CTA riders experience maximum safety," Johnson said in response to the letter.

He went on to attack the Trump administration, saying it "continues to politicize on what really could be addressed collectively."

On Tuesday, Pritzker signed a major transit funding bill passed by the Illinois legislature that includes a safety plan and the creation of a "sworn law enforcement officer crime prevention program" that will include participation of the Cook County sher-

iff's office, Chicago police and other local municipalities, ABC 7 reported. These politicians don't have to ride the CTA daily to get to work, school and the grocery store. Riders who depend on the system are at the mercy of people who are roaming the system in search of victims.

In one recorded message, Chance urges CTA passengers to "be safe."

Chance, my man, hip rap songs are a fun treat, but they won't soothe our fears. Let's hope the pressure from the feds will pump up the volume on safety and security on the CTA.

Laura Washington is a political commentator and longtime Chicago journalist. Her columns appear in the Tribune each Wednesday. Write to her at [LauraL.Washington@gmail.com](mailto:LauraL.Washington@gmail.com).

## The lawfare against New York Attorney General Letitia James isn't new. Both parties have used it

By John Soares

Proponents of democracy should be cheering a recent grand jury refusal to indict New York Attorney General Letitia James — the second grand jury in recent days to do so — after a federal judge dismissed an earlier case against her. Perhaps this and other embarrassing setbacks for Trump administration attempts at "lawfare," combined with the role Joe Biden-era lawfare played in fueling the president's political comeback, will convince both parties to abandon what James called "the weaponization of our justice system." Optimistic observers, in fact, might even imagine these events will convince the two parties to abandon lawfare altogether.

Despite these recent developments, though, there are two big reasons to worry. First, cases are still proceeding against other Donald Trump antagonists, headlined by former national security adviser John Bolton. Secondly, and even more problematic, since at least the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, something like lawfare has been disturbingly common. This lamentable reality is evident in Watergate, the Iran-Contra affair and the impeachment of Bill Clinton.

The Watergate scandal was not exactly lawfare as we discuss it today, because it involved actual crimes. Still, critics who denounced Nixon's "dirty tricks" typically ignored similar activities under his predecessors. During the administrations of Roosevelt, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, officials weaponized government agencies such as the IRS, FBI, CIA, Department of the Treasury or Department of Justice to bug, wiretap, surveil, harass or otherwise intimidate administration critics, including business groups, journalists and civil rights leaders. Among those



New York Attorney General Letitia James speaks after pleading not guilty outside the U.S. District Court on Oct. 24 in Norfolk, Virginia. JOHN CLARK/AP

targeted at some point during those years were the African American press, the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, the Congress of Racial Equality, Students for a Democratic Society, the "sugar lobby," Malcolm X, reporters from Newsweek and The New York Times, and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

Plus Richard Nixon. That's right: Nixon himself was targeted for the sorts of abuses that later led to his ouster. He was bugged and his taxes audited, the DOJ tried to conjure up criminal charges against him, and his mail was intercepted and read. This triggered no serious investigations, no Watergate-style scandals. Nixon might understandably have concluded the opportunity to harass political opponents was a perk that came with the presidency. Most alarming, in some

of the cases mentioned above, the abuses were technically legal because the people who should have been policing them had authorized them or carried them out.

The chief difference, then, between Nixon and those aforementioned predecessors was that he faced investigations they did not and was caught trying to obstruct them. In this way, Nixon's antagonists were unfair, yet they reaped a tremendous political payoff. Less than two years after Nixon's landslide reelection, he became the only U.S. president to resign. Three months later, Democrats gained a whopping 48 House seats, plus five in the Senate, in the 1974 congressional elections. And in 1976, largely because of Nixon's long shadow, Democrats claimed their only presidential election

victory between 1964 and 1992.

Similarly, the Iran-Contra scandal damaged Ronald Reagan politically. It did not drive him from office, but it reduced him, in the words of one sympathetic historian, to a "caretaker president" for the remainder of his term. The scandal arose from a scheme to fund so-called Contra guerrillas trying to overthrow Nicaragua's communist-led government while Congress prohibited U.S. aid to the Contras. After failed efforts at diplomacy with the Nicaraguan government, at the end of 1981, Reagan decided to support the Contras. During 1982, Congress imposed restrictions on that aid, then in 1984, it banned Contra aid for fiscal year 1985. Congress subsequently reversed course in 1985, voting to resume aid, then removing all restrictions in 1986, before the

scandal broke.

In denouncing Reagan, critics talked and acted as though that vote for the fiscal year 1985 was the only congressional action on Contra aid that counted. And this criminalization of policy differences not only damaged Reagan, the resulting scandal's impact lingered into 1992, when an independent counsel's highly politicized indictments, on the eve of George H.W. Bush's bid for reelection, helped defeat Reagan's former vice president.

But while lawfare worked for its practitioners against Nixon and Reagan, it boomeranged on Clinton's antagonists. During his presidency, the U.S. House approved articles of impeachment that charged him with perjury and obstruction of justice over his response to a lawsuit alleging sexual harassment. His defenders dismissed Clinton's problems as "just sex," as though his adultery was the issue and not the perjury and obstruction of justice. The implication, that perjury could be overlooked in sexual harassment cases, undermined sexual harassment law with consequences that only became clear after the #MeToo movement emerged, but in the short term, it worked for Clinton. The Senate acquitted him, and in 1998, his party lost no Senate seats and actually gained five in the House, an almost unheard-of success for the party of a second-term incumbent in midterm elections.

Lawfare, then, is undemocratic and can backfire, but it sometimes pays big political dividends. Hopefully, its recent failures, for both parties, will convince politicians, and the American people, to demand it be tossed on the scrap heap — immediately and forever.

John Soares teaches history at the University of Notre Dame. This essay reflects his opinion and not that of Notre Dame or any part of it.



## OPINION

# What Las Posadas has taught me about Christmas and community

By Anthony Pahnke

Marrying into a family of Mexican immigrants taught me new ways to practice my Catholic faith during the holidays. From honoring the Virgin de Guadalupe, to spending hours preparing tamales, these traditions differ from what I learned growing up in rural Wisconsin. But one tradition — the nine-day celebration of Las Posadas — stands out, principally for how it brings people together. Now, as our country finds itself divided on the subject of immigration, understanding this tradition offers a way to rethink the meaning of the holidays and appreciate those who have sacrificed so much to come here.

The four weeks preceding Christmas Day, as I learned in catechism, is Advent. During this time of preparation, we adorn our tables with wreaths, wear purple to signify royalty (as Christ is considered king) and do charitable acts such as food drives in our communities.

Practicing Las Posadas doesn't break from such traditions as much as deepen their meaning.

The word posada is Spanish for lodging. The tradition begins in how Spanish colonizers blended Mexico/Aztec rituals that celebrated the festival of the 15th month of their calendar, Panquetzaliztli, during the winter solstice in Mexico, to convert Indigenous people to Christianity. But what makes Las Posadas Christian is emphasizing the part from the Gospel of Luke 2:7 when we learn that Mary and Joseph were looking for a place to stay after registering to pay taxes in Bethlehem. In only that Gospel, do we find Mary and Joseph looking and failing to find lodging and ending up in a manger for the birth of Christ.

Practiced for more than 400 years wherever Latino Christians reside, Las Posadas includes over the course of the nine days before Christmas, daily celebrations of pinatas, food, and prayer. The prayers allude to how Mary



A manger scene is displayed at the International exhibition "100 Nativity Scenes in the Vatican," in St. Peter's Square on Dec. 8, which brings together works by numerous artisans depicting the Nativity. GREGORIO BORGIA/AP

and Joseph were traveling, seeking shelter and not finding it. In Minnesota, we took a small statue of the Mother Mary house to house over those nine days, praying together and then sharing a meal with different dishes that each family prepared.

But where most citizens center on the stability of the manger at the center of the Nativity scene when thinking of Christ's birth, being on the move and searching for lodging adds a different meaning to the Christmas holiday that immigrants embody.

On that meaning, I think of the people with whom I ate and prayed with over those nine

days. What brought us together was our faith and the importance of being with one another to practice it. Unlike me, many of them were like Mary and Joseph, searching for shelter and sanctuary, believing they had found it in the U.S. To celebrate, they created community with me, making Christmas real by sharing food, praying and singing and breaking the occasional pinata with candy, to ensure everyone, including children, had something to enjoy.

Centering the journey as much as the destination, Las Posadas is a tradition based on kindness and inclusion, sacrifice and community.

We are told repeatedly to find the true meaning of Christmas. Holiday movies remind us of love and family. We take work off to be with loved ones during the holiday season. We relax and watch football and basketball games.

But Christmas is more than a vacation, as celebrating Christ's birth is supposed to herald God becoming human for all. Regardless of the different faiths and their recognition of Christmas, or lack thereof, this idea of love without condition and universal community is something we can all aspire to.

Just as important, immigrants and Las Posadas show that the

point of the holiday season is in the intentional effort to be together. Preparation for Christ's arrival is not watching a movie or shopping for gifts, but in taking the time to build the meaningful bonds of community that immigrants, regardless of their status, around our country are doing now. Our country would be a better place if we all appreciated and understood this.

Anthony Pahnke is an associate professor of international relations at San Francisco State University and vice president of the Family Farm Defenders. He can be reached at [anthony.pahnke@sfsu.edu](mailto:anthony.pahnke@sfsu.edu).

## VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

### City Council, take action

I am writing to express my strong support for the homeowners, organizations and the more than 1,700 property owners involved in the class-action lawsuit filed regarding the Cook County tax scavenger sale.

This issue is critical given the testimony presented earlier this year to the City Council Committee on Housing and Real Estate, which highlighted the concerning fact that Black homeowners' accumulated real estate wealth in Chicago is effectively at zero. This staggering news echoes throughout the South Side and contributes to massive population decline, which is partially driven by scandalous real estate dealings.

The current application of the Cook County tax sales mirrors historical injustices, such as the repealed 2007 bill (HB4050) that resembled a 1830s Black-focused law. The tax sales effectively deny Black residents prolonged homeownership and the ability to build home equity by selling Black homes to flip companies at a significant discount. This practice is fundamentally wrong and causes significant economic harm.

I urge the City Council to flip the script and focus on immediate tax protections. Specifically, I request that the City Council:

1. Halt the Cook County payment deadline and extend it to mid-February.
2. Introduce an ordinance calling for a special review of the Cook County tax sale program through a joint committee.

Let us use the anniversary of the 13th Amendment (December 1865) as a moment to bless and protect homeowners and end this cycle of economic harm.

It's only right.  
— John Paul Jones, president, Sustainable Englewood Initiatives, and coordinator, CREATE Greater Englewood Together

### Protecting homeowners

Thank you for the excellent editorial about Cook County's convoluted and unfair property tax sales system that takes the homes, and all the equity in the homes, from owners who do not pay their property taxes in a timely way ("The chaotic situation involving property taxes and Cook County tax sales," Dec. 14). The editorial is correct that the system disproportionately impacts poor and minority homeowners and has the "historical stench of a racist method to strip equity from Black homeowners."

I would add that the procedures also disproportionately impact homeowners, most of whom are elderly, who have cognitive disabilities such as Alzheimer's disease. The patterns tend to be similar. The person has owned their home for decades, the home is completely or mostly paid off, and the home has substantial equity. Over the years, the homeowner has always paid their property taxes on time. Then Alzheimer's or other dementia sets in, and the homeowner misses a property tax payment. As a result, the person loses their longtime home with substantial equity over a minuscule unpaid property tax bill that the homeowner was not even able to understand.

Our office serves as guardian for about 600 mostly older people with cognitive disabilities. Unfortunately, we see this situation with frequency.

As the editorial points out, a federal court recently ruled this system unconstitutional. It is now up to Cook County



Residential homes in Chicago's South Side on Monday. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

and the General Assembly to enact reforms consistent with the court's ruling. We call on them to do so expeditiously and in a manner that protects the rights of poor and minority homeowners as well as those with cognitive disabilities.

— Charles P. Gilbert, Cook County public guardian, Chicago

### This senior is leaving

The editorial in Sunday's paper regarding the stratospheric increase in many property tax bills omits a few important facts and information. Although the Tribune Editorial Board correctly points out the faults with the tax sale system and the procedures involved, it somewhat contradicts its point with these statements: "The real value to the Illinois counties, of course, is not the tax sale but the threat of the tax sale that gets people to pay up. However this is resolved, some kind of consequence for not paying will have to be in place." The board is correct. This does seem like a policy right out of the 19th century. It is inequitable and onerous. So, who's side is the board on?

I have owned and lived in my home for over 30 years, and the tax has never decreased during any downturn. A more sensible alternative (although less lucrative for the county) would be to tax the property by an amount commensurate with the owner's ability to pay based on their income level.

My bill increased fourfold. I will most definitely have difficulty paying this as I am a senior on a fixed income. I will have to now sell my home and am considering moving out of the state altogether. This would be a win for the county because a new owner would be assessed at the increased value and be paying a higher tax. Maybe that is the county's ultimate objective as I'm sure the county could care less about one little old senior citizen. So, I'm leaving.

The board would do Tribune readership a great service by pressing for change and holding the spend-crazy city, county and state leaders accountable for their decisions in all matters financial. Maybe the board can help bring Illinois property owners out of the financially burdensome 19th century and force government to spend within its financial means!

— Joseph Talbott, Chicago

### ACA premium increases

With the U.S. Senate's rejection of legislation to extend the Affordable Care Act's enhanced premium tax credits, millions of Americans — including tens of thousands of Illinoisans — now face steep premium increases beginning Jan. 1.

For nearly 15 years, the ACA has helped address deep flaws in our fragmented health care system primarily by eliminating previous barriers to coverage for hundreds of thousands of Illinoisans, ensuring nearly 93% of our population now has health insurance, exceeding the national average.

Much of this progress has been driven by enhanced premium tax credits enacted under the American Rescue Plan Act. These credits made coverage affordable for middle-income households that previously struggled to pay for insurance. In Illinois, marketplace enrollment jumped by more than 32,000 when the credits were introduced, and overall enrollment has grown nearly 40% since 2021. This year, Illinois reported record enrollment, with nearly 4,660,000 people covered.

The numbers are stark. Without tax credits, the average monthly premium in Illinois is \$674. With them, nearly 90% of marketplace enrollees pay just \$143. That difference is the line between having coverage and going without. The Congressional Budget Office estimates more than 2 million Americans will lose insurance in 2026 if the credits expire. In Illinois, marketplace enrollment could drop by 30%.

This is not to suggest that the ACA is flawless public policy, but we cannot allow these gains to evaporate. Affordable care is not just about health; it is about economic stability, public health and fairness. Without insurance, patients delay care, chronic conditions worsen and costs rise for everyone.

As president of the Illinois Life & Health Insurance Council, I know there is much work ahead to address the existing affordability challenges of our health care system. Even with the extension of the enhanced premium tax credits, 2026 premiums are on the rise. However, reducing access to health insurance will make it more difficult for our industry, policymakers and our partners in the health care system to bend that cost curve moving forward.

Extending the enhanced premium tax credits is essential to preserving coverage gains, protecting families from unaffordable costs and ensuring Illinois continues to lead in expanding access to care. The Senate's vote was a setback, but it should not be the final word.

Preserving affordable coverage is not just good policy; it is a moral imperative.

— Laura Minzer, president, Illinois Life & Health Insurance Council, Springfield

**Note to readers:** We'd like to know your hopes for the new year. Please send us a letter, of no more than 400 words, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com) by Sunday, Dec. 28. Include your full name and city/town.

For online-exclusive letters, go to [www.chicagotribune.com/letters](http://www.chicagotribune.com/letters). Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to [letters@chicagotribune.com](mailto:letters@chicagotribune.com). Include your full name, address and phone number.



2

Putin wants to export chaos - but democracy can fight back

Rafael Behr

← Continued from front

Traditional methods of subversion are still practised. Reform UK's former leader in Wales, Nathan Gill, is now in jail after pleading guilty to bribery charges dating from his time as a Ukip and Brexit party MEP. He accepted tens of thousands of pounds in bribes to boost pro-Russian interests in the European parliament.

The case has prompted the government to set up an inquiry into foreign influence in UK politics. The terms of reference cover the post-Brexit landscape, not because Kremlin meddling is a recent phenomenon but because excavation of more historic interference - perhaps contaminating the democratic credentials of the Brexit campaign - is deemed too socially and politically fissile.

Back in 2016, the Kremlin obviously had a preference for Britain to harm itself and the EU by burning their mutually beneficial alliance, just as Putin had a clear interest in Donald Trump beating Hillary Clinton in that year's US presidential election.

But the method isn't confined to specific geopolitical goals. All divergence of opinion is ripe for radicalisation. A 2018 US senate committee investigation found that Russian troll accounts were posting messages in support of Black Lives Matter and cheering Confederate flags in different digital silos.

This is one of the challenges identified by Blaise Metreweli, the new director of MI6, in a speech earlier this week. She characterised the current national security environment as a "space between peace and war". In the eyes of Britain's spy chief, Putin is the pre-eminent menace. His method is "the export of chaos". That could involve needling incursions over Nato borders with drones, ships and submarines. It features cyber-attacks on infrastructure, arson and sabotage. Such provocations are alarming but counterproductive if they alert public opinion in the target country to a threat.

The more insidious method is pollution of democratic discourse. It blurs the distinction between knowing service to a hostile government and unwitting collaboration. Gill was greedy, but that doesn't mean he didn't believe arguments he was paid to make. Ideology is not the prime vector for sabotage of western democracies. Political commitment and activism can be less useful than their opposites - apathy and disengagement. The most toxic substance spewing from turbines of digital disinformation is cynicism. It is the view that politicians are as bad as each other and that none is trading in the truth. That is the path of despair down which democracy itself starts to be dismissed as a sham.

And that is where Putin's strategic calculation merges with his need to avenge Russia's humiliation in the 1990s. The lesson he observed in the chaotic Yeltsin years was that democracy was easily manipulated by elites to legitimise plunder. The liberal script was different from the one parroted by Communist party elites. The hypocrisy was the same.

The appeal in that analysis is that no Russians need be held responsible for their country's failure to thrive. They were tricked by their enemy and the great lie of political freedom. This is the deep well of resentment that fuels Putin's export of chaos. Sowing discord and shredding consensus is meant to rob western societies of the stability that was once their superpower. Then, in Putin's ultimate vindication, the moral lesson of the cold war will be inverted. Instead of authoritarian regimes crumbling because their captive subjects craved freedom, it will be demoralised citizens of liberal societies turning to strong leaders for order.

The realisation of that dark fantasy can seem grimly plausible, especially given the spectacle of Trump's misrule in the US. That has to be our spur to vigilance in Europe. In the end, dictators always underestimate the resilience of societies governed by law and institutions because they cannot believe in a system that is stronger than the rule of one man. They cannot cope with the most powerful truth of democracy - that it outlives every tyrant who tries to prove it is a lie.

# The Guardian

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'Comment is free... but facts are sacred' CP Scott

## Donald Trump lawsuit

### The BBC must defend itself against grievance politics with a purpose

On the day that the government launched a high-stakes consultation to consider fresh ways of funding the BBC in the digital era, the corporation could have done without another difficult news event of its own. Donald Trump's decision to follow through on threats to sue over the content of a Panorama programme broadcast in October 2024 may not have come as a surprise, given Mr Trump's litigious record in the United States. But it will add to the general air of beleaguement at the corporation and further embolden its domestic political enemies.

A terse BBC statement yesterday suggested that there would be no backing down in the face of White House bullying. That is the right response to absurd claims of "overwhelming financial and reputational harm" caused to the US president, and a fantastical request for damages amounting to \$10bn. The BBC has rightly apologised for the misleading splicing together of separate clips from Mr Trump's rabble-rousing speech on January 6 2020, prior to the violent storming of the US Capitol. A serious error of judgment was made in that editing process - though the House of Representatives January 6 committee concluded that Trump did use his speech to incite an insurrection. But the claim that a programme not broadcast in the US was part of a malicious plan to defame Mr Trump and subvert the democratic process ahead of last year's election is utterly specious.

The BBC is only the latest major media institution to be targeted by Mr Trump in a strategic campaign

of intimidation, although the first beyond US borders. There are already presidential lawsuits pending in relation to the New York Times (allegedly "a mouthpiece for the Radical Left Democratic Party") and the Wall Street Journal, which experts say Mr Trump has next to no chance of winning. Legal action and regulatory threats have also led to settlements in the television industry, successfully instilling a climate of fear and self-censorship.

That is the point, of course. Money is not the primary object of the exercise, though cash extracted from a case involving CBS News has reportedly been diverted towards the construction of Mr Trump's presidential library. The main goal is a cowed mediascape allowing the US president, and online outriders such as Elon Musk, to manipulate and control debate. For US corporate empires whose ambitions partly depend on the goodwill of Mr Trump's administration, the harassment can lead to invidious choices. But as an independent British broadcaster with its own global reputation to defend, the BBC is free to fight back.

In that battle, the corporation deserves more wholehearted backing from the prime minister, Sir Keir Starmer, than has hitherto been the case. The BBC remains a core component of the UK's democratic infrastructure, but Mr Trump's lawsuit is designed to undermine its prestige and sap its confidence, playing into the hands of his fellow travellers on the British radical right. The government should see that strategy for the attempted infringement on national sovereignty that it is. By relentlessly targeting the US "legacy" media and now the BBC, while cosplaying the role of victim, Mr Trump is seeking to galvanise his base and narrow the parameters of acceptable scrutiny and judgment. Auntie is not a menace to the functioning of democracy. But he is.

## NHS dental care

### Contract tweaks won't stop the rot. Dentistry needs radical surgery

If changes to the NHS dental contract in England result in fewer people being left to suffer with complex problems because they cannot get treatment, that will be a big gain. Sore teeth and gums are debilitating, and dentistry ought not to be out of reach for anyone who needs it.

The decision to prioritise complex cases, as well as the lack of urgent care in some places, has been taken following a consultation that highlighted these two issues. From next April, the NHS payment system will alter so that patients can book a package rather than a series of individual appointments if they need to be seen more than once. Dentists will be incentivised to offer more slots to those needing urgent treatment for issues including severe pain and infections.

But this week's announcement is not, and should not be mistaken for, a solution to all England's problems with dentists (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all face similar challenges with their NHS dental workforces - including acute shortages in particular places - but as health is devolved the changes apply only in England). The dry remark made by Shiv Pabary, the chair of the British Dental Association's general dental practice committee, that the changes are the "biggest tweaks this failed contract has seen in its history", was apt. The new fee structure announced by the health minister, Stephen Kinnock, is a big tweak to the existing system. But it is still a tweak, and not the overhaul that most experts agree is needed.

The NHS dental contract introduced in 2006 marked a radical break with what went before. People lost the right to register with a dentist in the same way that they register with a GP, who then acts as a gateway to other treatments and who receives a payment for each patient on their list. Instead, dentists began to be paid per "unit of activity". Very soon, problems with this arrangement emerged and were pointed out by the health select committee and others. It is disturbing to realise that many of the difficulties noted then are the same ones described now, in particular the lack of access to dentists for poor people in poor places.

The situation has in some respects acutely worsened. Calls about dental issues to the NHS's non-emergency 111 number rose by 20% between July and September compared with the same period in 2024. A&E attendances jumped by nearly 45% in four years - from 81,773 in 2019-20 to 117,977 in 2023-24. A new report by the patient watchdog includes shocking case histories, including people pulling out their own teeth.

Areas including the east of England face chronic shortages, and "golden hellos" for dentists in underserved locations have had limited success. Efforts to reduce the prevalence of tooth decay in young children, and to tackle dental health inequality, have stalled - though Labour deserves credit for the decision to introduce supervised toothbrushing in schools. This hands-on measure ought to make a difference.

A new contract is promised by the end of this parliament. Ministers should go further with a pledge to restore the right to register, ensuring universal access. They must also explain how this week's contract announcement relates to an existing plan to boost the number of urgent appointments by 700,000 - and set out a timeline so that the public knows what to expect and progress can be checked.





**If he rules out closer EU ties, he allows rivals to occupy the space where most Labour MPs, members and voters are to be found**

Although Nick Thomas-Symonds, the minister in charge of EU policy, who is now attending every cabinet meeting, insists the red lines are still in place, there are ways these could be bypassed. One idea would be to announce the start of negotiations now on a much bolder deal, for inclusion in the next manifesto, with implementation only if Labour won a fresh mandate.

Yet Starmer has most recently been damping it all down again by warning that a return to a European customs area would “unravel” the trade pacts with the US, which he regards as signature achievements of his premiership.

My understanding is that the PM’s scepticism goes still deeper, and is rooted in three further factors. First, he thinks any customs union agreement has been made significantly more difficult because his ministers are busily de-aligning from European rules across a range of policy areas, including the environment. Second, the exorbitant price set for the UK to join the EU’s new defence fund and the subsequent collapse in talks has convinced UK negotiators that former EU partners are less interested in cutting special deals with Britain than in demonstrating that Brexit does not work. Lastly, the new US national security strategy is seen by some influential figures in Downing Street as a reason for Britain to keep its distance from the EU. I’m told the government is worried that aligning closer with Europe would destabilise geopolitics further by risking fragile US military support for Ukraine, Nato and much more besides.

**If Starmer won’t go further on Europe, Labour challengers will**

**Tom Baldwin**



Seven years ago, it took just eight words to electrify the Labour conference and show the party was changing. Keir Starmer wasn’t really accustomed to his speeches having such an effect. All he had said was: “Nobody is ruling out remain as an option.” But context is everything. Departing from his agreed text in this way was always going to be seen as laying down the gauntlet to Jeremy Corbyn, who was trying to prioritise leave supporters in working-class seats. This grey-suited shadow Brexit secretary was transformed – if only for a while – into a risk-taker who would stand up for most Labour MPs, members and voters against a leader he would later replace.

Since then, much has happened, not least to Starmer himself. One of his first acts after taking over from Corbyn in 2020 was to declare that the Brexit issue had been settled by the previous year’s general election. And, at the last one, he repeatedly emphasised manifesto “red line” commitments that forbade re-entry into the EU, the single market or a customs union. Like his predecessor, his strategy has been to pursue Brexit-y voters in key seats.

However, it’s now the prime minister’s turn to be an embattled Labour leader. And, if Europe is no longer the boiling pot of British politics, a lid that has been kept tightly sealed for five years is beginning to rattle once more. Both Starmer and Rachel Reeves have ramped up the rhetoric about the devastation that leaving the EU has caused to the UK’s economy. It’s a useful stick with which to beat Nigel Farage. And yet the scale of the damage, which by some estimates has left Britain with an economy that is between 6% and 8% smaller than if it were still in the EU, towers over the micro-mitigation so far offered by the government. Starmer’s so-called re-set deal agreed with Brussels last summer offers economic benefits measured in low decimal points. The deputy prime minister, David Lammy, muses openly about the “self-evident” benefits of being in a customs union with the EU, while a dozen Labour MPs, including the chair of the Treasury select committee, last week voted for a Liberal Democrat motion on joining one.

*Keir Starmer, then shadow Brexit secretary, speaks at the 2018 Labour conference in Liverpool*

PHOTOGRAPH: PETER BYRNE/PA WIRE

It remains to be seen whether this position can hold if Trump really *does* seek to export Maga ideology to Britain at a time when Starmer has promised Labour will throw “everything we have” into the fight against rightwing populism. And perhaps, says one source close to him, a more reasonable US president will be in the White House by the time of the next general election. Given the feeble state of Westminster politics, it must be acknowledged there might be a new Labour prime minister too.

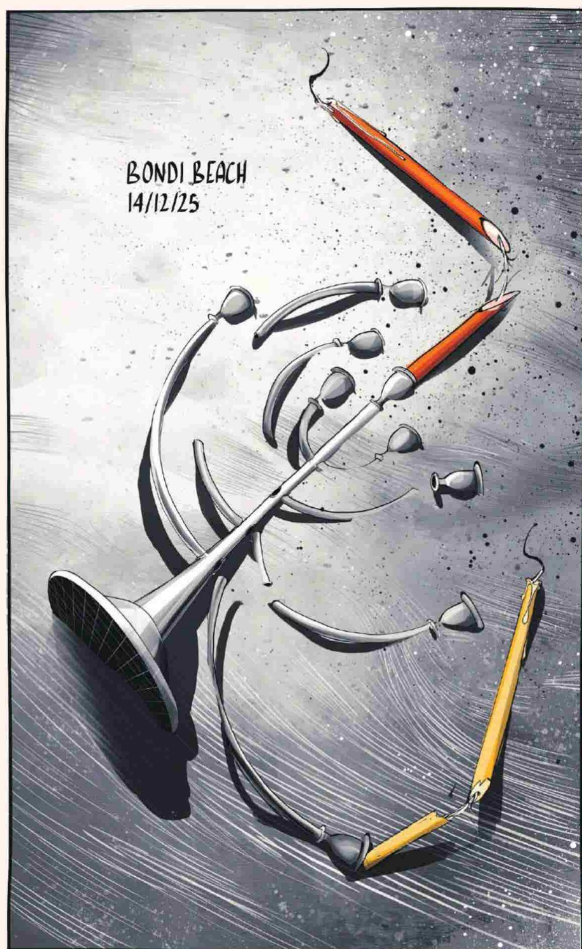
All of which brings us back to 2018. Starmer has always said his speech to the party conference was not a pitch for the leadership but merely an attempt to keep open the “option” of remain being on the ballot paper in a new referendum. Indeed, in those days, Starmer still favoured a “bespoke customs union deal” of the kind he now appears to be opposing.

But it’s not been lost on Downing Street that Wes Streeting is among a clutch of cabinet ministers letting it be known they want to go further on Europe. Aides to Angela Rayner insist she won’t discuss her position on a customs union as it would only “escalate unhelpful speculation”. The danger is obvious. If Starmer rules out more meaningful steps towards a close relationship with the EU, he allows rivals to occupy the space where the overwhelming majority of Labour MPs, members and voters are to be found.

It happens to be someone who both wants him to survive and believes he can do so. But it would be prudent of him to remember the impact just a few words had for him seven years ago. There are options for a big offer on Europe that the prime minister should not “rule out”; he should prise them open himself, before someone else makes them his – or her – own.

\* **Tom Baldwin** is a former senior adviser to the Labour party. He is the author of *Keir Starmer: The Biography*





## An 'ozone layer' moment for methane limits

**Mia Mottley**



**T**he timing is brutal. Just as the world celebrates the 10th anniversary of the adoption of the Paris climate agreement this month, new evidence shows that the world is crashing through the main defence that was constructed against climate catastrophe. The three-year temperature average is - for the first time - set to exceed the Paris guardrail of 1.5C above preindustrial levels. According to the Copernicus Climate Change Service, 2025 will join 2023 and 2024 as the three warmest since the Industrial Revolution.

As temperatures continue to rise - including in the oceans, where the extra heat fuels more powerful hurricanes - far greater catastrophes lie ahead as

feedback loops push the planet past irreversible tipping points. We have already passed our first tipping point, the progressive loss of warm-water coral reefs, on which nearly a billion people and a quarter of marine life depend; a development particularly relevant to island countries like Barbados. We are on the brink of several more, including the death of the Amazon rainforest, the collapse of key ocean currents, and the loss of ice sheets leading to metres of sea-level rise.

Cutting methane emissions is the fastest and simplest way to slow near-term warming and prevent triggering more tipping points. We must also reduce carbon-dioxide emissions as quickly as possible, although much of the impact on climate will take effect in the medium to long term. In contrast, we could avoid up to nearly 0.3C of warming by the 2040s by eliminating the easily avoidable methane emissions, starting with those of the oil and gas sector.

The European Commission helped launch the global methane pledge at Glasgow's Cop26 in 2021, where today it and 159 other countries are supporting emission cuts of 30% by 2030 from 2020 levels. However, this is voluntary. The urgency of the climate demands mandatory measures. It is time for a binding agreement for methane, starting in the oil and gas sector. Other leaders have joined this call, including Wesley Simina, president of the Federated States of Micronesia, and Feleti Teo, prime minister of Tuvalu. The French president, Emmanuel Macron, also voiced support for a binding framework and called for a global alliance dedicated to action on methane.

Despite many past promises and pledges, methane emissions from the energy sector continue to grow, making a binding agreement essential. Many of the pieces for an agreement are moving into place. Companies representing nearly 40% of global oil and gas production promised at Cop28 in 2023 to ban

routine gas flaring by 2030 and limit leaks to "near zero" by 2030. They include 34 national oil companies, suggesting that their governments should be ready to join an agreement that ensures their promises are honoured. The binding EU methane regulation bans flaring - and soon will ban leaks.

The Brazilian president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, and leaders of more than 80 other countries will be developing a roadmap to phase out fossil fuels, which should have as a first step eliminating methane waste through a binding agreement among willing nations.

The Montreal protocol, signed in 1987, can provide the inspiration. Besides improving the protective ozone layer, that agreement has done more than any other to combat the climate crisis, mainly because the ozone-depleting chemicals it reduces are also powerful warmers. The protocol is on course to avoid 2.5C of warming by the end of the century, a massive contribution. It was negotiated by a small coalition of willing countries, and concluded in less than a year after formal diplomatic negotiations opened.

The next step is to convene willing nations to develop a roadmap in 2026 for the oil and gas industry. An ambitious timeline would be to start negotiations among this coalition of the willing in early 2027, and adopt an agreement as soon as possible thereafter. A legally binding methane agreement for the oil and gas sector can prevent energy waste, while buying time over the next 15 to 20 years to build resilience as research to scale up decarbonising technologies to commercial level builds pace. This will give countries in the south with oil and gas assets the opportunity to use the one thing that can finance their way to net zero.

Preventing methane energy waste makes sense for industry, and it makes sense for people and the planet. As Aristotle taught us, waste is a form of injustice. Preventing it is not too much to ask.

\*  
**Mia Mottley**  
is the prime  
minister of  
Barbados



## The FT View



## Fifa scores an own goal with its World Cup ticket prices

**The tournament in North America is turning into an elitist spectacle**

Fifa's decision to expand the men's World Cup from 32 to 48 teams for next summer's finals across the US, Canada and Mexico was pitched by its president Gianni Infantino as an opportunity for the beautiful game truly to live up to its international brand. But after football's governing body opened its main ticket ballot last week and revealed its pricing strategy, this tournament is starting to resemble a premium spectacle for those with deep pockets, not a shared global festival open to all.

Tickets are priced higher than the indicative ranges given in the host nations' original bid. General admission tickets for the group stage — many costing hundreds of dollars — are up to three times more expensive than in the previous World Cup in Qatar in 2022. Pricing

for the initial games is based on the perceived popularity of the fixture, a departure from recent tournaments that used flat rates. The cheapest ticket banding also accounts for only a sliver of some stadium allocations.

Fifa notified member associations last week that the cheapest final tickets would start at \$4,195. Football Supporters Europe, a fan group, has estimated that a fan would need to spend at least \$6,900 on tickets to follow their team from the opening game to the final — almost five times the cost at the last tournament. Fifa will also operate a resale platform, taking a 15 per cent cut from both buyer and seller.

Fan groups are understandably outraged. Ticket costs come before factoring in the cost of flying to, and between, 16 host cities across the North American continent, as well as food and accommodation. US President Donald Trump's proposal to require tourists to disclose five years of social media history adds further concern.

If expanding the tournament was meant to broaden football's global reach, pricing many fans out undermines that goal. This World Cup will be the first for nations including Cape Verde and Curaçao. Haiti has qualified for only the second time. Fans from such countries were always going to struggle to attend the tournament, but tickets to attend all group stage matches could now cost multiples of their monthly salary. Supporters from other countries also say they will stay at home.

Fifa's pricing will hinder its efforts, too, to grow the sport's appeal in the US. If there are fewer international travellers, that will dim the festive, global atmosphere that has long enriched on-field entertainment. High prices will also squeeze and potentially deter households that are already struggling with America's high cost of living.

Still, this World Cup is shaping up to be a cash cow for Fifa. Its platform received 5m ticket requests in the first 24 hours of the open ballot that began

**If expanding the contest was meant to broaden football's global reach, pricing many fans out undermines that aim**

last Thursday. The Kylian Mbappé or England's Harry Kane is indeed enormous in the wealthy US market, many will pay a premium to be part of the spectacle. The expanded format also guarantees higher ticket and TV revenues. The Zurich-based body projects a record \$1.5bn in revenue in the four-year cycle ending in 2026 — up from the \$7.6bn of the Qatar cycle.

Supporters may feel Fifa is profiting at their expense. A new, limited entry tier announced yesterday for cheap tickets priced at \$60 suggests Fifa is not ignoring the complaints. The non-profit global governing body will also argue that higher revenues can be reinvested into grassroots football. But money alone cannot grow the game. Fairer ticket prices would enable a broader range of fans to experience the World Cup first-hand, creating memories that deepen loyalty and widen appeal. For a sport that prides itself on being global, access is an investment too.

ft.com/opinion

## Opinion Science

## What happens if AI data centres move to space?

Andy Carter



Anjana Ahuja

Ever there was proof that the race to feed the AI boom has become detached from reality, it came in a recent Google announcement that it would build a prototype solar-powered data centre in space.

Data centres are power-guzzling physical facilities that contain computing infrastructure; planning hurdles, local opposition and energy demands are now putting limits on how far and fast AI can scale. The idea of Project Suncatcher is to shift that infrastructure, and its associated headaches, into space.

Queries to AI models like Gemini would be processed there and the answers beamed back to Earth. The data centre would not be an orbiting moon but a flock of 81 solar-powered satellites loaded with AI chips, flying and processing in unison.

**Astronomers fear more satellites will clutter the skies, hampering their observations**

Google will work with satellite company Planet to send two satellites into low Earth orbit in 2027.

This would be a cosmic challenge — but while orbiting data centres minimise the need for planetary land and water, they promise problems of their own. Astronomers fear more satellite constellations will further clutter the skies, hampering scientific observations. Mass launches into crowded orbits risk creating space debris that could threaten vital services such as weather and climate monitoring.

But we should also stop for a moment to consider this: a technology, namely AI, being pushed by a handful of companies is creating an energy demand that, by the industry's own estimates, cannot be met within planetary boundaries. For many, that is the very definition of unsustainable. The scheme also exposes the lack of effective governance when it comes to space, a commons that has become the (almost) rule-free playground of tech titans such as Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk but in real life belongs to us all.

According to the preprint published by Google researchers last month, the satellites would travel in a Sun-synchronous orbit around 650km above the Earth. That tracking of the Sun means near-constant solar power for the AI payload but also thrusts the sat-

ellites into the single most congested route in low Earth orbit, according to Michigan university space scientist Mojtaba Akhavan-Tafii.

The satellites would be spaced just 100m to 200m apart, allowing them to talk to each other but perilously close should their paths wobble due to buffeting from air particles and space weather. At that proximity, Akhavan-Tafii explained in a recent article, "the margin for error [in orbital navigation] evaporates. A single impact could not only destroy one satellite but send it blasting into its neighbours, triggering a cascade that could wipe out the entire cluster and randomly scatter millions of new pieces of debris into an orbit that is already a minefield."

The European Space Agency notes that debris particles over 1cm in size can cause catastrophic damage — and there are already more than 1.2m of them. As orbital traffic soars, the probability of the Kessler effect — flying debris that sparks a chain reaction of other collisions and break-ups, rendering those orbits unusable — also rises.

There are nearly 16,000 satellites already whizzing around the Earth. Of those, close to 9,000 belong to Musk's Starlink network, with the company's plans for 15,000 new ones under review by the Federal Communications Commission. The reflective satellites can be seen in optical images, though the company seems willing to address the issue; stray Starlink radio emissions are showing up in frequent-flyer lists to be protected for radio astronomy.

The Google preprint mentions that the AI chips will be exposed to radiation that can degrade electronics and corrupt data, but rather sketches over the issues of remote satellite maintenance and how to extract defunct or malfunctioning hardware.

Microsoft can offer one reality check on putting data centres in remote locations: it sank an underwater data centre off the coast of Scotland in 2018 but that effort, called Project Natick, has reportedly ended and the company is quoted as having no further subsea ambitions. Achieving the same in space would be many times harder: even as launches get cheaper, the unit costs of power in space and on land seem roughly comparable. When approached for comment, Google referred to the preprint and an associated blog summarising its position.

One might be tempted, fairly or not, to interpret the ambitious corporate effort to yoke infinite solar power to the seemingly infinite demand for compute, as a signal to investors that AI is infinitely scalable. It is also quite the metaphor for an industry that is flying ever closer to the Sun.

The writer is a science commentator

## Letters

## The EU's trailblazing investment funds regime

The authors of "Europe needs a Schengen for its securities sector" (Letters, December 15) are right. But they ignore one of the most successful financial sector directives, the directive on UCITS or Undertakings for Collective Investment in Transferable Securities. Originally adopted in 1985 and revised in 2009, it sets rules for investment funds (UCITS) that allow them to be sold freely across the EU and EEA using a single authorisation, essentially creating a "passport" for these funds to operate cross-border, easily and efficiently.

## Steps the UK must take to improve its energy system

Your analysis of the UK Budget's energy price cut ("The UK energy price reduction will not stop bills from rising", Lex, December 2) highlights a deeper problem driving Britain's high electricity prices: policymakers remain focused on how to distribute the costs of the energy transition, rather than ensuring that all households can benefit from it.

Millions of UK homes are now equipped with heat pumps, electric vehicle chargers, batteries and other devices capable of reducing peak demand, storing excess renewable generation and lowering system costs. Yet the energy market still treats households as passive consumers, meaning the advantages of these technologies accrue only to those who can afford them upfront, while their broader system value goes untapped.

Unless this changes, the UK risks creating a two-tier energy system in which wealthier households reap the benefits of electrified technologies, while everyone else subsidises a transition they are unable to fully participate in.

The government must prioritise the co-ordination and integration of energy devices in homes and businesses if it wants to unlock a distributed energy system that makes better use of renewable power.

Real progress lies not just in shifting costs, but in enabling households to act as active contributors to a smarter, more efficient energy system.

**Chris Bernkopf**  
Chief Executive and Co-founder, Podero, London EC3, UK

## Brussels is creating a green spaghetti bowl of regulation

We agree with many of the points included in your article on the backfiring of the "Brussels effect" across a spectrum of rules and new regulations, and its inability to influence trading partners (Report, December 15). However, we would like to emphasise how this reflects regulatory over-reach, combined with value-chain ignorance, as well as increased industrial protectionism.

The postponement of the EU's deforestation regulation (EUDR), and stakeholders' lack of preparedness to comply, demonstrates a profound disconnect regarding the complexity of global agricultural production systems and value chain organisation. For example, most coffee production in Ethiopia — the birthplace of coffee — is grown on farms of less than 0.5 hectares, outside the "forest" definition and therefore not subject to the full EUDR requirements.

However, because the auction system aggregates all coffee for purchase, compliance will still be required: it is

impossible to differentiate coffee grown from less than, or more than, 0.5ha, with significant investments that systems cannot, and should not, absorb.

It is right to emphasise the role of international business and the EU's ability to "hold sway". A more positive picture is painted in your article regarding the influence of the EU's carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) on third-party country carbon pricing schemes (even though the ways and means through which carbon prices paid in third-party countries will be deducted remain to be seen).

However, the EU's global climate leadership now sits uneasily alongside growing industrial protection in strategic sectors — reducing the "sway" of CBAM and incentives for global decarbonisation.

Steel is a case in point: the culmination of a set of proposed measures in the "steel and metal action plan" launched this year (eg the proposed permanent steel safeguard, ongoing development of a lead market and low-carbon steel standards, eco-design and performance requirements) all risk a new green spaghetti bowl of overlapping rules and incredible compliance challenges.

The impact looks set to be an EU market semi-closed to steel imports from certain countries, reducing incentives for third-country producers under CBAM to invest in cleaner production.

Moreover, the envisioned additional export restrictions on scrap steel — a low-hanging fruit to decarbonise steel — could stall decarbonisation efforts further by trading partners. It is hard to justify these measures, by any standard of sustainability or enlightened regulation.

**Jodie Keane**  
Principal Research Fellow, ODI Global, London SW1, UK

**Collette van der Van**  
Director, Tulip Consulting, Geneva Switzerland

## Singapore's disciplined balance-sheet management

Thank you for your excellent Big Read on Singapore which asked the question: are the city state's investment giants being left behind (December 5)?

The need for fiscal space is rising globally, driven by ageing populations, climate pressures and geopolitical uncertainty. But Singapore shows what disciplined balance-sheet management can deliver. Despite lacking natural resources and carrying a gross debt-to-GDP ratio higher than that of many advanced economies, such as France and Italy, it remains one of the few sovereigns with a triple A rating. Markets and rating agencies understand why: Singapore's liabilities are backed by substantial, transparently valued public assets, managed at arm's length by institutions with long records of strong performance.

This approach has been central to the country's rapid transition from "developing" to "developed" within a generation. Its strong net worth position is no accident, but the product of rigorous valuation, robust governance, and an insistence on managing the whole of the public balance sheet — not just the flow of annual budgets.

If governments are serious about restoring fiscal resilience and supporting long-term prosperity, they must treat public-sector net worth as a strategic asset. Better balance-sheet management is not a technical nicety; it is one of the most powerful and underused tools available to revitalize an economy.

**Dag Dettner**  
Stockholm, Sweden

## Ministers misdiagnose rise in Neets as a laziness issue

Your report on Labour's welfare plans ("Young people who refuse job offer at risk of losing benefits", Report, December 8) rests on the assumption that young people simply need a push back into work. But treating the rise in those not in education, employment or training (Neets) as a laziness problem will only create churn.

Soaring housing costs that make starter wages almost meaningless, a real decline in entry-level opportunities and fading confidence in work as a social elevator for what is meant to be the most educated generation in UK history explain far more about disengagement than any lack of effort. Forcing Gen-Z Neets into 25-hour subsidised roles will not motivate employers or governments to address the root causes.

A policy built on the wrong diagnosis risks pushing more young people away from work rather than into it.

**Samuel Ducrey**  
UCL Economics Student, London NW1, UK

## It doesn't feel like business rates are at a 34-year low

Ashley Armstrong and Jim Pickard correctly note that chancellor of the exchequer Rachel Reeves recently claimed that business tax rates were at their lowest level since 1991 ("Business rates increase comes as a bitter blow for struggling pub sector", Report, December 16).

They also report that the government is "protecting" businesses via transitional relief to cap annual increases.

This raises a glaring question: if taxes are truly at a 34-year low, why is a cap on annual increases even necessary?

To put these claims into perspective: our business faces a 62 per cent increase in business rates in 2026, compared with 2025.

While transitional relief may spread this blow over three years, the end result remains the same.

For those of us on the ground, the claim of "lowest rates since 1991" feels entirely disconnected from the reality of our balance sheets.

**Christian Oddono**  
Managing Director, Oddono's Gelati Taliani, London SW19, UK

## My philosophy tutor had little time for superstition

Jemima Kelly certainly makes some valid points in her piece on Elon Musk's attempt to create an alternative to Wikipedia, but I do not agree with the chain of reasoning for all that she says ("Musk's Grokopedia is a major own goal", Opinion, November 5).

She asks whether Musk is right to assert that Wikipedia has a liberal or left-leaning bias and uses the "Covid-19 lab leak theory" entry as an example.

Apparently, she considers it significant that "two-thirds of Americans in a 2023 study by YouGov and The Economist said they believed the virus originated in a Chinese laboratory and not, as originally thought, a wet market".

To be frank, I have no idea how Covid-19 originated, but I do know that following the views of two-thirds of the public will not help me get any nearer the truth.

People believe many things, some of which are valid and some of which are not. In this particular instance, it would be important to follow the facts and not be swayed by mere opinions.

As my old philosophy tutor sarcastically put it when dismissing the popularity of superstition: "A million flies eat shit. It must be good!"

**Luke Powell**  
Charing, Kent, UK

## Full metal dust jacket

I enjoyed your columnist Janan Ganesi's analysis relating Samuel Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilisations ("The clash within civilisations", Opinion, December 11).

It reminded me of Tarky All's *The Clash of Fundamentalisms*, which played on the title of Huntington's book and which he wrote after 9/11.

The book's dust jacket had a clean shaven Osama bin Laden dressed in a suit behind the US president's lectern and George W Bush with a beard and a turban in Taliban garb.

What Ganesi fails to consider is that wars within "civilisations" and between civilisations have always been about power, land and resources often dressed up as ideological conflict.

**Edgar Kitchin**  
Consultant Nephrologist and Honorary Senior Lecturer (NHS Grampian), University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

Email: letters.editor@ft.com

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# Opinion

## We urgently need to rebalance EU-China relations

**Emmanuel Macron**

China's trade surplus with the rest of the world now stands at a whopping \$1tn. Its surplus with the EU has almost doubled to €300bn in 10 years. The combination of US tariffs and subdued domestic consumption means Chinese exports are now flooding into Europe. This is not sustainable – either for Europe or China.

However, placing tariffs and quotas on Chinese imports would be an unco-operative answer. We must acknowledge that these imbalances are both the result of weak EU productivity and China's policy of export-driven growth. Continuing in this direction runs the

risk of a dire trade dispute but both China and the EU have the means to reverse the imbalances. Strengthening the single market and unleashing European savings would spur innovation and growth on the continent. Levelling the playing field for investment across the two regions would raise the share of domestic demand as a source of growth.

On the EU side, the first thing we must do is deliver on a new economic agenda based on competitiveness, innovation and protection.

To increase competitiveness, Europe needs to complete its internal market in the energy, health and digital sectors, as well as investing massively in innovation, disruptive research and technologies in industries with high growth potential. De-risking in all critical material, physical and digital technologies should be part of that agenda, too.

We also need to make it easier for companies to scale up and compete with

their global peers. We should not be ashamed of a "European preference" as long as it means supporting strategic production – in automotive, energy, healthcare and tech – within our own borders. Protection against unfair competition is the foundation of resilience.

We must not be naive: a credible protection strategy requires that we have the means to defend ourselves against those who break the rules. That is why we have a range of trade protection tools, including tariffs and anti-coercion measures. No one should be in any doubt about our willingness to use them.

Second, in order to finance the investment we need, Europe must leverage its pool of around €30tn in savings. Each year €300bn is invested abroad. It is time we Europeans took the risk of investing in our own companies.

Regulation simplification, securitisation and unified supervision will free much needed capital. Implementing the Savings and Investments Union will ensure European savings circulate freely to finance innovation and growth. Europe should also seek to reinforce the international role of the euro through the development of euro stablecoins and the introduction of a digital euro, as well as the creation of safe and liquid assets to finance defence and technologies. Finally, European competitiveness should not be a casualty of dollar and renminbi depreciation.

Third, China must address its internal imbalances. A more favourable fiscal policy, aimed at reducing savings and

promoting domestic consumption and the development of a service economy, are essential for its long-term growth.

Fourth, rebalancing foreign direct investment flows is essential. China has long benefited from European FDI and co-operation, including on technology. The EU has invested close to €240bn in China while China has invested less than €65bn in the EU. Today, it leads in energy transition and clean mobility technologies, while Europe continues to lead in many service sectors. An optimal framework for our two regions is a co-operative one. The EU must stay open for China to invest in the sectors where it is a leader, provided the Chinese help generate employment and innovation and share technology. At the same time, Europe's service industry must continue to invest and develop in the Chinese market.

During my last trip to China, I made it clear that either we rebalance economic

relations co-operatively – engaging China, the US and EU in a genuine partnership – or Europe will have no choice but to adopt more protectionist measures. I much prefer co-operation, but will argue for using the latter if need be.

I am, however, convinced that by genuinely taking into account each other's needs and interests, we can establish an international macroeconomic agenda that will benefit us all. That is why strengthening EU competitiveness, innovation and protection is so urgent. This also implies defending EU regulatory sovereignty, including with regard to the US.

Resolving global imbalances will be at the heart of the G7 French presidency agenda next year. Major and emerging economies alike will be invited to join forces. For this rebalancing to succeed for all, we need immediate and co-ordinated action.

The writer is president of France

# Trump's war on Europe

**Martin Wolf Economics**

US foreign policy now aims to help rightwing nationalists into power across the continent



We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and success of liberty." Thus, in his inaugural address of January 20 1961, did President John F Kennedy declare the aims of his administration. It was the height of the cold war. For the inhabitants of a divided Europe, the speech was electrifying. In retrospect, this vaulting ambition led to the over-reach of the Vietnam war. But it was also an indication of an ennobling idea – that of a superpower with a moral purpose. Despite all the failures, people continued to believe in its purpose: in contrast to the Nazis and communists, the US believed in freedom and democracy.

For no people has this commitment been more significant than Europeans. Ultimately, it led to the collapse of the Soviet empire, the liberation of central and eastern Europe and a new era of unification, peace and prosperity. As so often in history, hopes have been disappointed. They have been disappointed in the rise of xenophobic and anti-democratic forces inside Europe, by the resurgence of an authoritarian, revanchist and bellicose Russia, and by the seething hostility to the core ideas of contemporary Europe from the second administration of Donald Trump.

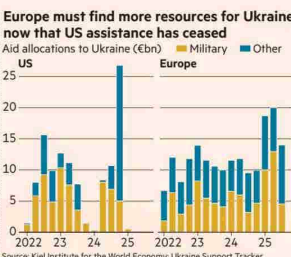
The new National Security Strategy of the United States of America has many strange features. But the strangest, and for Europeans the most disturbing, is

that they alone are now seen as the only ideological enemies of the US. In the rest of the document, interests are seen as merely material rather than ideological. Threats to democracy and freedom now come only from their opponents within the US and its closest allies.

Thus, it asserts, that the powers of the US government must never be "abused... under the guise of... 'protecting our democracy'". Just below (and not by accident) it asserts: "We will oppose elite-driven, anti-democratic restrictions on core liberties in Europe, the Anglosphere, and the rest of the democratic world, especially among our allies". Furthermore, "American diplomacy should continue to stand up for genuine democracy, freedom of expression, and unapologetic celebrations of European nations' individual character and history. America encourages its political allies in Europe to promote this revival of spirit, and the growing influence of patriotic European parties indeed gives cause for great optimism."

The significance is clear: the chief US aim for Europe is to help put rightwing "patriots" into power across the continent. Moreover, it insists, attempts to resist such parties are anti-democratic. Yet it is worth remembering that, unlike the US (until now), Europeans have painful memories of the consequences of granting right-wing extremists the right to seek power democratically. They still recall how Hitler came to power.

Alas, this alliance between the US and Europe's far right is quite deliberate.



The document declares the desire to protect Europe from the "stark prospect of civilizational erasure" by the institutions of the EU, mass migration, censorship of "free speech" and suppression of political opposition. The import is made clear: "Our goal should be to help Europe correct its current trajectory." How does the US intend to "correct" that trajectory? Evidently, by helping today's right-wing authoritarians, neofascists and Putin-admirers into power.

Much of the rest of this document

Europeans are seen as the only ideological enemies in the country's new national security strategy

strikes me as vacuous or ridiculous. I can see, for example, no coherent strategy for dealing with China. It also contains a firm belief that countries will continue to trust the US no matter how unfairly, irrationally and unpredictably it behaves, notably over tariffs and other means of exacting concessions. It suggests that the US can force South America into a state of submission, despite the rising influence of China. It is convinced that US technological supremacy will survive the country's war on science and racist hostility to immigrants. But one statement is indeed important, namely that "We reject the disastrous 'climate change' and 'Net Zero' ideologies that have so greatly harmed Europe, threaten the United States, and subsidise our adversaries." This, then, is a way to hand the future to China.

Yet it is for Europeans, above all, that this new strategy is most significant. It shows that they are on their own in defending Ukraine. Worse, it shows that the US wishes to break the EU as an institution and put power into the hands of Trump's and Putin's lickspittles. It will be hugely difficult for the Europeans – suffering from learned helplessness, fragmented, and scarred by the memories of the two world wars – to rouse themselves. But there is no alternative, other than a collapse. Much of this applies, too, to the UK, which decided to embark on Brexit at what turned out to be a disastrous time.

So what is to be done? The immediate aim must be to support Ukraine, with whatever means necessary and in whatever way feasible, into a just and stable peace. Europe must also create an effective

alternative to Russian threats. An excellent proposal from Philipp Hildebrand, Hélène Rey and Moritz Schularick for "European defence governance and financing" is much to the point.

When I re-read Kennedy's words, I imagined a spoof Trump version: "We shall exact any sum, impose any burden, inflict any hardship, oppose any friend and befriend any foe to assure the wealth and power of me, my family and friends." Yet even if Trump were as self-interested and transactional as this, Maga is not. Noah Smith argues that the "American right values Europe because they think of it as a White Christian homeland." If today's liberal Europe is to endure, these reactionary fantasies must be confronted and defeated.

martin.wolf@ft.com

**AMERICA**

**Edward Luce**



On the grounds of never interrupting your enemy while he is making a mistake, Xi Jinping is 2025's winner. The year's hinge moment was Donald Trump's cave-in to Xi in South Korea in late October. Trump's trade war climbdown marked a new epoch. After mulling decoupling for years, talk of US-China divorce was suspended. Even so-called de-risking is now in question. Trump awarded their meeting a 12 out of 10. China took 10 of those points.

Xi has profited simply by waiting for

strategic gifts to come his way. Rarely has the inverted motto, "don't just do something, stand there," been more apt. Last week, Trump added to Xi's windfall by approving Nvidia's sale of H200 chips, albeit with a 25 per cent export tariff. The logic is that Nvidia is an American champion and should dominate all markets. The reality is that Trump just handed China his biggest freebie so far. Advanced semiconductors are the one key area where China is still lagging behind the US. Trump is helping to close that gap.

His strategic purpose is hazy. With one hand, Trump is removing domestic guardrails to AI's growth with the aim of beating China to the superintelligence finishing line. With his other, however, Trump is furnishing China with the tools to keep up. The only consistent explanation for both is money. The AI boom is lining Trump's coffers. Almost all the broligarchs are on his side.

Nvidia, meanwhile, has promised to pay 15 per cent of its new China revenues to the US government. How that toll is calculated and collected remains hazy.

It is futile either way to seek geopolitical logic behind Trump's China policy. The recent national security strategy

The US president's actions have revealed the potency of the Chinese stranglehold on precious commodities

abandoned reference to China and Russia as peer competitors. The document added a "Trump corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine, which does have implications for China. Trump has declared the western hemisphere off-limits to outside powers. Among China's many regional friends is Venezuela. Keeping

China away from Venezuela's massive oil reserves at least partly explains Trump's military build-up in its backyard.

The rest of Trump's NSS seems designed to accelerate China's grip over the rest of the world. America's best chance of containing and shaping China's rise is to make common cause with Europe. Instead, Trump is targeting regime change. Citing "civilizational erasure", America's explicit goal is to get Trump-like parties into power in Europe. This converts the US into an ideological competitor of Europe's mostly liberal democratic governments. Trump is handing China and Russia the tools to accelerate the west's disintegration.

He is also unilaterally disarming on the global energy race. The value of China's cleantech exports in the first seven months of 2025 were double that of America's fossil fuel exports. In his

"big beautiful bill", Trump phased out most US tax breaks and subsidies for alternative energy. China will thus dominate the new frontiers of energy and supply those public goods to the global south. By doubling down on fossil fuels, Trump is ceding the world's energy future to China.

Will 2026 be another year of the dragon? Trump's prize is his summit with Xi next April. Between now and then, he wants nothing to upset the new warmth in US-China relations. It is hard to overstate the switch from when he began, which is a simple tale. Trump unleashed his bazooka in April by slapping 145 per cent tariffs on China. Xi then brought out his own bazooka – export controls on rare earths – This would have brought much of US civilian and military production to a halt. Trump climbed down in October. Xi's bazooka was revealed to be bigger, at least for the next few years. Xi's modest

concessions were to clamp down on China's fentanyl-related exports and resume imports of US soybeans.

Measured by net outcome, 2025 has thus offered a harsh tutorial. The US can sell China soybeans again while the latter assures access to rare earths. As an additional bonus, China gets access to advanced AI processors, though not to the most cutting edge. America's non-China trading partners, meanwhile, have stopped looking for method in this madness since there is none. In this time of great power competition, Trump's oddyssey has been eye-opening. He has revealed the potency of China's stranglehold on the world's most precious commodities. And he has told everyone else that they are on their own. "America first" works as an election slogan. In the real world, China is pulling ahead.

edward.luce@ft.com