



A thought for today

Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom

VIKTOR E FRANKL

For A Happier Diwali

Tinkering with I-T and GST rates is paying off, but won't push GDP into higher orbit without deeper reforms

By all accounts, it's been a happy Diwali for India Inc. White goods and cars have seen brisk sales since GST 2.0 kicked in on the first Navratra in late Sept. On Dhanteras, Maruti reportedly delivered 51,000 cars – roughly 35 every minute, and a record. Hyundai was expecting 20% sales growth over last year the same day. Cars sit near the top of the consumption pyramid, so if they're selling, demand for mithai, groceries, furniture and clothes likely shot up too. We'll know for sure when the numbers come in, but so far, GST 2.0 seems to be working.

It had to. By slashing tax rates on most goods, govt made space for price cuts. Industry wisely passed on the rebate, and the result was a timely boost to purchasing power. For a while at least, people will feel richer and buy more. In fact, GST cut is the second such stimulus this year. The first came in April with the reworked income tax slabs that left substantially more cash in people's hands.



If everything runs to script, spirited festive spending – and sustained demand thereafter – will nudge industry to hire more hands. New jobs will create more demand, and growth will finally take off. Govt's sacrifice of direct and indirect tax revenues will then pay off handsomely for the country. But what if it doesn't? What if this market cheer turns out to be an expression of pent-up demand from Aug-Sept that tapers off post-

Diwali? There isn't much more that govt can do to put money in people's hands now. RBI has already lowered rates this year, and sees no point in lowering them further at this stage.

Frankly, the easy and obvious options have been exhausted. And while one hopes they will work, it's important to get back to the drawing board for deeper reforms. For the second consecutive year, India looks set to grow at around 6.5%, which is better than any other large economy, but well below the 8% rate experts have prescribed for years, and far removed from the 12.2% rate that Morgan Stanley has calculated to address India's problem of under-employment. Making exports competitive, finding new markets for them, increasing innovation, tackling unemployment, fixing infra – there's so much that needs doing to make next Diwali even brighter and happier.

Burning Question

A woman had her face burnt by a drink set on fire in a pub, which was fined just ₹1L. That's a problem

A Bengaluru pub was sued in consumer court by a 28-year-old woman whose face and hair were singed when a flaming sambuca went horribly wrong and spilled out of her mouth. The consumer court has settled the 2021 case ordering the Brigade Road pub to pay damages of ₹1L. It is far from adequate not only because the woman remained homebound for three months, in pain, disfigured and suffered trauma but also because this is the second incident within just five years in the same part of town. A similar case in 2019 at a Residency Road pub was settled at ₹50k in 2021. Flaming sambuca accidents are clearly not as rare as pubs claim they are. True, any drink set on fire is anything but safe. But



customers assume establishments they visit can be trusted to be upfront. As a patient in Lithuania in a similar case put it: "Why would they be allowed to serve it if it is so risky?" When enthusiastic staff in a pub encourage groups celebrating to 'experiment', they must then list the risks too – even if it dampens the spirit so to speak.

Bengaluru Urban II district consumer disputes redressal commission noted the pub's negligence. But its order of ₹1L fine would barely cover the woman's basic treatment. Indian hospital ecosystem is long familiar with burn patients given the high volume of dowry-burn cases. But costs remain high and recovery is agonising and longdrawn. For court to say ₹1L also covers *mental agony* and legal costs is below the standards expected of it. Further, the sum barely acts as a deterrent to pubs pan-India who must show a higher degree of responsibility when serving drinks that can prove hazardous. In overlooking the nature of the accident, did court not undermine the very system designed to protect consumers?

Cracker of a diet

Being Gandhiji's fourth monkey: Eat no evil

Anil Abraham



I sat on the sofa, with a box of kaju katli comfortably resting on my paunch, reassuring myself that I was only helping to finish the last of the Diwali sweets. I was popping another delicious diamond-shaped delicacy into my mouth when I was interrupted rudely by my Bigg Boss. Kamala had my lab reports from our annual check-up in her hands and was visibly

displeased with the numbers. "Your sugars are shooting up like Diwali rockets. You're going to have to go on a diet" – she announced her fatwa against my pleasantly plump proportions with less niceties than some recent young contestants on *KBC*. "The less you eat and the less you talk, the better it is for you and those around you. Just keep your mouth tightly shut." I sulked in a corner like the unwanted box of soan papdi that is left ignored in a corner of the kitchen every Diwali. Then I covered my mouth with both my hands to indicate clearly to the world that I was determined to be Gandhiji's fourth monkey – eat no evil.

Kamala was not done with her TED talk – 'India is often referred to as the Diabetes Capital of the World, because it accounts for 17% of the total number of diabetes patients in the world. There are currently close to 80mn people with diabetes in India.' I pretended to be listening as I reached out for a syrupy sweet warm jalebi. But Kamala slapped me on the wrist and grabbed the box away from me.

Then she continued whispering her sweet nothings. "The whole of India is indulging in Intermittent Feasting in the last few months of the year – one festival follows another and each has its own special sweets. Onam has its payasam, Eid has seviayan, Ganesh brings modaks and Diwali has the whole spectrum.' I looked hopefully at a pista roll, hoping for at least a court approved green Diwali, but the spouse was not sugar-coating her message. She handed me a dry tasteless cracker and said that was the only snack I would be allowed till my sugars dropped consistently like the Indian rupee.

I got up to go for a walk. As the convoluted Jalebi Bai led her Sugar Daddy purposefully around the park, *Cheeni Kum Hai* popped up meaningfully on my playlist.

Mumbai & Secret Sadness Of Diwali

These days, doorbells seldom ring in the city on festival days. People take off for Phuket. Some celebrate 'digitally'. Houses have grown larger, the gatherings have shrunk

Siddharth Dhanvant Shanghvi



My parents stored our firecrackers in a bucket under their bed. This was in the early eighties – my siblings and I were in school – and the sly storage of suttli bombs and sparklers signalled the start of Diwali.

Other signs: my mother kneeling before a marble slab to paint it in red gheru. Then, dipping her fingers in rice flour, she drew loops and petals; rangoli was her visual bridge between the domestic and the divine. I did not understand then that in India art was not relegated to galleries and museums – as it is abroad. Here it was daily practice.

On bestu varsh, the Gujarati New Year, we visited our Parla relatives, in their falling-down mansions, collecting envelopes of eleven rupees and candy in shiny wrappers. The lodestar to our Diwali was my aunt Chitra-Ben's Diwali lunch; her silver platters of dhokla, rus-puri, and saffron-streaked shrikhand might have earned their own Michelin plaque. It wasn't joy I remember so much as the quiet steadiness of repetition; the reassurance of ritual that the essential things would never change.

But somewhere – perhaps in the late nineties, when old India set aside her sari for the bikini of liberalisation – Diwali as a family celebration turned into something of a public spectacle. India's trade share had nearly doubled as tariffs fell and growth leapt up. Wealth shifted what we celebrated, and how. Soon LED strings replaced lamps. Sparklers were traded for daybreak bombs.

Instead of swinging by old houses, to see even older relatives, there was the tinny laughter of a card party and its parade of lehengas. Just a decade of new money in, Diwali in Mumbai no longer registered on the authenticity graph. I did not long to meet my cousins. I found the neighbourhood fireworks – which I had thrilled in as a child – to be a real nuisance. I can't say when exactly the invisible string that joined Diwali to its original sweetness felt broken.

French philosopher Jean Baudrillard wrote that modern life is defined by the replacement of reality with its signs – a kind of hyperreality that might

explain how string lights came to stand in for diyas. There's even a name for when a cultural celebration becomes a hollow image of itself – festivalisation: where devotion is refitted for sponsors, stages, and metrics. Ever glanced up at the marigolds that adorn the malls that folks frequent on such holidays?

American historian Daniel Boorstin wrote about the pseudo-event: when something is orchestrated only for coverage, and where symbol triumphs over



Upstairs, they perform the end-of-year American choreography of togetherness, while below, Alfred collapses in his basement. The scene captures what happens when tradition turns into imitation: the body present, the spirit gone.

To be surrounded by the people you love and yet feel like a visitor in your own house – that was a special kind of loneliness, and also how I had begun to feel about Diwali. Plus there was my cynic's suspicion that festivals goad us into a theatre of happiness to disguise an essential sadness.

So now an unspoken, insistent sorrow invades my Diwali. My parents are gone. And my sisters live far away – one in Mumbai, the other in Bangalore – while I am in Goa. Even if I turned up at their doors, there was no way to resurrect that Mumbai Diwali of our childhood: the neighbourly warmth, the sulphur strike of matches, the oil-slick scent of diyas on a balcony rail. Like Proust's madeleine, memory opens not sweetness but a wound: the loss of tenderness.

Somewhere between liberalisation and Instagram, the gesture of showing up simply to wish someone well had vanished. The new Diwali had better lighting but less warmth, and it rewarded the pose, not presence. My nephews might chide me: Get over it, and get on with it. The world has changed! But another sort of sadness stems from not knowing how to explain what you have lost to someone who's never had it in the first place.

I don't know about you, but these days, during Diwali, the Mumbai doorbells seldom ring. Many urban Indians now celebrate festivals 'digitally'. People take off for Phuket. Pollution is a mood kill. Boxes of mithai replaced spontaneous visits – sweets that turned a nation into a fart bomb (nuclear power, indeed). The houses grow larger; the gatherings shrink.

If the Gods retreated from our doorsteps, was it because we stopped arriving at each other's? I see now that my mother's rangoli was not decoration; it was invocation, a prayer in form, her way of holding chaos at bay by drawing order out of dust. What are you doing for Diwali, a friend texted me this week. I was tempted to text: I'm travelling. Instead, I found myself messaging: Let's meet up.

Shanghvi is an author

SO, WHO'S AFRAID OF MALAYALAM CINEMA?

Bollywood rolls out the same old hackneyed formulaic movies that have little connect while Malayalam cinema has connected with viewers way beyond Kerala, by experimenting with contemporary ideas and imaginative production

Kunal Ray



A group of men in semi-urban Kerala learning to dance like Michael Jackson. Another lot training in martial arts in Alappuzha. A neighbourhood foiling a sinister plot. A woman stuck in an unhappy marriage. A predator on the prowl protected by the system. A septuagenarian struggling with memory issues. These are plot lines of a bunch of recent Malayalam films that have enjoyed both critical and commercial success at the box office.

Are these stories really hard to believe? Don't they all seem rather lifelike? Relatability of the story is one of the major factors responsible for the current popularity of Malayalam cinema beyond the state's linguistic frontiers. These stories can happen anywhere, anytime irrespective of one's location. These are not embellished narratives created especially for the cause of cinema. Instead, they are drawn from everyday life and experiences of living in a complex, varied society such as ours.

Malayalam cinema has time and again reminded us that larger than life is not the only story for cinema. Films and filmmakers don't need to necessarily rely on the past either or reconstruct cultural icons for the purposes of cinema. Cinema reflects the current and the now. It derives from daily life and experiences and becomes a gateway to comprehend a people – their culture, way of life, struggles, beliefs, challenges, etc. There are numerous stories around us only if we care to find them.

While it is partly true that OTT has created accessibility and some Malayalam films are now regularly released in theatres in metropolitan centres beyond Kerala, that's not the sole reason for their success. Similar arguments could be made for other cinema too. By that logic, *Bahubali* should have opened the floodgates for Telugu cinema. Other than a few blockbusters, what do we know about contemporary Tamil or Telugu film cultures, for instance?

We may know the top grossers and some of the biggest actors but trade figures alone do not determine

a film culture. Malayalam cinema on the contrary offers an interesting paradigm where the appreciation for its offerings is beyond the box office figures. All sorts of Malayalam films have found an audience on OTT and otherwise. These films are discussed for their content, performances, storytelling, formal ingenuity and much more. They have succeeded in creating an audience willing to risk and experiment with different



Still from Malayalam film Moonwalk

kinds of stories and storytelling on screen. The numbers may be small yet but at least a beginning has been made. And contemporary Malayalam cinema has also shown that the distinction between commercial and art cinema is facile and outdated.

Audiences appreciate a good script. And, if a willing audience exists, won't they extend this curiosity to other cinemas too? What's preventing Hindi cinema then from trying new narratives and breaking out of a time warp?

Mainstream Hindi cinema – Bollywood – cuts a very sorry picture in comparison. It is a much bigger industry in terms of resources with substantial reach. Hindi cinema is besotted with rehashing old formulaic films disconnected with the present. There's no imagination in even rendering a love story for that matter.

Love takes various forms and shapes. How can it be the same story again and again? There are recent debates about the southern part of the country being perennially stereotyped in Hindi films. Someone unfamiliar with nuances of life in Kerala or Tamil Nadu substitutes a film in those locations and ends up making a mockery of the people and their cultural attributes.

There are also numerous examples of the depiction of rural India in mainstream Hindi cinema without fully comprehending complexities of rural life. The result is a parody. Hindi cinema is trying to tell stories mimicking current trends without an understanding of the subject or the location. That could be a reason for large-scale disenchantment of viewers with films being released of late. And how long can an industry survive on mindless comedies and romances? Isn't it time to reinvent the script? Make something you know and understand instead of trying to suit a trend that may be popular in other film industries. Imitation after all is not art.

If Hindi cinema needs new stories and storytellers, where will they emerge from? One also wonders if Hindi cinema is ready to invest in *nurturing* new stories and storytelling. Stars have often failed at the box office but a good story with competent performances has kept a film afloat. Maybe that's the need of the hour: To encourage new stories and diversity in storytelling. And to recognise and pay writers for their intellectual labour. Also, these stories or writers cannot emerge from urban centres alone. That would amount to just one kind of a story. Malayalam cinema has certainly created a template. To mimic may not be the solution but why not watch and learn?

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Calvin & Hobbes



A Festival Is The Feast For Senses

Sumit Paul

Once a disciple asked Jalaluddin Rumi, 'Why are you lighting lamps? This is practised by infidels.' The mystic cried and told him: "Because of benighted souls like you, I light lamps."

Light outside reflects light inside. Shakeel Badayuni said, "Hazaron jale rakhsanda hain mere dil ke parde mein" – thousands of lights are effulgent in depths of my heart.

Urdu poet Niyaz Sherwani wrote, "Chiragh faqat baam-o-dahleez pe hi nahin jalte/Chiragh jalte hain dilon mein bhi" – lamps are not lit only on the roof or threshold/lamps brighten hearts of people too. Deepavali brings effulgence all around, beauty abounds and gratitude overflows.

There's a beautiful word for Deepavali in Persian, *'Shab-e-charag-ha'* – the night of lamps. It's also known as *Jashn-e-Charaghan*,

festival of lamps, in Pahlavi.

No festival is Hindu, Christian or Muslim. The festive spirit and ethos can never be confined to the narrow walls of religion. Even hardcore atheists unabashedly look forward to celebratory mood and gaiety so inextricably interwoven into fabric of a festival.

Unalloyed joy, boundless happiness and an atmosphere of cosmic serenity lend an uncanny aura to any festive occasion. Greatness of a culture can be found in its festivals. To celebrate a festival means to live out on some special occasion, in an uncommon manner, universal assent to the world. Linguist and etymologist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee wrote in *Wordplay* – "The word festival must have originated from feast or vice versa."

A festival is a feast for the senses; it's a feast for the whole mankind. It's a

period of bonhomie and togetherness and time of forgiveness. In ancient Rome, no prisoner was ever executed during the festive season, and many were granted clemency. Emperor Jahangir pardoned criminals during festivals, regardless of their community and religion. Exuberance and

expansiveness usually associated with a festival is soul-glad-ning and warms the cockles of all hearts.

CG Jung noticed that fewer patients visited him during a festive season. And who doesn't like a festival? However rational a person

may be, festivals never cease to cheer up his spirits and boost his drooping morale. The universality of festival can never be underestimated. Its all-encompassing spirit is transcendental and forever undiminished. But remember, a festival is latitudinarianism. It's not ruckus; it's a resplendent manifestation of our

shared humanity.

Every festival is a symbol of boundless universal joy. Festivals promote diversity, they bring neighbours into dialogue, increase creativity, offer opportunities for civic pride, improve general psychological well-being. In short, they make cities better places to live. Festivals are beyond religions and rituals. They've a universal essence with the common ethos of humanity and humaneness. Festivals are bookmarks of our life's happiest stories. Keep the spirit of festival alive in your heart all year round. Life is a festival to be enjoyed rather than a drudgery to be endured. Our earth is one big festival venue, and it is possible because man brings all that is needed to transform this earth into a paradise.

So, immerse yourself in the ensuing festive mood. Don't refrain from celebrating any festival. Light up lamps in hearts of those who genuinely need light.

Sacred space



Appreciation is the highest form of prayer, for it acknowledges the presence of good wherever you shine the light of your thankful thoughts.

Alan Cohen

Apropos 'Vive la Bloodless Revolution?' by Neeraj Kaushal (Oct 17), this topic should be looked at from a different angle. Commitment to democratic values such as rule of law, fundamental rights and avoiding repression of popular discontent would prevent mutinies and civil rebellions. In the case of totalitarian regimes assurance of minimum standards of living will help in averting popular uprising. Once those in the saddle of power ignore/breach the above understanding, they will invite trouble for themselves. Success of non-violent movements is predicated upon astute leadership and endurance capacity of the agitators. For example, in India, farmers braved adverse weather conditions to ensure new farm laws were withdrawn. We have many illustrations of good causes agitated in a non-violent manner petering out without achieving their objectives and, of course, violent agitations eventually failing.

*Angara Venkata Girija Kumar
Chennai*



The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

LIGHT, NOT HEAT

Diwali needs to be cleaner but framing 48-hr fireworks as fount of all toxins is wrong — in science and strategy

HERE IT IS again, a grey haze lingering after the Diwali celebrations as pollution levels spike to set a depressing new record for the festive season. With PM2.5 and PM10 concentrations 15 to 20 times higher than the permissible limits in some locations, air quality in Delhi-NCR dipped to a three-year low for Diwali night. The Supreme Court allowing government-approved “green crackers” on a “test case basis” is being said to have contributed to the toxic air — but this glib framing of the issue is part of the problem. It focuses on the easy quick-fix, provides unending grist for a polarising politics, counter-productively pits clean air against religion. Hidden in plain sight, the crisis is this: Delhi-NCR’s air is so bad all through the year that a few days of celebration are all it takes to turn it toxic.

The reluctance to address the problem of a high baseline pollution load is only matched by the alacrity with which slap-dash measures are resorted to. Public blame-games ensure that the focus shifts from what is necessary to whatever is politically expedient. For example, unpaved roads, potholes and broken footpaths and garbage disposal are significant — and year-round — sources of pollution. Addressing these, as a study published last year by a team of researchers at IIT Delhi shows, can reduce the concentration of PM2.5 by over 20 per cent. Yet, successive Delhi governments have ignored these. Or consider the invariably last-minute and knee-jerk attempts to villainise the farmer for burning of crop residue. This is an annual phenomenon which requires sustained efforts, nudges and incentives that can help the practice taper off long before smoke darkens the air in November. Take, also, the self-defeating vacillation and rollback on measures such as the fuel ban on end-of-life vehicles by the Centre’s Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM). They are evidence of how piecemeal or blunt solutions, in an erratic approach, take the place of sustained and purposive engagement with the problem.

In the last instance, the court order and government diktat can only go so far, when larger questions of the nature of urbanisation and lifestyle changes remain unaddressed. The patakha police, in other words, won’t solve a problem that sprawls well beyond the few days on which Diwali is celebrated. The needle may have moved somewhat as far as emergency measures, including the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), are concerned, but these too are not enough to alleviate Delhi’s misery. That can only happen by raising awareness about the complex causes of air pollution, investing in better monitoring, efficient public transportation and enabling behavioural changes, starting from school — many schools, connecting the dots between pollution and child labour, have helped frame the issue for students, showing heartening results. Measures to clean the air must start long before it starts to choke people, and must continue long after it has seemingly cleared up.

NOW YOU SEE HIM

An erratic Trump, and an emboldened Putin, illustrate the challenges that lie ahead in ending the war in Ukraine

DAYS AFTER BROKERING a fragile ceasefire in West Asia, US President Donald Trump has turned his attention once again to Eastern Europe. His stance on the ongoing three-and-a-half-year war has swung like a pendulum. In February, the Oval Office spat with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was followed by threats of sanctions against Moscow. Then at the Alaska Summit in August, Trump met Russian President Vladimir Putin and appeared to align himself with the Kremlin’s position — particularly Putin’s demand that Ukraine cede unoccupied parts of the Donbas region in exchange for a ceasefire. Subsequently, Trump threw his weight behind Kyiv and speculated in September that Ukraine could take back all of its territory and “maybe even go further than that”. He even expressed openness to the idea of supplying Tomahawk cruise missiles to Ukraine. Now, there is yet another reversal. Following a lengthy call with Putin last week and a meeting with Zelenskyy on Friday, Trump has urged Kyiv and Moscow to “stop where they are”, suggested that the war should end by allowing the Donbas region to “be cut the way it is” (leaving most of it under Russian control), and rejected Zelenskyy’s request for the Tomahawks.

Trump’s inconsistency is all-too-familiar and yet disquieting, not just for Ukraine, but also for Europe. Over the past six weeks, Russia has sent drones over Poland and Romania, flown fighter jets into Estonian airspace, and is accused of orchestrating drone flights that disrupted airports in Denmark, Belgium, and Germany — allegations Moscow has denied. At the time, Trump expressed clear solidarity with NATO, declaring that it should shoot down Russian aircraft violating its airspace. Now, as the US president again presses Ukraine to make concessions, it will be up to Europe to ensure that, in the event of a deal, robust security assurances are provided to Ukraine.

An erratic Trump and an emboldened Putin illustrate the challenges that lie ahead in ending the war. The two leaders have reportedly agreed to hold another summit in Hungary — an EU member that opposes Ukraine’s accession and is led by the pro-Putin Prime Minister Viktor Orban. Once again, it appears that Ukraine and Europe are being sidelined, with Washington positioning itself as the arbiter of war and peace. If this trend continues, and given the US president’s current stance, the day may not be far when Ukraine is left with little choice but to yield to Trump’s terms and compromise on its territory. To avert that scenario, Europe will need to act quickly.

THE LOUVRE HEIST

The daylight robbery seems like something out of Hollywood. But life is often less complicated than fiction

CLICHÉ IS a dead metaphor, an idiom or a phrase that has lost the impact it once had. Once in a while, though, there are acts so audacious that they can revive the meaning behind words. A team of four robbers — two who committed the act, the others who helped with the getaway — committed one of the most brazen acts of “daylight robbery” at the Louvre in Paris. For those who use the term casually while talking about ticket prices at the neighbourhood multiplex, the price of onions and, of course, income taxes, it’s a reminder of where the shock and awe of a metaphor turned literal.

At 9.30 am on Sunday, two men scaled a ladder mounted on a truck, and broke into the first floor of arguably the world’s most famous museum. Eight minutes later, they had made off, riding pillion on scooters, with nine precious objects including an emerald necklace, a sapphire necklace and a diadem worn by Eugénie, the wife of Napoleon III, who ruled France in the 19th century. The robbers and their accomplices are at large, and their success, at least for now, shows that life, at times stranger than fiction, can often be a lot less convoluted.

On the face of it, the “Louvre heist”, as it’s being called on social media, is out of a film a la Ocean’s Eleven. However, unlike a Hollywood caper, the daylight robbery relied not on cons, tricks and psychological games. It seems that looters figured out what politicians have long known: Shock and awe — the criminals broke through a window, smashed a display case, threatened security and ran away with their booty — is a simpler tactic. The crowd, more often than not, panics or just watches the show.

On air, connect the dots



GUFRAN BEIG

Warmer weather, timely monsoon withdrawal meant slightly better air around Diwali. But worse may come

WINTER IN DELHI is a season of contrasts: The glow of festivals, the chill of misty mornings, and the creeping dread of polluted skies. The past few months have offered a glimmer of hope with clear horizons, but an anxiety about what lies ahead lingers. Beneath that record clear horizon, I found no deeper meaning — it could be ascribed to record rainfall, and nothing more. Scientifically, there are multiple possibilities ahead. However, for once, the odds may tilt slightly in favour of relatively better air, thanks to ocean and large-scale circulation.

In recent years, delayed monsoon withdrawals have become a troubling new normal, widely linked to climate change by researchers. SAFAR’s earlier studies have shown that such delayed retreat, followed by the anti-cyclonic circulation that tends to slow down the winds beneath, gets further support under colder temperatures, leading to subsiding air and a compressed boundary layer. This dynamic acts like a lid over the city, allowing pollutants to accumulate ceaselessly. This year, however, was a welcome exception. The 2025 monsoon officially withdrew from Delhi at the beginning of the last week of September — the earliest retreat since 2002. The benefits were twofold. First, the early retreat under relatively warmer conditions kept the winds active, preventing the accumulation of pollutants near the surface. Second, post-withdrawal spells of western-disturbance-induced rainfall continued to wash the air, further curbing pollution build-up. In a region where late-monsoon retreat has become the new normal, 2025 stands out as a reminder of how seasonal timing and circulation dynamics can decisively alter the air quality trajectory.

India is presently under El Niño-Southern Oscillation (ENSO)-neutral conditions. However, the equatorial Pacific sea surface temperatures are trending below normal, signalling a likely transition towards a La Niña phase, with a 71 per cent probability by mid-October 2025. Forecasts suggest that the upcoming La Niña may initially remain weak, though a faster intensification later in the season could prove beneficial for North India’s air

quality. Recent studies from the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) indicate that strong La Niña events enhance surface wind speeds over northern India, promoting greater dispersion, thereby reducing the build-up of fine particulates that typically lead to winter smog conditions. In essence, while the transition towards La Niña is still unfolding, its potential strengthening holds a silver lining for cleaner winter skies in Delhi.

Punjab and Haryana experienced some of the most severe floods in decades this September, likely delaying the harvest by one to two weeks. This shift postponed the peak of stubble burning, preventing it from coinciding with Diwali. Diwali fell earlier this year, when the temperature was relatively warm and the weather conditions were less hostile. This science led me to predict and provide an outlook that Delhi could avert the extreme smog events that have plagued it in past years, with a caveat that other ground realities remain the same.

A weak La Niña could also have counterproductive effects. If its link with climate change holds, the winter may be prolonged and severe, creating conditions that favour pollution accumulation and extreme smog events. Compounding this, heavy rains have already delayed the paddy harvest in Punjab and Haryana. The cool November-December period is now likely to coincide with the delayed peak of stubble burning.

The Rabi sowing pressure is a looming challenge. Farmers usually have around 45 days to clear fields — a tight window to begin with. In much of Punjab and Haryana, fields remain waterlogged or crops damp, delaying harvest by at least one to two weeks. This shortens the window for wheat sowing. Rice stubble adds to the challenge: Unlike wheat stubble, it cannot be fed to cattle due to high silica content and must be removed from the field. Without suitable alternatives, many farmers may resort to burning.

The judiciary, in a balanced move, relaxed the blanket ban and allowed the use of green firecrackers in the Delhi-NCR region — albeit under stringent conditions. While these so-called eco-friendly crackers marked some

progress, they still emit 60-70 per cent of the pollutants that conventional fireworks do. So, with fireworks activity up by just 40 per cent, we have circled right back to where we started. The lesson is clear: Without diligent implementation, even the best-intentioned measures fizzle out. On the night of the celebration, pollution levels spiked sharply. Yet, by October 21, the overall AQI was “very poor”, not “severe”. That may sound like better news, but it was the weather, not anything else, doing the heavy lifting. Moderate winds and a warming morning sun aided dispersion, scrubbing the air faster than expected. Stations close to dense residential zones still recorded the worst numbers, a reminder that emissions are ultimately a neighbourhood story. But questions linger. What if the missing mid-night-to-4 am data of many stations had been accounted for, the very window when pollution typically peaks under colder, calmer conditions? And what if the AQI algorithm could have capped 24-hour averaged concentrations to an equivalent AQI of 500, instead of capping at each hourly concentration at an AQI of 500, potentially masking the true extent of the night’s pollution? In some locations, hourly concentrations soared to an astonishing 1000-1800 µg/m³ after midnight. The numbers tell a story, but only if we’re willing to read between the lines of smoke.

Delhi’s air pollution crisis is complex and persistent. This underscores the need for long-term, systemic solutions rather than temporary fixes like water sprinkling, costly smoke towers, or cloud-seeding experiments. The only viable path is to tackle the root cause — source emissions. While implementation is challenging, the sooner Delhi adopts an airshed-based approach, the better it will be for the health and well-being of its residents. For effective AQ-management, the vision of NARFI (National Air Quality Resource Framework of India) prepared by NIAS needs to be realised to fill a long-standing void and achieve *atmanirbhar*ta.

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SHUBHRA GUPTA

THE TRAGEDY of a popular comic is that he — or she, as the case may be — is never allowed to break free from the burden of making people laugh.

Govardhan Kumar Asrani was one of the Indian film industry’s finest actors whose best work was confined to strong supporting acts. Never peripheral, always integral, Asrani’s very presence lifted the films he did, and it was hard to find a film he wasn’t in during his most productive phase during the 1970s and ’80s.

He passed away yesterday after a prolonged illness, at the age of 84.

The FTII-trained actor had talent and timing, but he came into the Hindi film industry in an era when men who looked like him — not too tall, not too short, just your average Joe — did not get to play heroes. However good they may be, and Asrani was unfailingly good in everything he did on screen, they were relegated to playing the sidekick, which could either be the hero’s best friend, or the comedian who would come on for his track and then step aside, letting the hero take over.

But if it happened to be Asrani, we would be cheering for the little guy on the sidelines as much as the big guy in the centre and front.

Sholay, currently celebrating its 50th year, is remembered not just for its leads — Dharmendra, Amitabh Bachchan, Hema Malini, Jaya Bhaduri, Sanjeev Kumar — but also for its villain, played gloriously by Amjad Khan, and the Angrezon-ke-zamaane-ke-

ASRANI MADE IT BETTER

He was the Everyman whose very presence lit up the films he was in

jailor, played by Asrani in full ham-mode, furiously channeling his inner Chaplin-doing-Hitler: The stiff little moustache fronting a stiff little man strutting about, barking orders — “*aadhe idhar jao, aadhe udhar jao, aur baaki hamare saath aao*”.

It’s the kind of line which becomes instantly iconic, and it has taken its place in the pantheon of great one-liners that Salim-Javed wrote for this desi spaghetti Western to beat all desi spaghetti Westerns. The jailor may have divvied his staff in two, but everyone was unified in their liking for the actor: The Angrezon-ke-zaamane-ka-jailor got cemented in peoples’ memories, but he was always more than just that in his long career of more than 300 films.

He did try his hand at being bad — in Gulzar’s *Koshish* (1972) he plays Jaya Bhaduri’s evil brother responsible for the death of her child, but it didn’t take. He tried to break away from the non-stop assembly line comic roles by becoming a hero — *Chala Murari Hero Banne* (1977), but the film didn’t do well.

Through a production company he set up, he did manage to carve out leading roles in Gujarati movies, and that remained a flourishing parallel stream for him, even as his roles in Hindi cinema became sporadic after a point: The middle-of-the-road cinema where artistes like Asrani would automatically be a good fit was on its way out, ceding space to garish comedy.

He was one of those rare comedians who didn’t have to succumb to vulgarity (he could do borderline risqué without appear-

ing cheap, and that’s quite a feat) to grab attention. He was fortunate that he didn’t have to go down the Shakti Kapoor-Kader Khan route, nor did he have to resort to the single-note schtick forced upon older comedians like Keshto Mukherjee: Asrani was versatile enough to play shades of the guy who could always be relied upon to do the right thing, something that was visible right from his early roles in *Satyakam* (1969), *Mere Apne*, amongst many others.

His jodi with Rajesh Khanna — they did more than 20 films together, including *Bawarchi* (1972), *Namak Haramam* (1973), *Aap Ki Kasam* (1974) — was so popular that when Khanna appeared without him, viewers would feel as if they had been cheated. He worked with directors such as Hrishikesh Mukherjee and Gulzar who gave him roles where he could be life-like and regular; he also revelled in loud parts in the louder spectacles of David Dhawan, Rohit Shetty and Priyadarshan.

After a long gap, I caught sight of him in a web series (*The Trial*, Season 2) last month, playing a canny Parsi lawyer, jet black hair emphasising his ageing face, forced lines making me recall his glory days. One of my favourites is one in which his function isn’t just to prop the hero, but to act as able foil: In Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s 1973 *Abhimaan*, he played a secretary-cum-concerned friend to Amitabh Bachchan’s arrogant singer. And as always, Asrani made it better.

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OCTOBER 22 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

APARTHEID ULTIMATUM

COMMONWEALTH LEADERS, INCLUDING the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, have given South Africa six months to start dismantling apartheid or else face a programme of voluntary sanctions. A seven-page record released in Nassau represented a partial victory for Thatcher who, throughout the first five days of the Commonwealth summit, had firmly resisted the idea of economic sanctions. She nevertheless agreed that, as part of an immediate package of measures against Pretoria, each member of the 49-nation group should be ready to take whatever unilateral action was possible to preclude the import of South African Krugerrand gold coins.

CM’S SON INVESTIGATED

THE KARNATAKA GOVERNMENT ordered a judicial probe into the alleged “corrupt practices and misdeeds” Chief Minister Ramakrishna Hegde’s son, Bharath, his sister-in-law’s son, Idaya Shankar, CP Laxman, a coffee planter of Coorg, and Nagaraj, personal assistant to the chief minister.

VIETNAM TYPHOON

VIETNAM APPEALED FOR international aid on Monday after a typhoon last week left about 800 people dead or missing and hundreds of thousands homeless, officials said in Hanoi. The officials said it was the worst nat-

ural disaster yet in central Vietnam. A total of 670 people were confirmed dead, 128 were missing and 257 were injured after Typhoon Cecil swept across 350 kilometres of Binh Tri Thien province.

FAMILY PLANNING

TWO NOVEL SCHEMES, including one offering huge cash incentives, are on the anvil to give a decisive thrust to the family welfare programme and to arrest the population explosion in the country. Apart from limiting the size of the family, the policy stipulates that every couple must adopt spacing methods. The scheme is the result of a long-drawn exercise carried out by the Health Ministry.



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Trump trains guns on Venezuela: Why now, Maduro's options

EXPLAINED INTERVIEW

R VISWANATHAN

THE US is building up military presence in the Caribbean Sea, after striking Venezuelan boats it claimed were carrying drugs into the US. US President Donald Trump has authorised the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to conduct covert operations into the country, and his administration has offered \$50 million for information leading to the arrest of the Venezuelan President, Nicolas Maduro.

While Trump's stated aim is controlling the flow of drugs and illegal immigrants into the US, his country has a long history of involvement in regime changes in Latin America. **R Viswanathan**, who has been India's ambassador to Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, explains the Trump-Maduro dispute and the larger context around it. He spoke to **Yashree**.

The military build-up in the Caribbean is

much heavier than what's needed to tackle drug boats. Is Venezuela a major source of drugs going to the US? What exactly is Trump doing right now?

Venezuela is not known to be a major drug supplier to the US. The Trump administration would like a regime change in Venezuela, and the 'war on drugs' is a pretext that the US has used in this region earlier too. In 1989, it was Panama, when the US unseated President Manuel Noriega. In 2022, it was the leader of Honduras, Juan Hernández.

Let's look at the drug issue first. More than a supply side issue, it is a demand and consumer-driven business within the US. As long as the huge demand exists and the Americans are ready to pay top dollars, there will always be someone willing to supply.

Second, if we look at Venezuela, it is true that Maduro is unpopular and the election that brought him to power was rigged. Venezuela's economy has collapsed and there are frequent allegations of repression of critical voices.

But to a degree, it is the US that is responsible for the situation. US sanctions have crippled Venezuela's economy, which depends heavily on oil exports. And the fate of other unseated Latin American leaders have made

Maduro determined to stick to power. Noriega was in an American jail for 17 years. Hernández and his brother are also in jail. If Maduro were to lose power, he would be extradited to the US and imprisoned there. He would rather do anything to stay in power to avoid this fate. And it won't be him alone. A whole host of top generals, political leaders, cabinet ministers, members of the electoral commission, intelligence agencies, stand to lose from a regime change.

Maduro is not a single-man dictatorship. It is not like Noriega, or Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic, or even Maduro's predecessor, Hugo Chavez. Chavez ruled through personal charisma. Maduro is not charismatic, he doesn't have grassroots support or ideological standing, he is no firebrand. He is backed by a whole system, and that system will fight really hard to prevent a pro-American opposition from coming to power.

The victims here are the people of Venezuela, who are denied a free and fair election and the right to choose their leader.

Opposition leaders like Maria Corina Machado, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, should learn from other Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, which came out of military dicta-

torships through internal struggles. Banking on US intervention to dethrone Maduro is not the best course of action.

What is the reason behind ramping up the pressure on Venezuela right now?

Venezuela has the largest oil reserves in the world. If Venezuela starts pumping up oil, it will be in direct competition with the US, which has become one of the biggest exporters of oil. This is the reason the US doesn't want Venezuela, Iran and Russia to export their oil.

There is a dictatorship in Nicaragua, which is worse than the Venezuelan dictatorship. But the Americans are not up in arms against them because there is nothing of interest to them.

When the US brought about a short-lived coup in Venezuela in 2002, I was in Caracas as India's ambassador. That coup was bungled up by its pro-American instigators and Chavez came back to power.

However, right now, one very important factor driving the focus on Venezuela is US Secretary of State Marco Rubio. Rubio's parents were of Cuban origin; his family fled the Communist regime there. He would really like Maduro, a Cuban ally, gone. This is also

one of the reasons that diplomatic outreach to improve ties have not worked.

But the US efforts have been complicated by the fact that they don't know what is happening inside the Chavista regime. Because they don't recognise Maduro, they don't have an embassy there. If they had a proper embassy, they could have worked at gaining local support and dividing the Chavista regime from inside.

The US has a history of interventions in Latin America. Why is that?

Economic interests have powered much of it. Latin America is rich in natural resources, which the US wants its firms to have full access to. During the Cold War, there was the imperative to stop the spread of Communism.

In the 1950s, the CIA helped the coup against Guatemala's president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. In 1961 of course, there was the Bay of Pigs invasion, a failed attempt to unseat Cuba's Fidel Castro. In the 1970s, the CIA meddled in Chile to remove Salvador Allende from power.

Then, the US has launched serial wars — war on communism, war on drugs, war on terror, war on corruption, and now the tariff

war — which have been used for regime change, destabilisation and promotion of business interests.

What are the options before Maduro?

Not many. Militarily, none of America's opponents, like Russia or China, are likely to come to his aid. At the most, they might veto some resolutions against him in the UN.

Within Latin America, Maduro's best champion could have been Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva with his Lula Doctrine: Latin America will not allow external forces to remove elected presidents of their countries. Lula could have rallied other Leftist leaders to provide solidarity to Maduro and basically make more of a noise against the US. But Maduro has antagonised Lula by calling him names when the Brazilian leader questioned the elections that brought him to power.

However, while Maduro may not have a lot of friends, he is not exactly a sitting target. He has been trained by Cuba, which has survived many American interventions, assassination attempts, conspiracies, and regime change operations. So now, Maduro is hardened, and will fight a long — and if necessary, bloody — battle for survival.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

PRINCE ANDREW GIVES UP TITLES: A LOOK AT HIS TIES TO JEFFREY EPSTEIN

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

PRINCE ANDREW, the brother of King Charles of the United Kingdom, officially announced last week that he will relinquish the royal title of Duke of York. He said the decision stemmed from the continued accusations against him, which he has denied.

In 2021, an American woman named Virginia Giuffre sued Andrew, saying that financier and child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and his companion, Ghislaine Maxwell, arranged sexual encounters between her and the prince starting when she was 17 years old. Giuffre died by suicide in April this year at the age of 41. Her posthumous memoir, *Nobody's Girl: A Memoir of Surviving Abuse and Fighting for Justice*, was released on Tuesday.

Notably, the Metropolitan Police recently said it was looking into media reports that Andrew tried to obtain information about Giuffre through his police protection.

Who is Prince Andrew?

Andrew, 65, is the third child of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. He served in the Royal Navy and completed his military career in 2001.

He married Sarah Ferguson in 1986, and they have two daughters, but the couple separated after 10 years. Andrew's public life has been marred by allegations of inappropriate behaviour, and more recently, he became embroiled in a case linked to an alleged Chinese spy. But by far, the most criticism he has faced concerns sexual misconduct allegations and his friendship with Epstein.

What are the allegations against him?

Around the age of 16, Giuffre began working at the Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida, owned by current United States President Donald Trump. Her father was an employee, and he helped her secure a job as a housekeeper.

In her memoir, she wrote that Maxwell saw her at the resort and offered her a job as a masseuse for Epstein. From their very first encounter, Epstein engaged her in sexual and inappropriate acts, and then took her on to travel the world with him. In a book excerpt published in *The Guardian*, she wrote that he targeted vulnerable girls: "A master manipulator, he threw what looked like a lifeline to girls who were drowning...



Andrew was associated with Epstein for several years. AP

And then, he did his worst to them."

She said she was introduced to Andrew in 2001, when she was 17 and he was 41. Maxwell told her not to refuse him. "He was friendly enough, but still entitled — as if he believed having sex with me was his birthright," Giuffre wrote. In 2022, Andrew settled a lawsuit she filed against him, without admitting wrongdoing.

How has Andrew responded?

In a 2019 BBC interview, Andrew first spoke publicly at length about his friendship with Epstein, who died by suicide in a jail cell that year. He said he never met Giuffre, despite a photograph showing them together. His explanations for maintaining ties with Epstein were widely criticised.

Later that year, Andrew said, "The circumstances relating to my former association with Jeffrey Epstein has become a major disruption to my family's work... Therefore, I have asked Her Majesty if I may step back from public duties for the foreseeable future". He added, "I continue to unequivocally regret my ill-judged association with Jeffrey Epstein. His suicide has left many unanswered questions, particularly for his victims, and I deeply sympathise with everyone who has been affected..." Since then, he has curtailed his public work.

A report in *The Guardian* said the recent decision came due to "concern" and "anxiety" among the royals "about the continual headlines causing serious reputational risk to the monarchy".



HARISH DAMODARAN

RETAIL FOOD inflation has been in negative territory for the last four consecutive months ending September 2025. That's as against an average 8.5% annual rise in the consumer food price index during the 18 months from July 2023 to December 2024.

The softening has to do with the easing of supply pressures — thanks to back-to-back good monsoons, after an El Niño-induced prolonged period of dry weather and above-normal temperatures in 2023-24 — and overall weak price sentiment in agricultural commodities.

Cereal glut

The supply turnaround is particularly evident in cereals.

Table 1 shows wheat stocks in government godowns on October 1, at 320.3 lakh tonnes (lt), to be the highest in four years and over 1.5 times the required minimum buffer for this date.

The real glut, however, is in rice, where government agencies are not only holding an unprecedented level of stocks; these are also 4.4 times what is necessary to meet the needs of the public distribution system plus a strategic reserve for emergencies.

The oversupply is set to intensify as the harvesting and marketing of the new crop, which has started from October, picks up post Diwali. Indian farmers have planted a record 44.2 million hectares (mh) area under rice this *kharif* (monsoon) season, up from last year's 43.6 mh.

The jump has been even more, from 8.4 mh to 9.5 mh, for maize. Not for nothing is the starchy feed grain wholesaling in states such as Karnataka and Haryana at around Rs 2,000-2,100 per quintal, from Rs 2,200-Rs 2,300 a year ago and the government's minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 2,400.

The case of soyabean

Soyabean is an illustrative example of a crop exhibiting bearish price sentiment despite not-so-good production.

CENTRAL POOL STOCKS ON OCTOBER 1 (lakh tonnes)

	Wheat	Rice**
2021	468.52	347.51
2022	227.46	283.9
2023	239.95	314.57
2024	237.83	386.83
2025	320.33	449.38
Norm*	205.2	102.5

*Includes rice equivalent of un-milled paddy;

**Minimum required operational stock-plus strategic reserve for October 1.

Source: Dept of Food and Public Distribution

According to the Union Agriculture Ministry, the area sown under soyabean this year is 12 mh, down from 13 mh in 2024. The Indore-based Soybean Processors Association of India (SOPA) has estimated the output of the leguminous oilseed at a five-year-low of 105.4 lt. It was 125.8 lt in 2024.

The 16.3% drop is being attributed to a decline in acreage as well as yields — from an average of 1,063 kg to 920 kg per hectare. That has, in turn, been blamed on excess rainfall, causing waterlogging and crop damage resulting in smaller size of grains and yield loss. The crop has also been impacted by yellow mosaic virus and aerial blight fungal disease attacks in many areas.

Table 2 shows the closing stocks of soyabean in 2024-25, at 4.7 lt, to be significantly below the 8.9 lt, 24.1 lt and 25.2 lt for the preceding three marketing years (October-September). The lower opening stocks, coupled with a subpar 2025 crop, should ordinarily contribute to a tight supply situation and bullish prices.

But far from bullish, soyabean is selling in Maharashtra's Latur market at about Rs 4,100 per quintal, against Rs 4,300 last year at this time. The ruling wholesale price is, moreover, well below not just this year's MSP of Rs 5,328 per quintal, but even the Rs 4,892 declared for the 2024 crop! Why are soyabean prices low? The answer is sentiment, which is weak globally on account of bumper harvests in the three major producing countries: Brazil, United States and Argentina.

That is reflected in export prices of soyabean meal delivered at Indian ports falling from an average of \$490 per tonne in

SUPPLY AND DEMAND BALANCE FOR SOYABEAN (lakh tonnes)

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
1. Supply (a+b+c)	115.19	126.27	156.29	149.06	134.81
a. Opening Stock	5.16	1.83	25.15	24.07	8.94
b. Production	104.55	118.89	124.11	118.74	125.82
c. Import	5.48	5.55	7.03	6.25	0.05
2. Demand	113.36	101.12	132.22	140.12	130.15
Closing Stock (1-2)	1.83	25.15	24.07	8.94	4.66
Soya Meal Exports	19.2	6.44	18.36	22.75	19.5

Note: Figures are for October-September crop year. 2024-25 data is provisional

Source: The Soybean Processors Association of India

September 2024 to \$398 in September 2025. In quantity terms, too, exports dipped from 9.1 lt in April-September 2024 to 8.4 lt in April-September 2025.

One tonne of soyabean yields roughly 175 kg (17.5%) of oil and 820 kg (82%) of meal. The latter is basically the residual protein-rich cake after oil extraction. While soyabean oil is sold in the domestic market, the meal is both exported and consumed within the country, largely for use as a poultry and cattle feed ingredient.

In the 2024-25 marketing year, soyabean meal exports amounted to 19.5 lt, with domestic feed and food consumption estimated at 62 lt and 8 lt respectively.

Soyabean processors are realising Rs 31.5 or so per kg from meal and Rs 118/kg from oil. That translates into a gross realisation of Rs 46,480 from processing one tonne of the meal. Deducting Rs 2,000 of processing costs (towards hexane/chemical solvent, fuel, electricity, labour and fixed overheads) and another Rs 2,000 of transport-cum-market expenses (including *mandi* fees and labour charges, middleman commission and bagging), the maximum price payable to farmers would be Rs 42,450 per tonne.

That's close to the Rs 4,100-4,200 rate prevailing in Latur or Madhya Pradesh's Dewas *mandi*. "We (processors) don't decide the price that farmers get. The soyabean price is decided by our realisations from oil and meal. We simply pay that price," said DN Pathak, executive director of SOPA.

Sluggish exports apart, soyabean meal prices are also under pressure from the increased supplies of the so-called DDGS (dis-

tiller's) dried grains with solubles). This fermented mash — a byproduct of ethanol manufactured by maize and rice grain-based distilleries — contains protein, making it an alternative livestock feed ingredient.

Distilleries are selling DDGS from maize and rice at Rs 15-17 per kg. Given the Rs 31.5/kg price for soyabean meal, it isn't surprising that the domestic consumption of the latter for feed has come down from 67 lt in 2022-23 and 66 lt in 2023-24 to 62 lt in 2024-25.

The post-Diwali challenge

Through the second half of 2023 and the whole of 2024, the Narendra Modi-led government struggled to contain food inflation that was eating into the purchasing power of households.

With that battle decisively won, the shoe is on the other foot. It's farmers, not consumers, that are at the receiving end now.

Almost all crops — whether maize, soyabean and cotton or *bajra* (pearl millet), *arhar* (pigeon pea) and *moong* (green gram) — are selling way below their MSPs. The sentiment is overwhelmingly bearish, even as the benefits of recharged groundwater aquifers and filled reservoirs from the surplus monsoon rain are likely to extend to the ensuing *rabi* (winter-spring) cropping season as well.

The coming months could see a shift in the government's policy focus, from an excessively pro-consumer approach to one that is more pro-farmer. These may take the form of restoring import duties on cotton and yellow/white peas, besides stepping up MSP procurement of pulses and oilseeds under its price support scheme.

Louvre heist: What makes the Yamaha TMax the perfect getaway vehicle

SOUMYARENDRA BARIK & ANIL SASI
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

A MASSIVE manhunt is underway in Paris after thieves carried out an audacious daylight heist at the Louvre on Sunday, taking off with eight of the museum's most priceless treasures in just seven minutes. Also in focus are the likely getaway vehicles — two Yamaha TMax scooters.

Masked and holding angle grinders, the gang of 'experienced criminals' arrived with a vehicle-mounted mechanical lift to access the Galerie d'Apollon (Gallery of Apollo) via a balcony close to the River Seine at 9:30 am. Such lifts, called 'monte-meubles', are popular in Paris due to many old buildings that have narrow stair-

cases and no lifts.

Two thieves used power tools to cut through the window and made their entry, following which they threatened the guards and made away with the jewels. Before their exit at 9:37 am, the thieves attempted to set fire to the lift, but were prevented from doing so by museum security staff on site.

According to French police, the thieves were inside for four minutes and made their escape at 9:38 am on two TMax scooters parked outside.

These scooters are capable of reaching well over 150mph and are extremely manoeuvrable — features that clearly came in handy while scooting off through Paris's narrow streets.

In fact, the Yamaha TMax is so popular



Soldiers at the Louvre museum, after the theft on Sunday. AP

with criminals and biker gangs that regular riders often complain of excessive stops

by the police due to its reputation. As such, TMaxes themselves are common theft targets, which makes them relatively expensive to insure.

Powerful and with massive storage

The TMax features the powerful 560cc 2-cylinder engine, has an aluminium chassis, and a design that is a cross between a scooter and a motorcycle. It also has motorcycle-style components like a front fork and dual front disc brakes for a fast, yet stable, ride on Paris's famed cobbled streets.

The scooter has a large 7-inch TFT display with Garmin navigation, alongside electronic cruise control and traction control, features typically found only on cars. The high specification motorcycle-style frame, combined with a large footboard area that comes with scooters, perhaps

added to the versatility of the vehicle, especially for a job like this.

The most important feature, though, is the large storage space under the scooter's dual seats. Designed to accommodate one full-face helmet or two jet helmets (as Yamaha claims), the storage would have been perfect for putting in the loot. And this sets it apart from using a motorcycle for the job, since they do not generally have a discreet storage area unless a rear storage is created by way of an aftermarket installation.

Expensive options

Also, since scooters are part of the traffic in Western European cities, this allows some scope for blending in. The massive size of the Yamaha TMax would still make it stand out a bit, but the TMax is particularly popular in countries like France, Italy

and Spain, which dominate its overall sales.

By some estimates, France is its second-largest market, making up 34 per cent of TMax overall sales, despite the TMax being among the more expensive scooters, costing as much as €18,000. In comparison, the sticker price on entry-level car models such as the Volkswagen Up, Fiat 500 or the Renault Twingo would be lower.

Thanks to the big capacity engine and generally ergonomic driving dynamics, these maxi scooters can reach top speeds of over 160 kilometres/hour, and can accelerate from 0-100 kmph in under 8 seconds, making them ideal getaway vehicles. Being an automatic CVT "twist-and-go" machine, the TMax requires no manual gear shifting, allowing the rider to focus entirely on manoeuvring. This simplicity makes it approachable even for less experienced riders — or as a quick steal-and-go option.

Now, return the favour

India Inc must use its cash and step up capex so that more jobs are created

INDIA INC COULDN'T have asked for more. Festive sales are booming with everything from cars and two-wheelers to durables and apparel being snapped up in large numbers. Companies and large retailers say footfalls in their showrooms have been high. Consumers are clearly choosing to spend their “savings” from lower income tax rates and goods and services (GST) rate cuts. The numbers are indeed impressive. Maruti Suzuki, for instance, is believed to have delivered a record 51,000 cars on Dhanteras. That’s precisely what the tax giveaways were intended to do—bring customers into shops and get them to loosen their purse strings. The question now is whether this bounce in demand will sustain. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman believes it will. To be sure, as the FM pointed out last weekend, the benefits to consumers are here to stay. So while we could see some moderation in sales after the festive season, households will retain the additional purchasing power.

At the same time, there are factors that could impact aggregate demand. For one, the high US tariffs are beginning to take a toll on the economy with the country’s exports to the US having fallen 1.2% in September. The total exports of gems and jewellery, for instance, slowed to 0.4% year-on-year (y-o-y) in September versus 15.6% y-o-y in August and this would have been largely on account of smaller shipments to the US. Again, outbound shipments of textiles and apparel contracted far more in September than in August. Until a trade deal is signed, the loss of income for workers in these labour-intensive sectors will impact consumption. Unfortunately, this comes at a time when the levels of job creation in the economy are already low and we are seeing less hiring and even layoffs in well-paying sectors such as information technology.

Also, while retail inflation might be very benign currently, and might stay this way thanks to the GST rate cuts, the runaway rise in prices in previous years has left absolute prices of a range of goods and services elevated. That then could crimp consumption beyond the festive season with households compelled to spend more on necessities or repay their loans. Of course, salary hikes from the 8th Pay Commission’s recommendations will benefit government employees but that is some time away. The government has done more than its fair share to boost consumption and now has limited room for more stimulus if it is to be fiscally prudent. In the meanwhile, without some meaningful capex by the private sector, it’s hard to see many employment opportunities being created. Sadly, Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy data reveals that the value of new projects announced fell 46% on-year and 16% sequentially in the September quarter. However, the share of the private sector was at its highest since December 2020.

Private final consumption expenditure has grown quite well in the past couple of years—topping 8% in a couple of quarters—and recording a good 7% in the June quarter. But that doesn’t seem to have convinced India Inc to add fresh capacity. An article by central bankers forecasts a rise in private sector capex of 21.5% in the current year to ₹2.67 lakh crore. The jump is encouraging but the absolute quantum is not so exciting. In this season of giving, corporate India must loosen its purse strings and spend some of the ₹1.4 lakh crore of cash it is sitting on.

CEO vibes as misleading as consumer angst

IN THE PAST three years, many of us have wrestled with the ebbs and flows of the consumer “vibecession”. Even as survey data hinted at widespread economic unease, the hard economic numbers—consumer spending and gross domestic product, in particular—generally portrayed resilience. Less discussed is the lacklustre sentiment coming from the c-suite, which has grown more and more puzzling as earnings growth has broadened. But here too, there are signs that the vibes might not be quite as ominous as they seem on the surface.

Coined by author and content creator Kyla Scanlon, vibecession acknowledges the gloom that’s descended on folks who, in a brief six years, have had to grapple with a global pandemic; surging inflation; a break-neck rate hiking cycle; an artificial intelligence revolution; and the upending of the global trade system through once-in-a-century tariffs. And all this processed through an evolving media ecosystem that rewards the loudest, most bombastic voices, with little regard for the facts. It also nods to how hollow these vibes can be, and how apt to mislead economists, analysts, and investors.

Take Business Roundtable’s CEO Economic Outlook Index, which, at 76.1 in the latest September 2-12 survey, remains meaningfully below its historic average. Similarly, the Conference Board’s Measure of CEO Confidence slipped to 48 (where readings below 50 indicate more negative responses than positive ones). While confidence has generally improved since the “Liberation Day” tariff announcement shocked business leaders in April, sentiment surveys remain

largely out of sync with a US stock market near all-time highs and profits that are expected to grow meaningfully across large-cap and small-cap US stocks.

The sense of macroeconomic inquietude is largely echoed across other c-suite surveys, but the details in the guts of the reports provide reasons to stay somewhat optimistic.

First, generally speaking, CEOs and CFOs tend to be more upbeat about their own companies than the economy broadly. For one example, consider The CFO Survey fielded by Duke University with the Federal Reserve banks of Richmond and Atlanta, which shows that firms’ own-firm outlooks are nearly 8 points higher than their expectations for the economy. Deloitte’s North American CFO Signals survey has a similar message. Just 19% of respondents thought the North American economy was “good” in the third quarter and 34% thought it would be better in a year. Yet, in the same survey, there was near universal agreement among CFOs that their own firm’s prospects were on the upswing.

Wall Street clearly shares firms’ optimism about their own corporate prospects. Consensus analyst estimates suggest that S&P 500 net income will grow 9.2% this year and 13.7% in 2026. While tech and communications services have dominated the index in recent years, earnings projections show that analysts expect other sectors to pick up the slack starting next year.

So it seems safe to downplay the c-suite vibecession. The one caveat is that a lot of economic resilience is already priced into stock and bond markets, and executives (who ought to have insider knowledge of the matter) seem to agree. According to the Deloitte survey, 49% of public US firms thought that the US equity market was overvalued (31% thought it was undervalued). If you break out the responses by industry, 61% of technology, media, and telecom CFOs said as much, as did 73% of life sciences and health care companies and 65% of public financial services CFOs.

All told, the c-suite vibecession feels a lot like what we saw with consumer vibes. Clearly, the confluence of events in recent years is leaving consumers and business leaders unsettled, and you absolutely can’t blame them. But for those of us trying to make sense of what it means for the real economy and market, the key takeaway is that we have to focus on what consumers and businesses know best—their businesses, households, and local communities. And above all, we have to keep a close eye on what they’re actually doing with their money, not just what they say.

WHETHER ECONOMIC FRICTION CAN BE RECONCILED WITH STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IS A FRAUGHT QUESTION

An uncertain and rocky ride

A “**ROCKY RIDE**” often creates or reflects “uncertainty”. Those two labels describe the current Indo-US relationship. US President Donald Trump’s latest claim that Prime Minister Narendra Modi told him in a phone call that India would stop buying Russian oil has been denied by Delhi. India has retorted that no such phone call took place. Questions about trust and dependability are raised by India, which earlier denied Trump’s assertion that he brokered an India-Pakistan ceasefire in the summer. Once again, is India lying, or is Trump?

Until Trump 2.0, Indo-US ties were marked by frequent references to the world’s largest democracies. But the democratic decline of both countries is now frequently and hotly debated among liberal democracies. Democracy also implied that India and the US could publicly disagree with each other because democracy is, first and foremost, about intellectual and political choice. But a hypersensitive Delhi has, on occasion, criticised the US media, which is politically and intellectually independent, for its biased coverage of India. Delhi also seems to forget that the Indian media and non-official Indians often criticise the US. In contrast, the American media and government don’t react to Indian stricture.

During the Cold War, the US displayed its superpower through its economic prowess and military alliances. Aligned America was ill at ease with non-aligned India, yet democracy defined their relationship during that period and for more than three decades after the Cold War ended. Today, non-alignment has the same meaning—maximising India’s foreign policy options. The terms “strategic autonomy” and “multi-alignment” are favoured by India’s cur-

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rent political dispensation.

After less than a year, Trump 2.0 has shown that multi-alignment is impossible. Strategic autonomy has been controversial, given India’s continuing dependence on Russian weapons. It is unclear why India has rejected the US’s F-35 aircraft. Strategic autonomy was on display when Indian troops took part in the Zapad-2025 drills, held in the Russia-Belarus Baltic area, where Moscow and Minsk simulated a nuclear strike on an “adversary”. This has been critically noted by Washington. Meanwhile, performing a typical U-turn, Trump has predicted that an expansionist Russia can be defeated in Ukraine, which only last February he dismissed as a country with no cards to play against Moscow.

India ended up praising Trump’s Gaza peace plan four times in one day as he demanded the Nobel Peace Prize for ending eight wars. India’s flattery has been to no avail. Perceiving itself as a global player, Delhi is against hyphenating India and Pakistan after clashes between their forces in the wake of the terrorist attack on Pahalgam. But India may have done much to hyphenate itself with Pakistan by repeatedly insisting that Trump did not mediate a ceasefire between them in May. Meanwhile, Rus-

sia, the country India asserts has never hurt its interests, supported Trump’s many declarations that he brokered an Indo-Pak ceasefire. India is upset with Trump’s 50% tariffs. Trump has even been pushing the European Union to introduce 100% tariffs on India.

At another level, a \$100,000 fee for H1-B visas, over 70% of which are claimed by Indian citizens, is tearing the US and India apart as both negotiate a trade deal. Trump is indifferent to Delhi’s red lines on American agricultural exports to India. But India must defend the interests of its farmers, who command the major share of its economy.

Trade and politics between conflicting countries sometimes mix. Authoritarian China has surpassed India economically over the last four decades. By refusing to give the US its rare earths for US industries, China has shown that its economic power gives it great bargaining power, which India, having made less progress, lacks. Consequently, China is among the largest trading partners of both India and the US.

This seems surprising in the case of India, given their territorial conflict and China’s occupation of stretches of Indian turf since 1962. India’s trade with China has actually increased since

The paths which India and the US seemed to tread together as the world’s largest democracies are now diverging in social terms

When justice prevails over monopoly



JYOTSNA SINGH KM GOPAKUMAR

Respectively health journalist and legal researcher on IP and trade issues; both are co-conveners, Working Group on Access to Medicines and Treatment

ON OCTOBER 9, the Delhi High Court delivered a landmark judgment that could redefine access to life-saving medicines in India. In rejecting Swiss pharmaceutical giant Roche’s appeal against Natco Pharma, the court upheld the right of people living with spinal muscular atrophy (SMA) to affordable treatment. Roche had sought an interim injunction against Natco, claiming the generic version of Risdiplam infringes Roche’s patent. The company argued that allowing a local producer to sell it would result in irreparable damage during the pendency of its patent infringement suit. The Supreme Court upheld the high court’s order, denying Roche’s appeal to block Natco’s generic version.

Earlier in March, a single-judge bench of the Delhi High Court had rejected Roche’s plea for interim injunction, finding that the validity of the patent is questionable. Roche immediately appealed against that court order—and lost again. The division bench largely agreed with the single-judge bench. It appreciated the credible challenge on the validity of Roche’s patent and found merit in the argument that the patent failed to qualify as an invention, while rejecting the appeal. As India’s laws don’t allow patents on mere tweaks to existing knowledge, the patent itself was an attempt to extend a monopoly. If allowed, Roche’s patent would expire in May 2035.

The rejection of Roche’s claim has

meant a new lease of life for SMA patients, who are mostly children. The rare genetic disease leads to degeneration of motor neurons, causing progressive muscle weakness. Children lose the ability to walk, sit, or move on their own. They find it difficult to even breathe due to weak respiratory muscles. The slightest cold can be a cause for alarm, and families lacking resources are forced to watch children die. Many patients die young, while those who reach adulthood are often severely disabled, and dependent on others to even drink water as they cannot hold a glass.

Risdiplam, though not a cure, halts the progression of the disease. If taken early, it allows patients to live relatively normal lives. But in the most vulgar display of greed, Roche made it almost impossible to access. It priced the medicine at ₹6.2 lakh per bottle of 30 tablets. At this rate, it costs nearly ₹72 lakh per year per patient. Melissa Barber, a health economist at Yale University, has estimated the cost of production. Her analysis shows that one year of Risdiplam costs ₹3,024 per patient per year, which includes a 20% markup. That’s 0.04% of Roche’s price (or 2,380 times ₹3,024).

This is not a case of recovering research costs or maintaining quality;

it is pure profiteering. The pricing makes the drug inaccessible even to upper-middle-class families, let alone the vast majority of Indian patients.

Natco announced that it will sell the medicine for ₹15,900 per bottle—a 97% reduction in price. The impact is clear when measured against the Indian government’s National Policy for Rare Diseases, which provides ₹50 lakh per patient annually. Under Roche’s monopoly pricing, that fund barely covered eight bottles—less than one year’s supply. On the other hand,

at Natco’s price, it can now cover 315 bottles for the same amount.

Depending on the age and weight, patients need one to three bottles per month. At reduced price, ₹50 lakh can cover nine-24 years of supply per patient.

Without the patent barrier, other companies can also enter the market and competition may further bring down the price. However, since rare diseases cannot achieve economy of scale, a centralised procurement system can reduce the cost drastically and facilitate supply. The government should ensure such procurement and provide Risdiplam to all patients who need it free of cost.

We can also expect more detection of cases with reduced medicine prices. Doctors are reluctant to diagnose

patients who can’t afford treatment. This will now change as more SMA patients will be able to access treatment due to more diagnosis.

This episode shows that mistakes in granting patents can have far-reaching consequences, leading to unnecessary litigation and denial of treatment. The high court judgments show that Roche was granted the patent wrongfully. Roche’s monopoly has cost a lot of lives. Therefore, the Indian Patent Office should take utmost care while granting patents.

The Risdiplam case shines a light on a deeper systemic problem: the growing imbalance between intellectual property protection and public health needs. The patent system was originally designed as a social contract—companies would get temporary exclusivity in exchange for genuine innovation that benefits the public. In return, they were expected to make their inventions available at fair prices. That bargain has been broken. Today, pharmaceutical giants routinely use patent laws as weapons to stifle competition and prolong monopolies. The result is a distorted market where the right to health becomes secondary to profit margins, as seen in this case.

Ultimately, this judgment is not just about one medicine or one company. It is about what kind of society we want—one that values monopoly profits, or one that ensures no one dies because they cannot afford the price of survival.

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Geothermal in the renewable mix

Apropos of “Heat of the moment” (FE, October 21), the National Geothermal Energy policy is welcome, since geothermal power is renewable energy that is stable and free from the intermittency of solar and wind energy. It is generated from the vast heat beneath the earth’s surface and such electricity could be used both for industrial and domestic purposes.

But the heat source is location-specific and exploration incurs high upfront cost with environmental concerns. It is not a cost-competitive energy like solar and wind, since scaling depends upon exploring viable resources which are scant and very costly to discover. Yet, a mission with gradual growth in tapping geothermal energy is vital in strengthening the capacity of renewable energy creation. —NR Nagarajan, Sivakasi

Beyond GST growth

By all accounts, it’s been a happy Diwali for India Inc. Sales of cars, white goods, and consumer durables have soared since goods and services tax (GST) 2.0 took effect on Navratri in late September. The Centre’s decision to slash tax rates on most goods gave companies room to reduce prices, and the industry wisely passed on these benefits to consumers, triggering a surge in festive demand.

Yet, the easy gains may now be over. For India to sustain this momentum, deeper and bolder reforms are imperative. With GDP growth holding at around 6.5%—healthy by global standards but below the aspirational 8% mark—India must now focus on enhancing exports, fostering innovation, improving infrastructure, and generating more quality jobs. —N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Debt Trap Inflation

In recent years, many advanced economies from the United States and Britain to France and Japan have taken on ever larger public debts, fuelled by generous welfare commitments, ageing populations and chronic budget deficits. What is striking now is not just the scale of the borrowing, but the growing sense that inflation may become the easiest, if most destructive, way out of it. When governments are trapped between rising spending needs and voter resistance to higher taxes, letting prices drift upward becomes the silent escape route.

Inflation in this context is not merely an economic symptom but a political decision. It functions as a stealth tax, eroding savings, punishing creditors, and redistributing wealth from the cautious to the indebted.

When public debt reaches or exceeds the size of a nation's economy, as in Japan or Italy, the temptation to let inflation nibble away at real debt burdens becomes strong. But the cost is borne disproportionately by those on fixed incomes, from pensioners in Britain to middle-class savers in America, who find their purchasing power eroded and their sense of financial security shaken.

The comforting belief that technology-driven productivity will save the day is also misplaced. Artificial intelligence may boost output, but in welfare states such as France, Germany and the Nordic economies, higher incomes automatically trigger higher pension and health-care costs.

Even the United States, which prides itself on fiscal flexibility, faces soaring interest payments that now rival defence spending. Productivity alone cannot offset the structural weight of ageing societies and the political unwillingness to cut entitlements. As governments lean on debt to finance political promises, they risk turning fiscal complacency into a moral hazard, where future growth is mortgaged for short-term popularity and electoral gain.

Inflation, once unleashed, alters behaviour in ways that deepen the crisis. Workers demand higher wages, firms pre-emptively raise prices, and central banks respond by tightening monetary policy, raising the cost of servicing debt. The result is a feedback loop: more debt leads to more inflation, which leads to higher rates and still more debt pressure. Japan's decades of ultra-low yields may not survive such a cycle; Europe and America are already feeling its strain.

The only responsible exit lies in political candour. Governments must admit that sustained deficits are not harmless, and that controlling inflation will demand unpopular trade-offs, whether higher taxes, spending reforms, or a rethinking of pension promises.

Central banks must resist the pressure to quietly monetise public debt. And citizens, particularly the middle class, must brace for an era where real returns on savings are uncertain and the social contract less secure.

If inflation becomes the chosen cure for debt, it will erode not just money's value but public trust itself. The world's richest democracies should be aware: the easy way out of debt may prove the hardest to live with.

Vanishing Audience

India's movie theatres are caught in an uncomfortable paradox. The country produces more films than any other, yet fewer people are turning up to watch them on the big screen. The reasons are not sentimental but structural, rooted in pricing, technology, policy, and shifting patterns of consumption that have transformed the business of cinema itself.

Over the past five years, average ticket prices have risen by almost 50 per cent, while footfalls have declined by around six per cent in the past year alone. The economics are brutal: for a student or a working-class family, a single visit to a multiplex can mean spending over a thousand rupees on tickets and snacks.

Theatres defend the prices, arguing that maintaining modern facilities ~ air-conditioning, sound systems, safety standards ~ demands steady revenue. But the result is a narrowing audience base. What was once mass entertainment is quietly becoming a premium product.

The pandemic marked a turning point. The months of lockdowns pushed audiences to digital platforms, and the habit stuck. Streaming subscriptions soared from fewer than 50 million in 2019 to over 140 million paid users in 2025. The pricing contrast is sharp: a month's access to multiple OTT platforms costs less than two multiplex tickets. Families have done the maths, and the living room has replaced the foyer as India's preferred screening space.

At the same time, the "theatrical window" between cinema release and streaming premiere has shrunk drastically, now often just four to six weeks. That short gap has eroded the urgency to watch films in theatres. Many viewers prefer to wait, especially for mid-budget or non-franchise films that lack the pull of spectacle. Theatres can no longer rely on volume; they must depend on event films that can command crowds despite high prices.

Meanwhile, the content landscape itself has fragmented. Regional cinema and smaller-budget productions have captured both audiences and critical attention. Hindi cinema's once-dominant position has weakened, while blockbuster failures have underscored how unpredictable theatrical returns have become. With lower occupancy, multiplexes have leaned even harder on food, beverage, and advertising revenues to stay afloat. But these are volatile and cannot offset the structural decline in admissions.

The challenge is not merely commercial, it is cultural. Cinema in India was once a shared democratic space that transcended class and language. If theatres become the preserve of the affluent urban elite, that inclusiveness will vanish. Policymakers debating price caps must also consider incentives for smaller theatres, regional exhibition, and differential pricing to keep the format viable.

The screen will not die, India's appetite for storytelling is too vast for that, but its audience is changing shape. Unless the industry finds ways to make the big screen accessible again, the theatre may remain alive only as nostalgia: a grand stage waiting for a crowd that no longer comes ~ or in the immortal words of Kaifi Azmi, "Dekhi zamaane ki yaari, bichde sabhi baari baari."

Education at Crossroads

The stakes involved in recruitment scams are directly relatable to the gloomy employment scenario; latest CMIE data shows that 44.5 per cent of Indians in the 20-24 age bracket are unemployed, despite many of them holding graduate, or even postgraduate degrees. On the other hand, industry leaders rue the shortage of good workers in their establishments. Thus, beyond a surfeit of candidates, there is another reason for mass unemployment; only 54.8 per cent of Indian graduates are considered employable

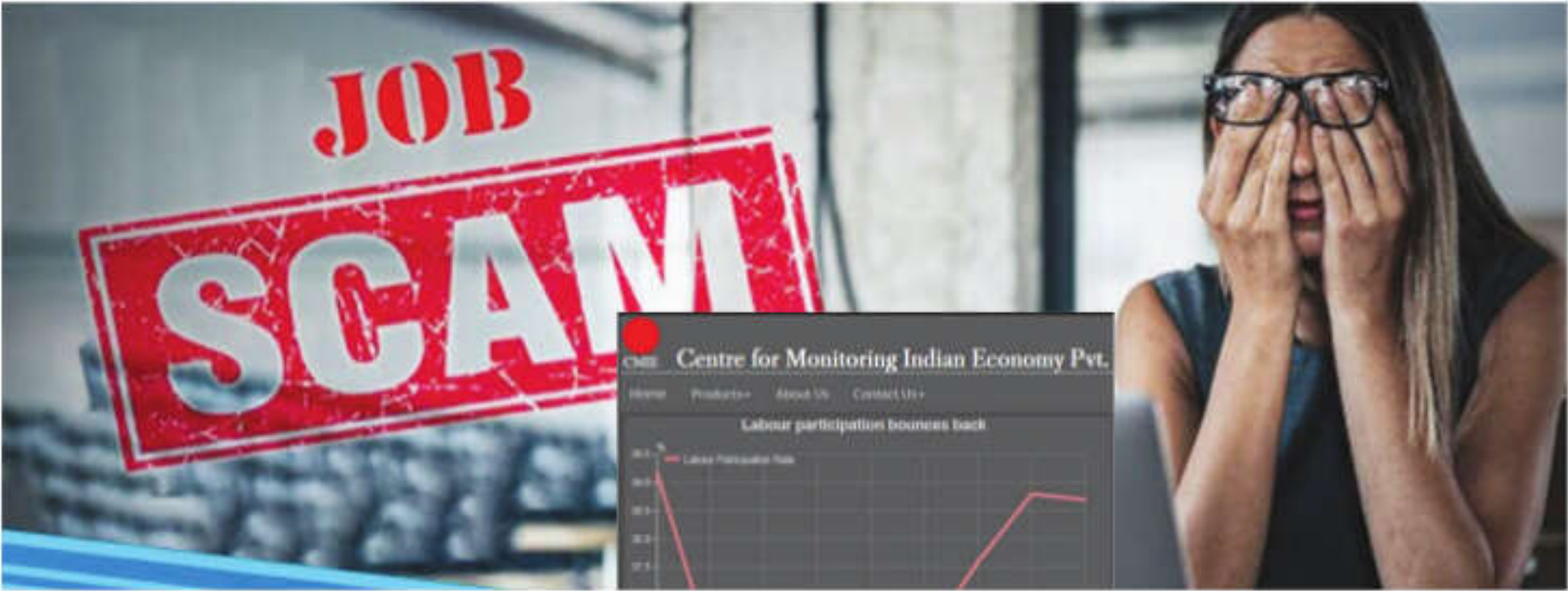
According to a report tabled in the Lok Sabha by the Minister of State for Finance, per capita net national income (NNI), in 2024-25 at constant prices was a meagre Rs 1,14,710. An analysis by Anil Swarup, a former Secretary to the Government of India, shows that after excluding the richest 5 per cent of population, per capita income of the balance 95 per cent of our population, at current prices, is US\$ 1,130 i.e., hardly Rs 1 lakh. Despite PM Modi's exhortation to youth to be job creators and not job seekers, it would be extremely difficult to set up a viable business with such limited resources ~ and the lack of vocational and business acumen that plagues Indian youth.

Young men, and young women also, are willing to work but the Government and society have no use for their services. According to the Madhya Pradesh Employee Selection Board (the infamous Vyapam in a new avatar), 9.76 lakh applications were received for 7,500 posts of constables, i.e., 130 applications for each post. Applicants included 42 Ph.Ds and over 12,000 engineers.

Similarly, 50 lakh applications, with a proportionately higher number of over-qualified applicants, were received for 60,000 police constable posts in Uttar Pradesh. The 2018 mega-recruitment drive of Railways was record-breaking in many respects; 2,83,747 vacancies were notified, for which more than 4 crore applications were received and 1,32,000 appointments were made. The balance appointments were not made even after four years; agitated candidates took to the streets, burnt a train, thereby drawing public attention to their plight.

The chronology of events is telling; tests were conducted in late 2020 and early 2021, and results were declared in December 2021 and January 2022, after which, instead of being issued with appointment letters, candidates were told that the tests they had appeared in were the first stage and another round of tests were to follow.

Apparently, the recruitment drive had fizzled out after conclusion of General Elections 2019 and Bihar Legislative Assembly Elections, 2020. The Railway's NTPC



(Non-technical Popular Categories) tests gained so much notoriety that the National Thermal Power Corporation Ltd. wrote to the Railways asking them not to use the abbreviation NTPC for their exam.

Leaked question papers of competitive examinations and delaying recruitment processes indefinitely are another blight on the hopes of unemployed youth. No examination seems to be untouched, be it constable recruitment tests in Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh, BPSC examination in Bihar, or the head clerk examination in Gujarat; leaks are being reported regularly from almost all States, for all levels of examinations.

Irregularities in Government recruitment is nothing new; a former Chief Minister of Haryana, Om Prakash Chautala, underwent ten years' imprisonment for illegally recruiting more than three thousand junior basic teachers. A decade ago, the Chairman of the Punjab Public Service Commission was arrested for running a Rs.100 crore job racket. Then there was the constable recruitment scam in UP, in which around 22,500 constables were recruited in highly suspicious circumstances, in UP Police during 2004-06.

More recent is the West Bengal SSC scam, where more than Rs.125 crore of cash, gold and foreign currency were recovered from a former education minister and his female associate, allegedly as a quid pro quo for providing teaching jobs. As of now, the Enforcement Directorate (ED) has attached unaccounted assets worth Rs 636 crore in the case.

The stakes involved in recruitment scams are directly relatable to the gloomy employment scenario; latest CMIE data shows that 44.5 per cent of Indians in the 20-24 age bracket are unemployed, despite many of them holding graduate, or even postgraduate degrees. On the other hand, industry leaders rue the shortage of good workers in their establishments. Thus, beyond a surfeit of candidates, there is another reason for mass unemployment; only 54.8 per cent of Indian graduates are considered employable (India Skills Report 2025).

In a recent newspaper article, Nobel Laureate Abhijit Banerjee, pointed out that most of our youth waste the best years of their life in preparing for Government

recruitment examinations at which they have little chance of succeeding. He suggested that instead of competitive examinations, which often test skills that are not relevant for the position on offer, there should be a five-year apprenticeship for all posts, after which the best candidates should be given employment.

However, Banerjee's proposed solution is like a strip of band-aid, for a deep wound. The malaise runs much deeper; societal attitudes place a government inspector much ahead of a self-made entrepreneur, what to say of a private sector executive.

The mindless rush for government jobs will only end when the glamour, power, and oopari aamdani of government employees is curbed ~ a highly improbable event. Then, we have remnants of our accursed caste system, which places a person doing nothing ahead of a person working honestly. Living in a small town during my younger days, I was perplexed when my farmer friends bemoaned the shortage of labour at their farms. One day, when I suggested to one of them that given their large family, they could themselves do much of the required work, I got a lesson in what an upper-caste person should do or not do ~ physical labour being a huge taboo.

Attitudinal change may take time; in the short-term tailoring the education system to jobs available could work wonders. At present, the antiquated syllabus of most universities prepares students for ministerial jobs ~ just as it did in Macaulay's time. With computers being far more efficient at repetitive tasks, there is little need for this kind of expertise; a telling indication is that even in reputed universities, graduate-level liberal arts and science courses draw few meritorious students ~ such courses being continued only because of institutional inertia and the for benefit of existing faculty.

Many engineering colleges established in the 1990s, which used to offer their seats at a premium, are now on the verge of closure. The reason is not far to seek; the IT industry that employed these engineers, most of them at basic jobs ~ is laying-off workers at record speed ~ in the last nine months 60,000 information technology (IT) employees have been laid-off in India, and the US IT industry has consistently been

laying-off around 1 lakh workers annually for the last few years. The situation is predicted to get much worse, with AI making much of the present IT workforce redundant.

The solution lies in a revamp of the education system by prioritising vocational education. National Education Policy, 2020 aims at integrating vocational education with academics, so that at least half of the students have exposure to vocational education by 2025. A Centrally Sponsored Scheme 'Samagra Shiksha', covering Government and Government-aided schools, was launched for this purpose.

However, with most people seeing vocational learning as good only for other people's children, even a small part of the target of fifty per cent enrolment in vocational courses, has not been achieved.

The only way to popularise vocational education is to involve local industry in this endeavour. They would let local educational institutions know of their requirements, and guide them in designing industry-relevant courses. Pass-outs from such tailor-made courses would not have much difficulty in securing jobs.

Such initiatives are being attempted at several places; the Government of Karnataka has signed an MOU with a car company that will first expose faculty members to the car company's manufacturing and learning practices, so that they can guide children effectively; the ultimate goal being to enable students from Grades 9 to 12 to gain hands-on industry exposure and develop essential skills for future employment.

The NEP document visualised an investment of 6 per cent of our GDP for education, but till today actual expenditure is only half of that. Graduates from adequately funded colleges like the IITs and the new crop of private universities, which charge a bomb, hardly face unemployment ~ either in India or abroad. The problem of unemployment can be solved only when all colleges offer the same quality of education ~ making their pass-outs employable.

Good education is essential for all worthwhile things in life ~ not jobs alone. As Michelle Obama, attorney, author, and the erstwhile American first lady, had pointed out: "The ability to read, write, and analyse; the confidence to stand up and demand justice and equality; the qualifications and connections to get your foot in the door and take your seat at the table ~ all of that starts with education."



Building Hà Noi into leading cultural industry centre in Asia

Hà Nội is not only the capital in terms of administration and politics, but also the cultural heart of the country. With over 6,400 monuments, thousands of traditional festivals, 1,350 craft villages, along with countless intangible cultural values, Hà Nội is blessed with a 'cultural gold mine' that few cities in the region have.

The issue is not just how many heritages Hà Nội has, but how we awaken, preserve and develop these values in the new era. To unlock its full cultural potential, Hà Nội needs a systematic, long-term and breakthrough development mindset, starting at the commune and ward levels ~ where the soul of heritage is kept and community memories and resident identities exist daily. First, there must be

a shift in cultural approach, not just preservation, but preservation for development, not just heritage, but a foundation for cultural industries, cultural tourism, humanitarian education and urban identity.

Second, we need to build cultural strategies at commune and ward levels based on the characteristics of each area. Where craft villages exist, develop handicraft tourism; where there are relics, plan experience spaces; where there is traditional folk art, support community playgrounds and teaching classes. Each ward and commune must become a small cultural centre with its own identity, a well-planned investment scheme and connected to the overall development of the capital. Third,

investing in people ~ specifically cultural officers, artisans and local communities ~ must be prioritised. Without people 'breathing life' into heritage, all programmes will be rigid and lifeless. Residents must be enabled to participate actively in creating and preserving culture. Fourth,

Hà Nội needs a modern cultural ecosystem where cultural infrastructure, technology, data, media, education, training and the economy are synchronously connected. Each commune or ward cannot operate alone without being part of a larger supportive system.

The municipal government must be the guide, so each locality can explore the valuable cultural treasure they hold, not just for today but for the future.

Letters To The Editor | ✉ editor@thestatesman.com

Blame game

Sir, This refers to the report "Amit Shah flags border breach issues, blames Bengal & Jharkhand" published today. The war of words between the Centre and the states over infiltrations has been long standing. The conflict reaches its acme ahead of elections. As the West Bengal Assembly election is nearing, the Centre, as usual, has become vocal on the infiltration issue.

While speaking to a national news channel last Saturday, Home Minister Amit Shah said: "The border is not an easy place to manage. There are rivers, forests, and hilly terrains where fencing or round-the-clock surveillance is not possible. Sometimes check posts get washed away." Those who have visited the Bangladesh or Pakistan borders know the challenges."



But he is in complete denial regarding the failure of the BSF and his own ministry. He has praised Rajasthan, Gujarat and Assam, stating there is no infiltration as the BJP is in power in those states. He has criticised the non-BJP ruled states like West Bengal

and Jharkhand for indulging infiltrations for political interests.

Border management and security are entirely the Centre's affairs. If infiltrations are to be stopped fully, both the Centre and the states should be more cautious about this serious issue. There should not be any blame game between the Centre and the states at the cost of national security for petty political interests.

Yours, etc., Haran Chandra Mandal, Barrackpore, 20 October.

Right call

Sir, This refers to "Apex court allows limited use of green crackers in Delhi-NCR". The Supreme Court has made the right decision by lifting the blanket ban. Even if the ban stayed, people would have bought

firecrackers from neighbouring cities.

The fireworks industry valued at around Rs 10,000 crore in Sivakasi, Tamilnadu is a significant contributor to the local economy and provides direct and indirect employment to millions of people.

We need to understand that pollution is a year-around phenomenon and there is no point unnecessarily targeting Diwali for it. The apex court has laid down some norms like banning the sale of series crackers, and time restrictions. Implementing them at the ground level would not be possible.

All stakeholders need to work together to devise an implementable comprehensive strategy to counter air pollution throughout the year and not only during the winter and festive season.

Yours, etc., Bal Govind, Noida, 16 October.



Gandhi’s struggle in Noakhali

SANGRAM DATTA

In the long, tumultuous history of India’s path to independence, some episodes stand out for the sheer intensity of human suffering they reveal. One such chapter is the Noakhali riots of 1946, a tragedy that exposed the raw fault lines between communities in Bengal on the eve of Partition. Nearly three-quarters of a century later, the incident continues to attract international attention. On 2 October 2019, BBC News Bangla revisited this dark chapter in a report titled “Gandhi in Noakhali: The Bloody Chapter of a Communal Massacre”, highlighting the horrors of the time and Gandhi’s courageous intervention.

By mid-1946, undivided Bengal was a tinderbox. The Great Calcutta Killings of 16 August 1946 had claimed nearly 4,000 lives, leaving over 100,000 homeless, and the aftershocks rippled across eastern India. Suspicion and animosity between Hindus and Muslims spread like wildfire, and communal distrust became inseparable from political discourse.

In Noakhali, a coastal district in what is now Bangladesh, tensions erupted on 10 October 1946 during the festival of Kojagori Lakshmi Puja. A rumour concerning Sadhu Triyambakananda, a visiting Hindu monk, sparked violent backlash. The monk, falsely accused of claiming he would please the goddess with the blood of Muslims rather than goats, became the symbolic pretext for a massacre that was already waiting to happen in a region rife with resentment.

Markets were looted, homes torched, and landlords targeted. Rajendralal Chowdhury, a prominent zamindar, was killed when his estate was attacked. Chittaranjan Ray Chowdhury,



another landlord, reportedly killed his family before taking his own life under siege. Violence quickly spread across Noakhali and neighbouring areas - Lakshmipur, Begumganj, Chhagalnaiya, and parts of Comilla - resulting in the deaths of more than 5,000 Hindus. Women faced sexual violence, and thousands were coerced into “voluntary” conversion to Islam, leaving a deep scar on the social fabric.

To understand the full magnitude of Noakhali, one must recognise the role of Golam Sarwar Hossaini. Far from being merely a religious leader, Hossaini was a political force. As head of the Noakhali Peasants’ Association (Krishak Samiti), he championed agrarian reforms, fought against exploitative moneylenders, and sought to abolish unfair rents. His popularity among poor Muslim farmers placed him in direct conflict

with the Hindu landed elite.

The Congress Party’s ambivalent approach to Hossaini - courting him briefly, then distancing itself - transformed a legitimate class struggle into a communal confrontation. Hossaini’s dual identity as a reformist leader and a religious authority complicated the situation: his influence could not be ignored, yet it provoked fear and resentment among the region’s Hindu elite.

In this climate of fear and hatred, Gandhi decided to enter Noakhali, arriving in November 1946. He did not come as a politician; he came as a pilgrim of peace. Over the course of nearly three months, he walked barefoot across 116 miles, visiting 47 villages devastated by violence. He prayed with survivors, spoke to Muslim villagers, and sought to rebuild trust between communities torn apart by bloodshed.

Gandhi’s approach was deliberate and deeply personal. In each village, he listened first, offering empathy before preaching reconciliation. His methods were simple yet profound: he urged forgiveness, restraint, and the value of human life. Yet, even amidst this moral authority, his mission faced challenges.

One anecdote, highlighted in the BBC Bangla report, illustrates the tense atmosphere he confronted. Gandhi’s goat, whose milk he depended on, was stolen. Later, during a meeting with Hossaini in Chatkhil, the same goat’s cooked meat was presented before him - a gesture meant either to mock the Mahatma or to test his composure. Gandhi, characteristically, said little. He continued his peace mission, aware that symbolic gestures of defiance could not undo the real human suffering around him.

Gandhi’s efforts, though heroic,

were constrained by the structural realities of the time. Violence flared again in early 1947, this time in Bihar, where Muslims were massacred in retaliation. Despite his interventions, the communal logic of revenge and the political realities of the impending Partition made his mission inherently fragile. On 2 March 1947, Gandhi left Noakhali, his work unfinished.

He expressed profound despair at the continuing plight of the region. “The situation in Noakhali is so unbearable that the Hindus must either leave - or perish,” he said, acknowledging the grim reality that moral persuasion alone could not resolve deep-seated hatred. His departure left behind a wounded land and a stark reminder that peace, even when championed by the greatest moral authority, is not easily restored in the aftermath of mass violence.

The Noakhali massacre is not merely a historical event; it is a cautionary tale. It demonstrates how freedom, pursued without reconciliation and understanding, can carry the weight of tragedy long after the guns fall silent. Gandhi’s journey through Noakhali was a testament to courage, compassion, and resilience - but also to the limits of human intervention in a society fractured by distrust and animosity.

As the BBC News Bangla report reminds us, the echoes of Noakhali continue to resonate even today, serving as a powerful reminder that the pursuit of peace requires vigilance, empathy, and the courage to confront hatred wherever it emerges. Gandhi’s pilgrimage remains a beacon for those who seek reconciliation, even in the darkest hours of human history.

(The writer is a Bangladesh-based freelance writer.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 22 October 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE telegrams are delightfully vague about the new autogiro aeroplane with which Mr. Courtney, the well-known pilot, has been performing such astonishing feats at Farnborough. All we are told about it is that the usual wings are replaced by “a four-bladed wind-wheel” fitted above the fuselage. What is a “wind-wheel?” Is it another name for the helicopter, or has Señor de la Cierva, the inventor, discovered some new method of controlling a motor-driven machine? In any case, we are told the pilot astonished the spectators with slow and fast flights and vertical drops, concluding by landing “very gently” from a height of only twelve feet. If the new machine does all that is claimed for it the autogiro aeroplane will usher in a new era in flying. Pending further developments in this direction, the attention of the flying world is centred upon the race for the Schneider Cup which is to take place at Baltimore on Sunday. We were able to print yesterday some interesting facts about this competition. Seven machines have entered, of which two are British, two Italian, and the remaining three American. The length of the course seems to vary, but this year the seaplanes, for which the new word supermarines has been coined, have to fly about two hundred miles up the inlet known as Chesapeake Bay.

News Items

BAN ON FASCIST VIOLENCE

MUSSOLINI’S CHANGE OF POLICY

(“TIMES” SPECIAL SERVICE.) LONDON, OCT. 20.

SIGNOR Mussolini has apparently returned from Locarno determined to purge Fascism of its undesirable elements.

It is announced, says the Times Rome correspondent, that a full inquiry is to be held regarding the activity and morality of all Fascists. In order to ensure that only those who are morally and politically worthy to be made Fascists shall be allowed to enter the organization, the Fascist provincial leaders have been instructed to enforce the strictest discipline and to punish severely those committing unjustifiable acts of violence.

Meanwhile, no more recruits are to be admitted to the Fascist party, and the carrying of arms during Fascist processions and demonstrations is strictly forbidden.

It is emphasized, however, that this new policy does not imply any change in Fascist tactics in regard to opponents of the Fascist regime.

ARMISTICE DAY

BANGALORE OBSERVANCE PROGRAMME

(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.) BANGALORE, OCT. 21.

THE Armistice Day observances at Bangalore, after the tolling of church bells, the silence and salutes by all military guards, will include an open air commemoration service for all Christian denominations on the grounds of Holy Trinity Church at 11 A.M. A parade service for Indian troops in their own lines under their own religious teachers will be arranged by each unit.

A football match England v. Scotland will be played.

A fancy dress dance is to be held at the United Service Club, other dances at the Departmental and Staff Club and the Opera House, and the sale of poppies, all are to lie in aid of the ex-services Association.

MOSLEM TOLERANCE

10TH CENTURY CHARTER FOR CHRISTIANS

LONDON, OCT. 21.

DR. Mingana, Assistant Keeper of Manuscripts, Ryland’s Library, Man-chester, who recently discovered the Syriac version of the Koran, has now unearthed another important document, which, incidentally, proves Moslems were the protectors of Christians.

It is a translation of the Charter of Protection granted by Muktafi II, Khalif of Bagdad, to the Nestorian Church in 1138, written in rhymed prose of a florid style.

It states that, in granting the Charter, Muktafi was following in the steps of all previous Khalifs. Hence the keynote of tolerance pervading the document is presumed to apply to all the Khalifs mentioned.—Reuter.

A man who made us laugh

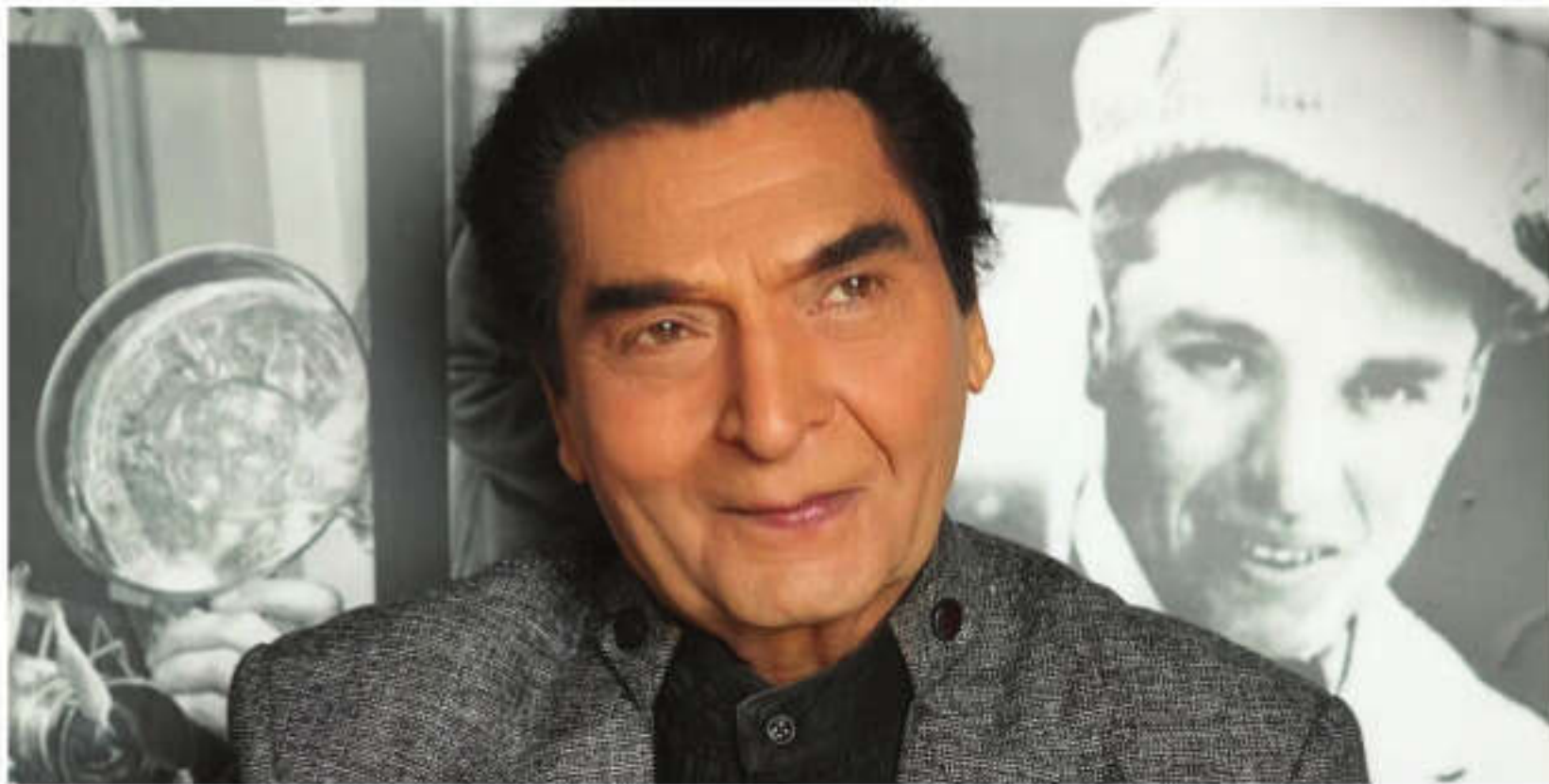
AKHILL PRATAP

Blessed are those who make others laugh. These uncommon people, gifted with a sense of humour and comic timing, are treated as jokers but the fact remains that they make the world a much better place to live in. India needs more of them.

It was this very month of 1984 when I encountered a film celebrity in person for the first time ever in my less ordinary life. The location was Dum Dum Airport of Calcutta (Now Kolkata) and the man...average height, average build, pinkish cheeks, clean shaven, curly haired and lost in his thoughts. Donning a light cream suit, a bag on his shoulder and a suitcase next to him, he stood quietly by himself. I had recognized the *Narad* in him.

I reserve special regard for every self-made guy, especially in a compartmentalized country like India, more so if he is talented. The chap standing there was both. Unfortunately, due to my own character flaw, I have never been starstruck till date. I just stood at a distance and watched my all-time favorite actor with excitement - an actor whom I mimicked in the annual Nautanki at my little village. By the time I met him, I had been fascinated by this gentleman’s performance in films like *The Burning Train* (1980), *Pati Patni Aur Woh* (1978), *Chala Murari Hero Banne* (1977), *Sholay* (1975), *Chhoti Si Baat* (1975), *Chupke*

Chupke (1975), *Namak Haram* (1974), *Abhimaan* (1973), *Bawarchi* (1973), et al where he literally stole



every scene he appeared in. I was in the process of mesmerization when the gent picked up his stuff and walked in my direction. He casually stole a glance and smiled at the delighted child in me. Before I could smile back and point him out to my mother, that handsome man ruffled my hair and walked away quietly just the way he did in his death. It was Govardhan Puja and I had just met Govardhan Asrani.

For the uninitiated, the legendary Asrani Sa’ was a multi-faceted personality with inexhaustible talent. From being a student of the first batch of my Alma Mater, Film & Television Institute of India, to being a Director of the same institute, Govardhan Asrani came from the Pink City which he always called *Jaipur*: the way typical Rajasthani pronounce Jaipur, the capital of Rajasthan. Taking off as a

voice artist at All India Radio, Jaipur to being a Lecturer at FTII, Pune, he covered a long uncertain journey by the time he turned 30 and hit the City of Dreams, Bombay (now Mumbai) in the early 1970s.

Doordarshan viewers of the 1980s-90s would remember his impeccable hosting of famous film shows and remarkable anchoring in TV Shows. This system faded when the film stars took over anchoring from non-stars in late 90s. The versatile Asrani Sa’ was already restricted to comic roles in Indian cinema, due to the impact he created; a classic case of paying for your success.

Nevertheless, it didn’t bother him as he had been there, done it all - from hero to villain, from secondary characters to comedy, from hero’s sidekick to parallel lead, from writer to singer, from director to producer,

from radio to movies via TV and from Rajasthan to Maharashtra via Gujarat. The song “*Binati Sunal Tanik Natkhat Gori Mori*” was sung by him for a movie, *Alaap*, which featured a bigger legend who was at his peak then - Amitabh Bachchan.

Wherever Asrani Sa’ appeared he left his distinct footprints and that’s the sign of someone unique, secured, talented and confident. He had created his own fan following. His influence can be gauged by the fact that for decades, TV viewers considered him to be the personification of *Narad* (the divine sage and official PR of Lord Vishnu as per Hinduism) when he played this character in the 80s DD serial - *Natkhat Narad*. Such masters are unstoppable. His professionalism was of such high standards that as a Lecturer at FTII, Asrani Sa’

apparently refused admission to a rich and famous youngster from a powerful and renowned film family because he didn’t possess the necessary educational qualifications. Despite this friction, they went on to do 16 films together. That youngster was Rishi Kapoor.

From 350 films plus in a 60-year long career to the upcoming *Bhoot Bangla* (2026), starring Akshay Kumar, Asrani Sa’ regaled us no end. Let me share a recent example of his lasting mass appeal. One of the most viral episodes till date of the popular Kapil Sharma Show, on Sony Entertainment Television (SET India), had him as one of the guests in 2022.

In the company of seasoned entertainers like Shakti Kapoor, Tiku Talsania, Pailintal and Kapil Sharma himself, Asrani Sa’ walked away with a standing ovation. Without taking other mediums into consideration, that episode has been viewed by 10 million on the YouTube Channel of SET India. Asrani Sa’ was 81 years old then.

No, wait. I am wrong. Such so-called non-stars don’t walk away quietly into the night. They leave behind a timeless legacy on the path followed by generations thereafter. Could there be another *‘Angrezo Ke Zamaane Ke Jailor’* in the last 50 years?

The heavens would be full of laughter today but you will be sorely missed down here. 41 years down the line, it’s Govardhan Puja again and I miss meeting Govardhan Asrani again.

(The writer is a movie and media professional.)

Crossword | No. 293270

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

10 11

12 13 14 15 16 17

18 19 20 21

23 24 25 26

27 28

29 30

Yesterday's Solution

MYOPIA SONATA

EWASFLY

EMBLEM CHATSHOW

PICCOLO

CHESSE THERAPY

SEARCH WARRANT

SLAMMUR

ABSENT ABITMUCH

LMHIT

NOGOARECAVEIN

TDABREEL

THESE BATTLE

OLD BO

ACROSS

1 All but the two of us will reject hot drink (4-4)

5 Where students will be affected: United States! (6)

10 Spain excluded from distribution of air miles, Libya likewise (9)

11 Queen of Hollywood, one providing light entertainment? (5)

12 Bird nesting in northern Europe (4)

13 Climbing out of bed after hot cavorting with a

15 Relaxed about extra secure borders (2,4)

16 Anne Boleyn’s deprived of any special honour (7)

19 Arsenal’s no 1 policy: to keep current manager ultimately in Emirates? (7)

21 Cornwall’s paradise for the country (6)

23 Endless confusion in European part of the world, here in the UK? (4,6)

25 In communication, ‘secure language’ (4)

27 Record company describes Simpson as an icon (5)

28/17 Sporting event having would-be scorer? (6,3,9)

29 He investigates lush type, heartless criminal (6)

30 Obsessive behaviour, say, to replace leader of country (8)

DOWN

1 Old part of England being captivated by introduction of Windows 10 (6)

2 Al Martino composed

3 Ban EU travel until, finally, non-existent (4)

4 Good press extremely desirable for wine department (7)

6 One not into unions receiving zero work benefits (10)

7 Unhealthy-looking food item (5)

8 Top of Sca Fell is bare (8)

9 Washing liquid containing red fruit (6)

14 What can be said of Trump or one like Trump? (10)

17 See 28 Across

18 Unidentified travelling salesmen (8)

20 Essentially, Leicester supporters wanting a German left-winger (6)

21 Second language German? That will cause a row (7)

22 One called Frank is 13 and reddish-brown (6)

24 Make scratches in roof of shopping centre (5)

26 Say yes to a female ditched in partnership (4)

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





Cold calculations

NDA and Mahagathbandhan are using schemes and promises to get votes

Rival fronts in Bihar are settling their internal dynamics even as constituents negotiate seat sharing and individual parties choose their candidates for the two-phase Assembly polls, on November 6 and November 11. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has had relatively smooth sailing in seat sharing with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Janata Dal (United), or JD(U) taking 101 seats each. The Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) is contesting 29 seats, while six seats each will be contested by the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) and Rashtriya Lok Morcha. The Mahagathbandhan or Grand Alliance of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the Congress, the CPI, CPI(M), CPI(ML) and others is, however, struggling with conflicting claims over seat sharing and even leadership of the alliance. In the clearest manifestation of the BJP's upper hand in the NDA, it will, for the first time, contest as many seats as the JD(U). The JD(U) had already lost its senior partner status in the alliance in 2020, but its leader, Nitish Kumar, continued at the helm as the BJP did not want to upset the apple cart. In 2025, the BJP appears more confident of being an authentic platform for the backward caste communities which considered Mr. Kumar as their key leader. Consequently, the BJP has indicated that Mr. Kumar may be replaced in the event of the alliance winning yet another term, beating anti-incumbency.

The BJP's strategy for primacy involves a combination of caste-based social engineering and a consolidation of horizontal identities such as youth, women, farmers and senior citizens. It is clever in accommodating caste interest groups, but is also using state resources in a brazen manner to offer welfare schemes that cut across caste. It is notable that the BJP, which decries subsidies, has designed schemes which are little more than ill-disguised efforts to purchase votes. A grant of ₹10,000 to start businesses has reached more than a third of women voters. Between the Congress and the RJD too, there is a cold war. As they enter the decisive phase of the battle, the two big parties appear to consider each other necessary but share little organic and emotional bonding. Their resolve and posture appear to fall short against the challenges. A formidable caste combination in Bihar is against the Mahagathbandhan, and the RJD has a past that continues to haunt it. The Mahagathbandhan is trying to match the NDA's schemes by making undeliverable promises. Unfortunately for Bihar, the strategies of both alliance groups ring cynical than optimistic.

Turning tides

Pakistan cannot ensure internal security by bombing Afghanistan

When the Taliban recaptured Kabul in August 2021, after two decades of insurgency, Pakistan viewed it as a tactical victory. Imran Khan, then Prime Minister, famously said the Afghans had "broken the shackles of slavery". But the Taliban's return emboldened the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), which is organisationally distinct from, yet ideologically aligned with, the Afghan Taliban. Over four years, Pakistan, particularly the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province bordering Afghanistan, has seen a dramatic surge in militant attacks. This year alone, at least 2,414 people were killed in militancy-related violence in Pakistan, according to an Islamabad-based think tank. Pakistan blames the Afghan Taliban for sheltering the TTP, better known as the Pakistani Taliban, and tensions escalated into full-scale cross-border clashes. On October 9, while Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi was visiting India, Pakistan carried out air strikes in Kabul, apparently targeting the TTP. These strikes triggered a week of cross-border attacks that left dozens dead, before a fragile Qatar-brokered ceasefire took effect.

When the Afghan Taliban were waging an insurgency, Pakistan offered them refuge and support. Pakistan's military establishment expected the Taliban to remain loyal once in power. But when the Taliban took over the reins in Afghanistan, the old patron-client relationship was replaced by state-to-state ties, with deep structural contradictions. The Pakistani Taliban, which oppose the merger of Pakistan's tribal areas with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, want their version of a strict Islamic code to be enforced and demand the release of TTP prisoners, drew inspiration from the Afghan Taliban's triumph. The Durand Line, the colonial-era border, re-emerged as another flashpoint as Kabul has never recognised it. Besides, Pakistan's decision to deport thousands of Afghan refugees strained ties further. What likely provoked the Pakistani establishment even more was India's diplomatic outreach to the Taliban. By carrying out air strikes on Kabul in response to militant attacks, Pakistan appears to be setting a new precedent – holding Kabul directly accountable for cross-border militant attacks – in a move reminiscent of India's doctrine of responding to terrorism with overwhelming force against Pakistan. Yet, the security crisis in Pakistan now engulfing its tribal areas is largely of its own making. For decades, it has followed a contradictory policy – fighting terrorism while harbouring terrorist/militant groups that were fighting its neighbouring countries. It backed the Taliban for over two decades, hoping that a Taliban-controlled Kabul would offer it strategic depth. That strategy has now backfired. If Pakistan believes that it can restore internal security by bombing Afghanistan, it is mistaken. Prolonged conflict and chaos will only deepen instability and strengthen insurgency.

For India, the challenge of adapting its foreign policy to emerging global realities is proving to be highly daunting for its foreign policy mandarins. Steeped in the traditions of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, they seem unable to come to terms with current realities. Adapting India's foreign policy to new global realities is, however, an urgent necessity.

With the advent of President Donald Trump in the United States, multilateralism or even plurilateral ways of advancing foreign policy, seem to have lost all meaning. India, however, is yet to demonstrate the necessary flexibility to deal with a seemingly friendless world, in its neighbourhood and well beyond. As days go by, India's trust deficit only seems to be growing, and the consequences can be serious.

The view about India

At one level, it would appear that India is losing its 'geopolitical relevance' despite the best efforts of its foreign policy establishment. Undoubtedly, Mr. Trump's pyrotechnics are aggravating the situation and his constant shifting of goal posts clearly demands extreme nimbleness on the part of the foreign policy establishments. For the present, India's foreign policy mandarins are finding themselves out of step, and increasingly isolated in the comity of nations. That we should find ourselves in this difficult situation is unfortunate. U.S. policy alone cannot be the reason, for there is much more happening across the world with India increasingly being seen as an 'outlier' when it comes to situations and events. All this at a time when India's economic heft is growing and it is among the top five economic powers of the world.

Two recent events bring this out in stark detail. Even as the world celebrates the new Gaza peace settlement – a critical breakthrough in the troubled politics of this region which was largely orchestrated by Mr. Trump and the U.S., with the support of Türkiye, Egypt, Qatar and a few other nations, India's absence or exclusion from the process smacks of its growing irrelevance in the politics of West Asia. That countries such as Türkiye, which demonstrate a degree of hostility towards India, should have been critical to the process of settlement adds further grist to India's growing irrelevance.

India appeared to compound this situation even further by sending the lowest level of representation for the grand reconciliation held to celebrate the end of the Gaza conflict and the return of peace to West Asia, at which most world leaders were present. For Indians across the world, this should be a wakeup call, something that needs to be remedied sooner rather than later.

Closer home, another signal event where India 'was a conspicuous absentee' was the Gen Z revolution in Nepal that seemed to spiral out of



M.K. Narayanan

is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

Adapting India's foreign policy to new global realities is a necessity

control. It only seemed to further demonstrate that India's foreign policy lacked both depth and content, even where its vital interests are at stake. The revolution, on India's doorstep, may have followed a slightly different pattern than the youthful dissent seen in Bangladesh and Indonesia previously, but the fact that India found itself helpless and a mere bystander when tumultuous events were taking place on its doorstep, should make discerning observers of the scene sit up and take notice.

Additionally, there is a disconcerting strategic angle to India's displacement from the driving seat, with this space being filled by countries not so well disposed, if not inimically inclined, towards India. Türkiye is a case in point, for during the recent India-Pakistan conflict, it was seen siding with Pakistan. Recently, Türkiye along with countries such as Egypt and Iraq were the toast of West Asia even as Mr. Trump spread benediction across the entire West Asia.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have signed on to a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement to treat aggression against one as against both, which only seemed to confirm India's position as an outlier in a region where previously Indic influence reigned supreme. All this would suggest that India's foreign policy has not demonstrated adequate ingenuity and flexibility to deal with the many vicissitudes and problems that afflict the region.

The situation in the neighbourhood

India cannot afford to be complacent. In its immediate neighbourhood, the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict threatens peace across a swathe of India's northwest. India may tend to view the attacks by the Afghan Taliban on Pakistani cities as retributive justice, but this would be shortsighted. Since Field Marshal Asim Munir effectively took over the reins of power in Pakistan, the threat that Pakistan poses to India and the region has gone up significantly. There is every need to 'unfang' the Pakistani dragon to ensure peace in the region. Being satisfied with the Afghan Taliban's attacks on Pakistan's rear can provide cold comfort at best. India's efforts should be on how best to create a conducive atmosphere where wars remain the last resort.

The rest of India's neighbourhood also remains in turmoil, and the challenge before India's diplomats is how to persuade countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal, which are currently perceived as hostile to India, to retrace their steps and make it worthwhile for them to maintain better relations with India. India-Sri Lanka relations are seen like an enigma wrapped in a mystery. While outwardly, India-Sri Lanka relations are on an even keel, it would be a mistake to underestimate the intrinsic potential of countries such as China to muddy the waters.

Vis-à-vis China, while India's diplomacy may

look like 'work in progress', it appears more an effort to patch over differences. This is specially so in the context of what may be termed as the current India-China bromance. Since Tianjin (August 2025), there has been a tendency in India's diplomatic circles, and possibly within the political establishment as well, to gloss over the June 2020 Galwan episode as a 'mere blip' in long-standing China-India ties.

This willingness to ignore the realities of a long-standing and fast-festering China-Indian border problem appears intended to give an impression that 'peace is at hand'. Little, however, has changed on the ground and the current diplomatic and military exchanges clearly lack candour.

Ties with China

Indians have seldom been able to comprehend Chinese elliptical thinking on global and regional issues, and even more so in its diplomatic manoeuvres. China-India ties today have not returned to the period that existed in 1988, following Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's highly successful visit to China. There is, hence, every need for India to be cautious; India would do well to acknowledge that China is a conundrum that is not easily cracked. China's President Xi Jinping is much less a statesman than his predecessors Deng Xiaoping and Hu Jintao, and India cannot be too careful in its dealings with Xi's China.

China and the U.S. are, without doubt, presently engaged in a 'cat and mouse game' on tariffs, and Mr. Xi's gambit, viz., immediate and tangible concessions for long-term gains (including entering into deals with regard to the resumption of exports on rare earth materials to the U.S.) cannot possibly be the model for India to follow or adopt.

Also, what India needs to be concerned about is that, friendly or not, China is steadily expanding its influence across much of the region to India's east, and adopting devious ways, including proliferation of small businesses at one level to a growing presence in universities, research centres and in cyber space at another, to establish its dominance and eclipse India's influence across this region. India's needs to be wary and it is increasingly becoming evident that as the U.S.'s influence wanes across much of the world and is steadily being eclipsed in large parts of Asia, a new China-led order is emerging in East and Southeast Asia.

This article, hence, should be seen as a wakeup call. Reiteration of the old adage that 'eternal vigilance is the price of liberty' is important. India's future is assured, but it also depends on how much effort is made to protect its brand of civilisation. It is quite distinct and different from that of China, the West, the Persian/Arab variety and other forms of democracy that had held sway over the years.

Unreliable air and noise data, real-time deception



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Kushagra Rajendra

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With monitoring networks releasing misleading raw data, policy efficacy, public trust and international credibility become weak

Dave, in the Rajya Sabha, highlighted serious flaws in India's urban noise-control policy. The noise monitoring network was flawed from the outset, with sensors failing to capture actual decibel levels. India continues to rely on the outdated Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000, which has been criticised as being inadequate. The decibel limits fall short of WHO guidelines, enforcement is weak, and penalties carry little deterrence.

Technology is deployed as spectacle without scientific discipline. Shiny hardware without rigour breeds opacity. Misleading data downplay hazardous levels as merely "moderate." In a democracy, misleading the public on health is deeply troubling. Governance becomes a contest between citizens and industries: flawed numbers favour inaction and the voices of citizens demanding protection under the right to health and life are suppressed.

In Delhi, misleading Air Quality Index often delays judicial intervention. In Lucknow, inaccurate noise data weaken fundamental rights under Articles 19 and 21. The judiciary too has begun to acknowledge this. In a recent order, the Supreme Court of India transferred pleas highlighting noise pollution around Delhi Airport to the National Green Tribunal, underscoring that such disputes demand specialised adjudication. This recognition makes it clear that noise is no longer a nuisance but a constitutional and public health issue.

The missing pillars

The CPCB does have clear guidelines on sensor location, calibration and periodic audits. But enforcement is lax by design, political pressures abound, and independent scientific scrutiny is nearly absent.

The irony is glaring. Class-I quality sensors for air and noise monitoring are installed at enormous public expense by the CPCB under the aegis of the Environment Ministry. There is no

independent panel to review monitoring systems as in international norms. Without third-party audits and transparent processes, public trust in official data will continue to erode.

The latest Air Quality Life Index report (Energy Policy Institute) shows that if Delhi's air met WHO standards, average life expectancy could rise by 8.2 years. Across India, pollution silently erodes life expectancy by close to five years. The jugglery by agencies with misleading data diverts focus from accountability

This debate is not about devices but about people's health. Fresh scientific evidence shows that exposure to pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) weaken lungs and accelerate myopia. When air quality indices misrepresent reality, children with asthma are exposed to unsafe air. Likewise, flawed noise monitoring leaves infants and the elderly unprotected. Behind every misleading index or incomplete dataset lies preventable harm.

Science as the foundation

For monitoring to inspire trust, science must guide its foundation. Install sensors strictly according to standards with independent experts. Keep raw data open, enable routine third-party audits and create formal citizen oversight.

The experiences of Delhi and Lucknow are a warning: environmental monitoring cannot be treated as a bureaucratic formality. Real-time technology is meaningful only if it reflects reality. In India's rapid urbanisation, environmental data will shape policy, inform the public and represent the nation globally. If the data regime is misleading, the price will be paid not in reports but in children's lungs and the sleepless nights of citizens. Scientific rigour, transparency and public trust must be the bedrock of India's environmental monitoring revolution. Otherwise, real-time networks will turn into real-time deception.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Toxic air

It is intriguing to note that Delhi, of all the cities in India, is always in the news on account of severe air pollution after Deepavali. A friend of mine living in Delhi begs to disagree with this oft-repeated notion about the poor Air Quality Index (AQI) in Delhi. According to him, every other month, farmers in Punjab and

Haryana burn agricultural waste leading to smog ever so frequently in Delhi. This friend also disagrees with the contention that vehicular traffic is a major contributing factor. I think the authorities should mull over the ground-level situation by inviting people's opinions on how best AQI levels be controlled and only then

decide on long-term measures to control air pollution in Delhi and other cities.

Govardhana Myneedu,
Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

The policy of permitting so-called "green crackers" while banning regular ones is akin to banning *beedis* but allowing filtered cigarettes — cosmetically

progressive but substantively hollow. In a city that is already gasping, this is a distinction without a difference. If cultural pressure and economic stakes could be overridden earlier, they can be overridden now, especially when the winter inversion is already trapping India's air under a toxic lid. The so-called "middle path"

merely licenses a controlled deterioration.
Harsh Pawaria,
Rohtak, Haryana

Escalatory

The Defence Minister of India recently issued a veiled threat to Pakistan, which sparked a counter from the Pakistan Army chief. This exchange of rhetoric is perhaps reckless

and endangers south Asia's fragile peace. Already scarred by conflict in Afghanistan, our region cannot afford this sort of escalatory brinkmanship. There ought to be diplomacy and dialogue.

P.H. Hema Sagar,
Secunderabad

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

We need a law to protect domestic workers

In January, the Supreme Court directed the Union government to enact a comprehensive law to stipulate the rights of domestic workers and set up a committee to look into setting up a framework for it. The Court directed the committee to submit a report in six months. Whether this has been done or not remains unclear.

Status of domestic workers
India is estimated to have 4 million-90 million domestic workers. A majority of them are women and girls and most of them are from Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities, rendering them particularly vulnerable to structural power differences.

The Court's recent directive was issued as part of criminal proceedings involving the confinement and trafficking of a female domestic worker from a ST community from Chhattisgarh to Delhi. These proceedings bring attention to several considerations that are important in devising rights and protections for domestic workers. Workers toil in the homes and workspaces of other people, which has the effect of atomising them. Inspections into workplace conditions become nearly impossible. These workers may be subject to harassment, abuse, and segregationist practices. Child labour is rampant in this sphere. Exploitative employment agencies and brokers frequently mediate relationships between employers and employees. While some workers labour full time in a single household, others work across multiple households for a few hours each day. This can make the stipulation and enforcement of minimum wages, work hours, and leave entitlements tricky.

Many workers are migrant workers who need protections across State borders. Workers also routinely come in from neighbouring countries. The absence of a separate national-level legislation to look



R. Geetha

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The absence of a separate national-level legislation to look into protections and benefits hurts workers in multiple ways

into protections and benefits hurts workers in multiple ways.

In recognition of their contributions to the global economy, the International Labour Organization passed a Convention (no. 189) in 2011 to ensure the rights and protections of domestic workers. While India voted in favour of the convention, it is yet to ratify it. As noted by the Court, there have been multiple attempts to pass legislation at the national level from the 1950s. The National Platform for Domestic Workers (NPDW) was formed in 2012 specifically to demand a comprehensive Central legislation for domestic workers. The NPDW drafted a Domestic Workers (Regulation of Work and Social Security) Bill in 2017, but this Bill was never enacted into law. While the Court's new directive is welcome, the fact that the Court directed various ministries to constitute a committee comprising "subject experts" with no representatives of domestic workers is a matter of concern.

Gains made at the State level

In Tamil Nadu, where there are about 2 million domestic workers, a welfare board has been set up under the Tamil Nadu Manual Worker Act, 1982. Through it, registered workers receive benefits, including pensions, maternity benefits, educational assistance for children, and accident relief. However, a very small number of workers are actually registered. While minimum wage is stipulated at ₹37-39 per hour, workers tend to make much less. They are seen as "part-time" workers because they may not work full time in a single household. In response to a plea filed by a domestic worker in Dindigul, the Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court directed the State government to consider enacting a special legislation to protect domestic workers.

Meanwhile, the Karnataka government announced the introduction of the Domestic Workers (Social Security and

Welfare) Bill, 2025, which looks to regulate the working conditions of domestic workers. It requires that employers compulsorily register domestic workers with the government and commence employment with a written contract that includes an agreement on wages and work hours. It entitles workers to minimum wages, overtime pay, and weekly holidays. Importantly, it requires employers to contribute 5% of wages to a welfare fund that will distribute welfare benefits to domestic workers.

What should be done

Tamil Nadu is one of only 12 States that stipulates minimum wages for domestic workers. These wages must be updated and increased, while all States must be required to stipulate minimum wages for domestic workers. In addition to the already-mentioned provisions in the NPDW draft Bill and the Karnataka legislation, the NPDW recommends that all employers, employment agencies, and workers be compulsorily registered with the State government. A workbook must be issued to each employer through a tripartite board constituting employers, employees, and the State. This must be maintained by each employer and employee and endorsed each month. Women workers have reported not being able to access local complaints committees set up at the district level under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act. These complaints committees must be set up at panchayat and urban local bodies.

Housing is another critical consideration for domestic workers. While workers in Tamil Nadu received some assistance during the pandemic-induced lockdowns in 2020 and 2021, several could not pay rent. Rather than intermittent relief in the event of a "crisis", structural solutions are imperative to protect the women in this critical workforce.

The long wait for a resolution

A High Court order on the Munambam dispute has deepened the legal tangle

STATE OF PLAY

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The recent order of the Kerala High Court, declaring the disputed Munambam holding as not a Waqf property, has deepened the legal imbroglio rather than offering a lasting solution to the vexed issue.

The judgment of a Division Bench of the High Court, which found the actions of the Kerala Waqf Board regarding the Munambam land to be bad in law, stopped short of striking them down. The order has put the ball back in the court of the Waqf Tribunal, which is already seized of the matter.

Two sections of Kerala society, with the backing of various political and religious formations, are engaged in a pitched political and legal battle over the nearly 400-acre holding located along the coastal belt of Ernakulam district.

The Bench passed a landmark order, while striking down a single judge's order, which cancelled the appointment of a former judge of the Kerala High Court as the Inquiry Commission into the Munambam issue. The Bench also termed the Kerala Waqf Board's notification and registration of the Munambam land as Waqf as an act of land grabbing with an eye on the valuable real estate.

A setback

The observations of the court are a major setback for the Board, which is mandated by the Waqf Act to protect and manage Waqf properties. The Board is now left with no option but to challenge the decision. The Board can either go for a review of the decision be-

fore the Division Bench, which passed the order, or approach the Supreme Court with a Special Leave Petition. In either case, the agency will have to spend much of its energy and resources on challenging the order, which has raised serious questions about its functions.

In its elaborate order spread over 122 pages, the two-member Bench also gave little consideration to the judicial wisdom of the single judge, who cancelled the government order appointing the Inquiry Commission. The Bench could have taken a lenient view of the conclusions of the single judge in the case than terming it as "ex facie erroneous and having been passed in ignorance of Mussalman Waqf Act 1923 and the Waqf Acts of 1954 and 1995, as also the "pronouncements of the Supreme Court from time to time."

What has come as a real surprise is the observation of the Division Bench regarding the possibility of even the High Court building or State Legislature Complex being declared as a Waqf property if the Board is allowed to continue with its "arbitrary declaration" of Waqf properties, as in the case of Munambam.

It may be recalled that some far-right organisations had earlier raised the spectre of some historical monuments being declared as Waqf pro-

perty if the provisions of the Act were not struck down. The sarcastic comments of the Bench, presumably, have not gone down well with the stakeholders. The observations, which were given special emphasis in the court order, apparently lacked any legal backing or justifications and could leave wider socio-political ramifications.

Continuing fight

As the legal war over the Munambam holding assumes new proportions, the plight of the bona fide owners of parcels of land in the coastal village is far from over. They had been petitioning the authorities, right from the village offices to the top political offices in the country, seeking justice. They have also mustered the support of various socio-political organisations in their fight for their holdings.

However, the claims of the villagers are keenly contested by the Board and the organisations, which are determined to restore what they term as the alienated Waqf properties in the State. The organisations which have committed themselves to the restoration of Waqf properties say that around 30,000 acres of properties given in Waqf have either been encroached upon or changed hands, thus defeating the very purpose for which the properties were dedicated.

It may take a few more years and long-drawn legal battles, even to the highest court of the country, to find a judicial finality to the contentious issue. Endless litigation and delayed delivery of justice are what appears to be on the cards for the Munambam residents as well as the organisations fighting for the restoration of Waqf properties in the State.

Does India's 1.9 fertility rate reflect reality?

The large gap between real and calculated Total Fertility Rate is particularly relevant in a developing country such as India

DATA POINT

Anish Gupta
Shubham Sharma

The recent United Nations Population Fund's State of World Population 2025 report shows that India's current Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has fallen to 1.9. This sub-replacement fertility has shifted the focus of discourse from the belief that rapid population growth is the root of economic backwardness to new concerns about ageing populations.

The report brings urgent questions to the forefront. Does the methodology used to calculate TFR accurately reflect public perception? And could the decline in TFR pose risks to India's economic trajectory, thereby creating the need to raise the TFR?

Perceived meaning of TFR

In public discourse, TFR is interpreted as the average number of children a woman would bear by the end of her reproductive age. However, it is a statistical measure which calculates the average number of children a woman would have in her lifetime if she experienced the current birth rate trends at each age cohorts from 15 to 49 years throughout her reproductive life.

The reproductive age is divided into seven five-year age cohorts: 15-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, and 45-49. For each age cohort, the number of live births per 1,000 women in a given year is calculated; this is known as age-specific fertility rate (ASFR). These ASFRs are then converted into per-woman figures by multiplying each rate by five (since each cohort covers five years) and dividing by 1,000. Adding up the figures for all seven cohorts gives us the TFR.

This calculation assumes that that today's 15-19 age cohort will show fertility patterns similar to today's 45-49 cohort (or other older cohorts) once they themselves

reach that age, and vice versa. This is known as the synthetic cohort assumption.

Limitation of TFR calculation

Real fertility preferences do not follow the synthetic cohort assumption. They often evolve differently, as future younger cohorts are likely to exhibit preferences that differ from those of today's older women.

Another important limitation is that it is a point-in-time measure, which is highly sensitive to a phenomenon known as the tempo effect. This refers to changes in the timing of childbearing, not necessarily reduction in the number of births. Since TFR is calculated from the ASFRs of women in a given cohort, births postponed are not captured in that year's data, so the fertility of women who delay childbirth is effectively 'missed' even though they may have the same number of children later. Thus, tempo effect artificially reduces the TFR and gives a false impression of lower fertility. The phenomena exacerbates when birth postponement takes place in the majority of the younger age cohorts. Interestingly, today's postponement will overestimate future TFR calculation. This large gap between real and calculated TFR is particularly relevant in India, which is simultaneously undergoing economic, social, and cultural transitions. These include rising female literacy and a more career-oriented outlook among women that creates a stronger incentive to delay childbirth.

The ASFR trends presented in **Charts 1 and 2** reflect a shift in childbirth patterns, with fertility being postponed from younger to older cohorts. In urban areas, the decline in the share of ASFR among the youngest two cohorts (15-19 and 20-24) and the corresponding increase across the older cohorts (25-29 to 45-49) strongly indicates a postponement of fertility preferences rather than an overall decline in fertility.

In rural areas, a decline in the share of ASFR is observed in the 15-19 age cohorts, along with an increase in the 20-24 to 30-34 age cohorts. This also suggests a postponement of fertility preferences. However, unlike in urban areas, this shift is largely confined to the middle age cohorts. The declining share of older cohorts (35-39 and above) points to a reduction in fertility preference in these age cohorts.

Another key limitation of the TFR is its exclusion of births to women below 15 and above 49, based on the assumption that such cases are negligible. This assumption is less valid in developing and Islamic countries where early marriages are common. Owing to legal and social sensitivities, births to underage girls are often concealed. Moreover, survey enumerators may also avoid uncomfortable questions, as noted in the 2020 DHS Methodological Report.

Given these problems, and amid growing calls to raise the TFR due to concerns over ageing population, it is important to recognise that historically, sub-replacement fertility has not constrained economic progress, as evidenced in Europe, the U.S., and several newly industrialised economies. Moreover, India has missed the opportunity to fully harness its demographic dividend, constrained by persistent youth unemployment, a challenge likely to intensify with automation and AI. More importantly, the current size of the elderly population remains largely independent of present fertility trends. While caring for the ageing population is a moral responsibility of the state, its urgency does not automatically increase simply because of a reported decline in TFR.

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Delayed and not counted

The data for the charts are based on the authors' calculations using unit-level data from the NFHS rounds 3, 4, and 5



- 1 The reproductive age is divided into seven five-year age cohorts: 15-19 to 45-49
- 2 For each cohort, the number of live births per 1,000 women is calculated (ASFR)
- 3 These age-specific fertility rates (ASFRs) are then converted into per-woman figures

Chart 1: Urban age-specific fertility rate (ASFR) contribution to total fertility rate (TFR)

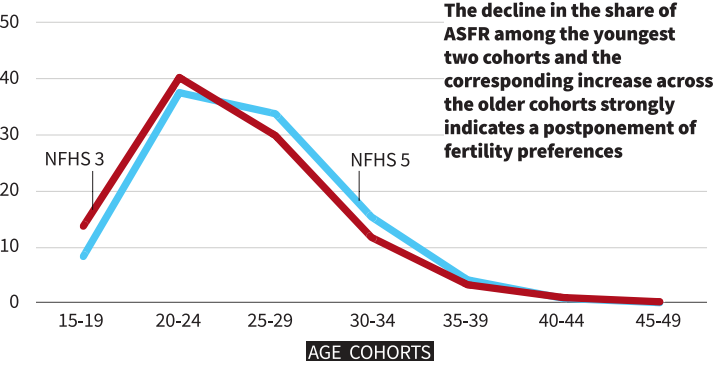
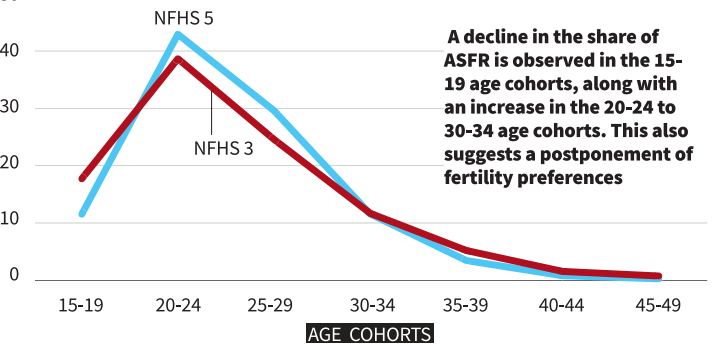


Chart 2: Rural age-specific fertility rate (ASFR) contribution to Total Fertility rate (TFR)



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 22, 1975

Jobless in Bombay living off jobless

Bombay, Oct. 21: Many jobless people in Bombay have been found living off the jobless.

Their strategy is to float employment agencies offering attractive openings in the oil-rich Sheikdoms of West Asia.

Several agencies have been exposed by the victims in the last two months. But a majority remain silent sufferers to avoid legal procedures.

The agencies canvass for candidates seeking attractive salaries in the Gulf region and collect advances ranging from Rs. 350 to Rs. 6,000. The applicants are then asked to wait for appointment order and necessary travel documents, including passports and no objection certificates.

When nothing materialises even after months, the victims seek fund from the agencies who usually issue cheques that bounce at the bank counter.

In some cases, the agencies arrange no-objection certificates and send applicants abroad. On landing there, they would find to their utter dismay that the travel documents empowered them to stay in that country only for 48 hours.

The agencies are said to be operating also in remote areas in Kerala through their agents. Remittances to city-based agencies by post from gullible people have been made. Many victims arranged for the advance by pawning their ornaments.

Quite a few even quit their jobs in anticipation of lucrative salaries in the fabulous Sheikdoms.

In a case reported by the police this month, about 100 persons were collectively duped of over Rs. one lakh. The victims hailed from Kerala, Karnataka and Gujarat.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 22, 1925

Storm havoc in Rangoon

Rangoon, Oct. 21: The Collector, in the course of his report to the Chief Secretary, regarding the damage caused by the recent cyclone, says: The schooner - "Wavelet", dragged foul of the brig "Delhi," both sustaining damage. One cargo boat sank alongside the S.S. "Burma," off the Botataung fixed moorings. Two cargo boats sank off the Thompson Street jetty 50 or 60 squared logs of timber, adrift in the harbour, damaged and sank many small fishing boats and Sampans.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Number of new births in Italy in the first seven months of 2025

1.98 In lakh. This is a 6.3% decrease from the same period of 2024, the national statistics bureau ISTAT said. Last year, the country recorded 3,70,000 new births, the lowest figure since Italy's unification in 1861, and the 16th year in a row in which the figure declined. REUTERS

Number of cases registered in Delhi related to crackers

150 Police have registered more than 100 cases across Delhi over alleged violation of the Supreme Court's guidelines on bursting firecrackers. The Supreme Court has restricted the bursting of firecrackers to October 19 and 20, between 6 AM and 7 AM, and between 8-10 PM. PTI

Afghans deported from Pakistan's Punjab in October

22,000 The Punjab government of Pakistan this month deported around 22,000 Afghan nationals residing in the province illegally besides closing down the last Afghan refugee camp, a Punjab police spokesperson said. PTI

Russia-linked suspects held in Poland since the year 2022

55 These people, suspected of acting on behalf of Moscow, have been detained in Poland since the start of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "These people who acted to the detriment of Poland have all been charged under Article 130 of the penal code", said Jacek Dobrzynski. PTI

The estimated cost to rebuild Syria after the civil war

216 In \$ billion. The cost is almost 10 times Syria's 2024 gross domestic product. The World Bank says the rebuilding may cost between \$140 billion and \$345 billion, but their "conservative best estimate" is \$216 billion. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On CBI takeovers: a judicial standpoint

The Supreme Court has transferred the investigation into the Karur stampede from an SIT to the CBI. However, the top court's reasoning, entirely based on petitioners' pleadings, unaccompanied by prima facie evidence, is simply not enough to shift a case to the CBI

LETTER & SPIRIT

Krishnadas Rajagopal

On October 13, the Supreme Court abruptly applied the brakes on a fledgling investigation of a Madras High Court-appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) and a State-constituted Enquiry Commission headed by Justice (retired) Aruna Jagadeesan into the Karur stampede (on September 27, 41 people were killed during a stampede at a political rally hosted by actor-cum-politician Vijay in Karur district, Tamil Nadu).

Both the SIT and Justice Jagadeesan were directed to immediately hand over papers and evidence to the officers of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The top court's decision to shift the Karur stampede investigation to the CBI was powered by two "sweeping" factors – the "political undertones" of the case and a perception that top-ranking Tamil Nadu Police officers made comments in a press conference to the extent that their subordinates were not at fault. The Bench of Justices J.K. Maheshwari and N.V. Anjaria concluded that the conduct of the State's senior police officers "may create doubt in the minds of the citizenry about the impartiality and fairness of the investigation", necessitating its transfer to the CBI.

The CBI is a central agency governed by the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946 which traces its origins to the Special Police Establishment (SPE) formed in 1941 to weed out corruption in war-time procurements. Once coined by the Supreme Court as a "caged parrot" of the Centre, the CBI is considered a premier investigative body which probes a wide range of crimes with inter-State and national ramifications.

However, the top court's reasoning, entirely based on petitioners' pleadings and "sweeping remarks" unaccompanied by *prima facie* evidence to show the SIT probe was riddled by bias, are simply not enough to shift a case to the CBI without the express consent of the State government. While it is well-settled that a constitutional court can order a CBI probe as judicial review is part of the Basic Structure, the court, be it the Supreme Court or a State High Court, must not direct a CBI enquiry in a "routine manner". A judicial order of transfer of a probe to CBI is only the 'last resort'.

'Measure of last resort'

The Supreme Court has a well-developed jurisprudence, evolved through judgments, which imposes significant self-restraint on the exercise of the extraordinary constitutional power to order a CBI probe under Article 32 (for the Supreme Court) or Article 226 (High Court) of the Constitution. The top court has held that the exercise of inherent powers to direct the CBI to investigate must be exercised "sparingly, cautiously, and only in exceptional situations". The court has consistently cautioned that a CBI investigation should not be directed "merely because a party casts certain aspersions or harbours a subjective lack of confidence in the State Police".

"It goes without saying that for invoking this power, the court concerned must be satisfied that the material placed *prima facie* discloses commission of offences and necessitates a CBI investigation to ensure the fundamental right to a fair and impartial investigation, or where the complexity, scale, or national ramification of such allegations



Human cost: Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK) President and actor Vijay's rally in Karur on September 27. MOORTHY, M

demands expertise of central agency," the court has explained.

Judicial precedents have underscored that an order directing an investigation to be carried out by CBI should be treated as a "measure of last resort", justified only when the constitutional court is convinced that the integrity of the process has been compromised or has reasons to believe that it may get compromised to a degree that shakes the conscience of courts or public faith in the justice delivery system.

Such circumstances compelling the judicial transfer of an investigation to the CBI from the State Police may typically arise when the materials placed on record before a court *prima facie* point towards systemic failure, the involvement of high-ranking State officials or politically influential persons, or when the local police's conduct itself creates a reasonable doubt in the minds of the citizenry regarding their ability to conduct a neutral probe.

In the absence of these factors, constitutional courts must avoid placing unnecessary burdens on a specialised agency with "matters that do not satisfy the threshold of an exceptional case".

The reason for the shift

The 25-page order of the Supreme Court shifting the Karur stampede probe to the CBI shows that the decision was largely made on the basis of "allegations" raised by the petitioners, who have been identified as relatives of victims and public-spirited persons.

The court noted that the tragedy which claimed 41 lives and left over a 100 injured at a rally organised by Vijay, founder of the Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam (TVK), at Velusampuram in Karur District had "stirred public sentiment and shook the conscience of people across the nation". The court said that petitioners have made "allegations" that the ruling dispensation, which has "control over the immense machinery of the State", did not discharge its functions "properly". The Bench, in this context, referred to averment in the petitions that top police

officers, held a press conference during which they "robustly" defended their colleagues, raising the apprehension that the probe by the SIT comprising Tamil Nadu Police officers would not be held fairly. It recorded submissions in the petitions that the police had denied permission earlier, in January, to another political party to conduct a rally at the same place where the tragedy occurred during the TVK event. The court voiced this vague notion to hint at "political undertones" at play.

These factors led to the court to *prima facie* conclude that there was "a doubt in the minds of the general public about the independence and impartiality of the investigation" and victims should be spared of being caught in the "political tussle between two sides".

Previous judgments

A cursory read of the order shows that the decision to shift the probe to the CBI was entirely based on the allegations levelled by the petitioners. The Supreme Court judgment in *Secretary, Minor Irrigation & Rural Engg. Services UP* has observed that the power of a court to shift an investigation to the CBI "can be exercised only in cases where there is sufficient material to come to a *prima facie* conclusion that there is a need for such inquiry. It is not sufficient to have such material in the pleadings".

Secondly, the Supreme Court did not specify a single instance of bias or delay by the Tamil Nadu Police's SIT. In a Constitution Bench judgment in *State of West Bengal versus Committee for Protection of Democratic Rights*, the top court had held that the extraordinary power to transfer probes to CBI "cannot and should not be exercised in a routine manner without examining the complexities, nature of offence and sometimes the tardy progress in the investigations involving high officials of the State investigating agency itself".

In an October 16, 2025 order authored by Justice Maheshwari himself in the case of *Legislative Council UP versus Sushil Kumar*, the judge noted that public order

(Entry 1) and the police (Entry 2) was a State subject falling in List II of Schedule VII of the Constitution. "It is a primary responsibility of the investigating agency of the State Police to investigate all offences which are committed within its jurisdiction. The investigations can be entrusted to the CBI only in exceptional circumstances," Justice Maheshwari had written. In *K.V. Rajendran versus Superintendent of Police, CBCID*, the top court had held that a transfer of a case to CBI could only be justified by showing sufficient material to prove that the State investigation was dishonest or mala fide.

Thirdly, ambiguous inferences about "political undertones", "political tussles between two sides" and reported comments made by police officers in a press meet cannot be grounds for making incursions into a State's power to investigate crimes within its own jurisdiction, especially when Tamil Nadu had withdrawn its general consent to CBI investigation in 2023. The Supreme Court has further constituted a committee headed by former top court judge, Justice Ajay Rastogi, to oversee the CBI probe. Such an arrangement does not have any statutory backing.

Besides, the SIT was formed separately by the Madras High Court in the Karur stampede case. The Justice Jagadeesan Commission of Enquiry was constituted on the very night of the tragedy. There had been no allegation of specific bias levelled against the SIT or the Enquiry Commission, warranting a change of the probe agency. The Madras High Court had also previously refused a specific demand for transfer to the CBI. In the *Shree Shree Ram Janki Asthan Tapovan Mandir* judgment, the top court had held that it was not for the judiciary to make sweeping remarks about the State government and its functionaries and subject them to CBI investigation merely based on allegations brought before it. The court said the judiciary has to understand that the "functioning in the government is by different officers and the working of the Executive has in-built checks and balances".

THE GIST

The top court's decision to shift the Karur stampede investigation to the CBI was powered by two "sweeping" factors — the "political undertones" of the case and a perception that top-ranking Tamil Nadu Police officers made comments in a press conference to the extent that their subordinates were not at fault.

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Electoral roll revamp: the case for digital transformation

The Election Commission has initiated a Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, starting in Bihar. However, outdated verification methods and lack of digital tools, stress the need for technology-driven reforms

Rajeev Kumar

After two decades of silence on one of India's most critical democratic processes, the Election Commission (EC) has finally revived the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls – beginning with Bihar, followed by West Bengal, and later the rest of the country. Electoral rolls require continuous updating – removing those who have died or surrendered citizenship and transferring entries for individuals who shift residence to another constituency. A person must be an Indian citizen of at least 18 years of age and ordinarily resident in India to be included in the roll. However, concerns persist about including ineligible persons, especially those who may have entered from neighbouring countries, underscoring the need for transparent verification. Although this long-awaited SIR aims to update the voter database, it became controversial due to procedural ambiguities and reliance on outdated and cumbersome Standard Operating Procedures (SoPs) instead of modern digital tools.

Reliance on outdated methods
The last full-fledged SIR of electoral rolls in most Indian States was conducted between 2002 and 2004, when voter data was entirely paper-based, fragmented, and manually verified. Two decades later, despite India's sweeping digital transformation – from Aadhaar integration to the Digital India mission – the SIR 2025 framework remains rooted in outdated, paper-era procedures.

To mirror the 2002-04 model, 11 documents were mandated for voter verification, including birth certificate, passport, driving licence, domicile, caste certificate, and family register. However, the list excluded Aadhaar, India's most widely used and digitally verifiable ID. The justification that Aadhaar is not fool-proof and can be manipulated is only partly valid, as the same limitations apply to most other accepted documents. More reliable documents such as passports and government service IDs cover only a small section of the population.

Relying on limited and often inaccessible proofs contradicts the spirit of Digital India – turning what was meant to be a modern transparency reform into a bureaucratic bottleneck. The exclusion of Aadhaar made verification cumbersome and eroded public trust, particularly among migrants, first-time voters, and marginalised groups. The deeper issue lies in the failure to adopt interoperable, technology-based systems. Most approved databases remain isolated and inaccessible, preventing real-time verification and automated consistency checks. As a result, the SIR of 2025 repeated the old cycle of manual errors, delays, and inconsistencies.

A credible and trustworthy SIR requires a nationally unified, technology-driven framework that ensures accuracy, accountability, and transparency across India's billion-plus voters – not replicating the early 2000's outdated methods in 2025's digital era.

Aadhaar: a national digital ID
After extensive hearings and deliberation,



Outdated methods: Door-to-door distribution of enumeration forms and collection of filled forms under the SIR in Nawada, Bihar on July 13. ANI

Aadhaar was upheld as a valid and legitimate digital ID for electoral governance processes. Despite earlier concerns about privacy and misuse, the decision confirmed Aadhaar's operational legitimacy, establishing it as the backbone of India's digital ecosystem.

India has no comparable identity system. Aadhaar uniquely combines personalised details with biometric data, enabling reliable individual verification. It is the only centralised identity database accessible to multiple government and private agencies for authentication. Over time, Aadhaar verification has become routinely used for attendance systems, scholarship disbursement, welfare distribution, financial transactions, life certification, and educational institutions. In practice, it has emerged as India's de facto national digital identity register.

Therefore, rather than sidelining it, India's technical leadership must make the Aadhaar ecosystem more robust, tamper-proof, and transparent. It can securely integrate birth, death, and migration records with appropriate safeguards, ensuring that electoral rolls remain dynamically updated without compromising privacy. Integrating verified Aadhaar data into electoral roll management under strict data protection norms could eliminate duplication, automatically remove deceased voters, update residential shifts, and prevent fake or multiple registrations. Every addition, deletion, or correction would carry a digitally signed authorisation, create an unbroken digital audit trail, and ensure a transparent, verifiable, and accountable

electoral database.

Data anomalies
The revised electoral roll of Bihar revealed significant inconsistencies, including deleting 3.66 lakh names without adequate clarity or traceable communication to those affected. The total number of electors was around 80 lakh (nearly 10%) lower than the estimated adult population of the State, with no verification trail explaining the reasons for such deletions or confirming that due notice had been given.

Further scrutiny exposed several irregularities such as centenarians being listed as new voters, and names re-included without supporting documents to maintain overall voter counts. There were also gross variations in demographic statistics, such as a decline in the gender ratio from 934 in September 2025 to 892 in the final roll, a statistically implausible shift, inconsistent with population trends. These anomalies suggest data entry errors or unverified mass revisions, raising serious questions about the integrity of the database.

Moreover, data transparency remained the primary concern. The lists of additions and deletions were not published in machine-readable formats, preventing independent audit or public scrutiny.

Collectively, these anomalies – from demographic distortions and manual errors to opaque data handling – expose the fragility of electoral roll management and underscore the urgent need for technology-driven verification and

transparent data governance in revisions.

On ECI-Net
ECI-Net is among the world's largest and most dynamic digital databases, housing records of nearly one billion voters. Continuously updated through additions, address changes, and profile modifications, it is searchable by Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) ID and voter-name and administered by the Centre for Development of Advanced Computing (C-DAC), Pune, India's premier computing R&D institution. Globally, few systems match the scale, functionality, and democratic significance of this mission-critical database.

By design, ECI-Net can detect duplicates, flag inconsistencies, and facilitate corrections through authorised verification. Its architecture can instantly produce real-time demographic and statistical reports transparently and accurately. With the integration of data analytic APIs, the system can automatically identify and resolve most anomalies and demographic inconsistencies identified during recent revisions.

However, the lack of disclosure and system-level analytics raises serious concerns. If automated audit and analytical tools already exist – as expected in a database of this scale – they could have easily detected duplication, demographic distortions, and data irregularities without large-scale manual intervention. The failure to utilise these digital capabilities suggests institutional inertia or deliberate avoidance of technology-based transparency. Such practices weaken confidence in the integrity of existing SoPs. Despite strong technical expertise within its leadership, the reliance on manual verification over verifiable, software-driven protocols remains inexplicable. Until data-driven audits and system-level transparency are prioritised, claims of purification of electoral rolls will continue to invite public scepticism and institutional introspection.

The way ahead
Today, India has one of the world's most advanced digital ecosystems – from Aadhaar-linked databases and UPI to data analytics and e-governance. Yet, the procedures guiding SIR 2025 show little reflection of this progress. The weaknesses are not merely administrative but structural, stemming from the absence of traceability, and database integration. Reforming the SoPs is therefore not optional; it is vital for safeguarding democratic credibility.

The electoral roll must be recognised as a living, dynamic national asset rather than a static, state-bound record. Its accuracy directly shapes the integrity of elections and public confidence in electoral governance.

Recent judicial observations have underscored the need to learn from the Bihar experience as preparations begin for a nationwide revision. Future SIR exercises must demonstrate procedural correctness, visible fairness, transparency, and accountability. The focus should shift to software-driven verification, digital audit trails, and real-time corrections. The ECI-Net should be made more user-friendly, technical glitches should be fixed promptly, and an efficient and quick grievance redressal mechanism should be incorporated.

The 2025 SIR must not become another verification ritual; it must transform into a trust revolution powered by technology based on transparency, verification, and integrity.

Rajeev Kumar is a former Professor of Computer Science & Engineering at IIT Kharagpur, IIT Kanpur, BITS Pilani, and JNU, and a former scientist at DRDO and DST.



Language in conversation

Vaishali R. Venkat

“Genie, my mom says I can cuddle a cute little baby in my arms, and it's just two months away.”

His eyes twinkling in the moonlight, the Genius Genie smiled. He said, “Ah, little Moon, your mother is pregnant. But you know, ‘pregnant’ isn't just about babies.”

“Really, Genie? I think being pregnant means there must be a baby involved all the time!”

“Dear Moon, most people think that, but the word ‘pregnant’ itself is pregnant with surprises, ready to unfold when you least expect it.”

Moon furrowed her brows and blinked, her eyes wide with wonder. “Genie, I don't understand. How can a word be pregnant?”

“Some words are like treasure chests, full of meaning waiting to be discovered.”

“So, no babies to cuddle this time?”

Genie nodded, smiling. “Exactly, Moon. The word ‘pregnant’ means ‘full of something,’ like qualities, ideas, feelings, or secrets that are waiting to be discovered. For example, the sky is pregnant with countless stars, each one glimmering like gold. Look at the ocean. It's pregnant with whispering waves. The night air is pregnant with the scent of salt and the hush of still night, even amid the roaring waves.”

“Wow, Genie! The sky, the ocean, and even the air can become pregnant in a different sense. Surprising! Words can be so magical.”

“Sometimes a moment is so important and quiet that it's called a ‘pregnant pause.’ For instance, the waves seem to hold their breath, pausing before they burst onto the shore, or when a tide hesitates for a heartbeat before rolling in again. In real life, it's like when your teacher stops mid-sentence and everyone waits curiously to hear the next word, or when a puppy freezes before pouncing, full of excitement. It's like the pause is pregnant with what's about to happen.”

“But how do I use ‘pregnant pause’ in a sentence?”

“A pregnant pause hangs in the air before the teacher announces the winner. Also, a pregnant pause falls over the room as everyone waits for the secret to be revealed.”

“Is there any other word like ‘pregnant pause’?”

“Dear Moon, ‘pregnant pause’ isn't a word. It's an idiom, a group of words that together mean something entirely different from their literal meaning. For example, when someone says ‘it's raining cats and dogs,’ the phrase doesn't mean animals are falling from the sky; it just means it's raining heavily.”

“Got it!. What are the other related words?”

“Ah, words are like families, and the words ‘pregnancy’ and ‘pregnantly’ are little branches from the same root. ‘Pregnancy’ means a state of being full and ‘pregnantly’ describes something done or said in a way that carries a lot of meaning. We can meet the other members of this family another time, Moon.”

“Any examples, Genie?”
“The poet's verse is pregnant with peace, and it's a kind of poetic pregnancy. Further, when your mom gives you a silent look that says more than a thousand words, she's looking pregnantly, without speaking.”
“Cool, I got it Genie.”

THE DAILY QUIZ

With the high profile mayoral elections in New York city due in a fortnight, here is a quiz on famous mayors of cities

Srinivasan Ramani

QUESTION 1

What unique and heroic distinction marks Madhu Kinnar's victory in the mayoral elections in Raigarh, Chhattisgarh in 2015?

QUESTION 2

Name this freedom fighter who became the first mayor of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation in 1924. What was he also popularly known as?

QUESTION 3

Another freedom fighter, she played a vital role in

the Quit India movement and later became the first elected mayor of Delhi. Name her.

QUESTION 4

This person, nominated to the post of Mayor in Madras (currently Chennai) in 1957 was also instrumental in a scheme on mid-day meals for children studying in corporation schools. Name her.

QUESTION 5

Famous (or notorious depending on peoples' point of view) for introducing a congestion charge in London, this mayor is also known for his quirky “war on pigeons” in Trafalgar Square. Name him.



Visual question: Identify this current head of government of a country who earlier served as the mayor of its capital city. Name the country as well.

Questions and Answers to the October 20 edition of the daily quiz: 1. The year in which World Statistics Day was first observed.

Ans: 2010; it is observed every five years

2. The motto of this year's World Statistics Day. **Ans: ‘Driving change with quality statistics and data for everyone’**

3. Number of member states which make up the United Nations. **Ans: 193 member states**

4. The fourth most widely practised religion in the world. **Ans: Buddhism**

5. This is the largest of all Orders, constituting 25% of all known animal species. **Ans: The insect Order Coleoptera**

6. The world's largest company by market cap estimated to be in excess of \$4.5 trillion. **Ans: Nvidia**

Visual: Name this scientist. **Ans: Prof. P.C. Mahalanobis**

Early Birds: Patrick Vijayan| Lalchand Bhutani| Anil Warrier| Deepak Gogiya| Anubhav Gupta

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

Word of the day

Excoriate: express strong disapproval of; tear or wear off the skin or make sore by abrading

Synonyms: condemn, decry, reprobate

Usage: The candidates have excoriated each other throughout the campaign.

Pronunciation: newsth.live/excoriatepro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /ɪkˈskɔːɪeɪt/, /ɪkˈskoʊ.i.eɪt/

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

CBDC matters

India must develop wholesale CBDC for global use

Reserve Bank of India Deputy Governor T Rabi Sankar sprang a surprise of sorts recently when he suggested that RBI was in no real rush to launch the central bank digital currency (CBDC). This view indicates a dip in interest in CBDC, ever since Donald Trump took over as US President. One of the first legislations enacted by the Trump administration this year was to stop all work on development of a CBDC in the US, and create a framework for launching stablecoins as an alternative to the official digital currency.



In India, the need for an official digital currency in retail payments when we have a vibrant UPI-based ecosystem is debatable. But wholesale CBDC which is used in interbank and very large transactions can be useful in settling external trade in rupees. Over 130 countries representing 98 per cent of the global GDP are exploring the broad viability of a CBDC. India must do the same. Though only a few countries including Nigeria, Jamaica and Bahamas have launched an official digital currency, many central banks including the Peoples Bank of China are in an advanced stage of the CBDC pilot project. The use of the CBDC in cross-border payments can serve as an alternative to dollar-based channels of payment such as SWIFT in conditions of geo-political stress when the ‘weaponisation of the dollar’ becomes a distinct possibility. This came into play when Russia was locked out of SWIFT as part of the Ukraine war sanctions, and third countries took a hit. Around 13 projects are exploring the use of CBDC for cross border payments, including Project mBridge, which links banks in China, Thailand, Hong King, Saudi Arabia and UAE, bypassing the Bank of International Settlement.

The RBI began pilot testing CBDCs towards the end of 2022. There was a buzz when the retail CBDC or the e-rupee was introduced in December 2022, with many users downloading the wallets and transferring some money into it. But the project has not progressed due to limited use of e-rupee and the dominance of UPI-based payments. Outstanding e-rupees in the retail segment stood at just ₹1,106 crore towards the end of March 2025. While the RBI Deputy Governor said that there were 70 lakh users, they are unlikely to be actively using this route.

The RBI must develop more use cases which are unique to e-rupee. Enabling offline transactions and moving towards tokenisation, which provides anonymity to users, can improve usage. Significantly, while retail CBDC has made a slow start in India, wholesale CBDC has not taken off at all. The RBI annual report shows that no wholesale e-rupee had been issued until March 2025. The central bank must examine the challenges being faced by banks in using e-rupee in wholesale banking transactions. Cross-border payments in e-rupees become possible when other countries are willing. India must explore options with such countries to reduce the risks posed by weaponisation of the dollar.

OTHER VOICES.

讀賣新聞

THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Parties Must Learn Lessons from Recent Policy Talks It is commendable that the Liberal Democratic Party and the Japan Innovation Party have now agreed to form a new coalition government and put in place a framework for policy implementation. It is more important than anything to put an end to the prolonged political vacuum as soon as possible and restore political stability. LDP President Sanae Takaichi has now become certain to be named the first female prime minister in Japan's constitutional history. However, the road ahead is fraught with challenges. Even with the LDP and the JIP cooperating, they fall short of a majority in both the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. How Takaichi will lead the minority ruling parties to tackle mounting domestic and international issues will be the first test of her competence. TOKYO, OCTOBER 21

The Guardian

Europe must ensure Zelenskyy can resist Trump’s bullying It wasn’t quite the calamity of February, when Volodymyr Zelenskyy was publicly humiliated in the Oval Office by Donald Trump and his vice-president, JD Vance. But the Ukrainian president’s latest visit to the White House on Friday was, by all accounts, a disquieting experience. Mr Trump’s public musings before the meeting suggested that his stance had hardened towards Vladimir Putin, to the strategically significant extent of being willing to sell long-range Tomahawk missiles to Kyiv. But by the time Mr Zelenskyy arrived in Washington, the US president had changed his mind, instead lecturing his guest on the need to make territorial concessions to Russia. So far, so familiar. Since being re-elected, Mr Trump has repeatedly resiled from following up tough talk on Russia with meaningful action. LONDON, OCTOBER 20

Are we in a financial bubble?

RISKY TREND. The presence of global majors Nvidia and Alphabet may ensure that the bubble deflates rather than bursts



DAMBISA MOYO

Financial bubbles are notoriously difficult to define in real time — until the moment they burst. To say with any conviction whether we are in one now, one must understand the magnitude and intensity of today’s AI investment boom, as well as the timing of the potential bubble’s end.

There are at least four ways to determine when a bubble is building in financial markets. The first is to look at valuations. Even when conventional valuation metrics such as price-to-earnings (PE) ratios reach excessive levels, the market might excuse this by focusing on new metrics to justify overvaluations.

For much of the past 25 years, the average PE ratio across the S&P 500 has been 16x, whereas now it is 25x. But this increase can be justified by focusing on the potential for new productivity gains from AI, or on products with a national-security value — such as semiconductors, which will be protected and ultimately backstopped by the government.

Moreover, some commentators argue that existing indicators like GDP simply are not capturing new sources of growth potential in the economy. For now, the fact that expected equity returns are higher than bond returns means that equity valuations are indeed “rational,” even if they seem high.

A second factor to consider is the prevailing narrative, which usually revolves around the message that “this time is different.” A bubble is almost always buttressed by belief in a new paradigm or emerging technology — whether it be the internet, the Japanese production process, electricity, railroads, or canals. The typical narrative creates a mental bridge between what actually is (current cash flows) and what could be (forecasts of future revenues).

The bridge is what lures investors to buy into a possible upside. While they may start by focusing on the rationally calculable growth forecasts of the business, the next step is to buy into an irrational story about an imminent economic transformation. This is when investing becomes overly one-sided, because it becomes hard to argue against the prevailing narrative.

EYE-POPPING VALUATIONS Just in the past month, two start-ups have garnered eye-popping valuations



S&P index: PE ratio over the years



by tapping into the AI narrative. Nano Nuclear Energy was valued at \$2.3 billion despite having no revenue or even a license to operate; and the data-centre energy supplier Fermi, which was founded only in January, was valued at \$14.8 billion.

Much like the 1980s Japanese bubble and the 1999-2001 dot-com bubble, the situation today may reflect a good, old-fashioned misallocation of capital, as everyone chases the new, shiny technology. The obvious risk is that investors will not get anywhere close to the returns they seem to expect.

A third indicator of a bubble is hidden leverage. Not only have investors and

speculators continued to pile into overvalued stocks, but an increasing number have done so with borrowed money.

One finds growing leverage throughout the shadow banking system; but the greater concern, perhaps, is the risk embedded in financial products, such as leveraged exchange-traded funds. Even more ominous, the explosion of zero-day options (single-day bets on an equity’s price movement) suggests that more retail investors are engaging in leveraged trades whose risks they may not know how to manage.

This growing leverage — a common feature of bubbles, most notably the 2008 global financial crisis — implies that speculators, and the overall economy, are inherently exposed to more risk than they are aware of. According to FINRA, margin debt — the amount lent to investors by their brokers — reached a record high of \$1.06 trillion in August, a 33 per cent year-on-year increase.

Not only have investors and speculators continued to pile into overvalued stocks, but an increasing number have done so with borrowed money

Gold jewellery market is seeing a churn

Amidst rising prices, an investment frenzy and changing consumer trends, the sector is shifting to a franchisee model

Kinjal Shah

India emerged as the world’s largest consumer of gold jewellery in CY2024, overtaking China. But the consumption pattern is undergoing a notable shift amid soaring gold prices.

There has been significant increases in the proportion of bars and coins within overall gold usage, investments in gold exchange traded funds (ETFs) in India are mirroring global trends, and there is growing interest in digital gold. These factors are contributing to a partial reduction in gold jewellery consumption.

Central banks maintained robust gold purchases, consistently buying over 1,000 tonnes annually from CY2022 to CY2024, though this momentum eased in CY2025. However, investment in gold ETFs has shown steady growth, fuelled by ongoing global geopolitical turmoil and economic downturns.

As of September 30, 2025, global ETF holdings of physical gold stood at 3,838 tonnes, higher by 20 per cent YoY, while India’s gold ETFs nearly doubled their holdings to 77 tonnes over two years. Worldwide investment demand for gold — including bars, coins and ETFs — surged by 78 per cent in Q1 FY2026,

contributing to a sustained upward trend in international gold prices.

Global gold jewellery demand, in volume terms, declined by about 15 per cent in FY2025 and 14 per cent in Q1 FY2026 on a YoY basis, largely due to rising gold prices. In India, the drop in FY2025 volumes was less severe — around 7 per cent — aided by a 9 per cent reduction in customs duty implemented in July 2024. However, H1 FY2026 is estimated to have witnessed over 20 per cent YoY decline in domestic gold jewellery volumes.

According to ICRA, the industry’s overall revenue growth will remain within the mid-teen range in FY2026. Retailers’ advertisement expenditure and promotional discounts are expected to rise. Nonetheless, the increasing proportion of value-added studded jewellery is likely to help support profit margins.

Additionally, retailers who do not completely hedge their gold purchases could see margin improvement due to continuing rise in gold prices. To sustain profitability in this challenging demand environment, gold jewellers will need to focus strategically on their product offerings and practise prudent risk management.

The gold jewellery retail sector in



JEWELLERY. Market evolution ANI

India is experiencing a major shift in its business model, moving from company-owned stores to a franchisee, aimed at accelerating their expansion and strengthening consumer trust by leveraging the local knowledge of the franchisee partners.

This strategy has proven successful, especially in North, West, and East India, while adoption of franchisee model in South India is hindered by lower returns for business partners due to consumer preference for low margin plain gold jewellery and strong loyalty to local stores. The share of franchisee outlets for ICRA’s sample set companies increased from 35 per cent in FY2021 to an estimated 46 per cent in FY2025, and about half of all new stores expected to

Lastly, a common feature of bubbles is circular dealing between companies. Many market participants are scrutinizing recent deals in which Nvidia has agreed to invest \$100 billion in OpenAI, which will use the money to pay Oracle, which will then buy chips from Nvidia. These sorts of arrangements were a major contributor to the Japanese equity bubble in the 1980s.

INDICATORS TO WATCH Assuming we are indeed in a bubble, the next question concerns when it will deflate or burst. While this inevitably requires guesswork, there are some important indicators to watch.

One is market sentiment. Currently, retail investors are driving a lot of the stock-price momentum, whereas institutional sentiment is neutral, meaning they hold Big Tech stocks but are not adding to their positions. But since retail is a relatively small share of the overall market, such exuberance can drive only a limited amount of asset-price inflation.

Another indicator is positioning. In simple terms, we will know that the bubble is inflating further if the institutional bid strengthens and becomes a long position, because this signals that institutional investors are giving up on other assets such as bonds, gold, or underperforming sectors (health care) and allocating more capital toward risk-on AI assets.

With most people only just beginning to learn about AI’s capabilities, it remains to be seen what new business models will emerge. As time passes, sophisticated professional investors will come to a better understanding of AI’s value and where cracks in the prevailing euphoric narrative may lie.

For now, there is a reasonable argument to be made that a bubble has only started to form. Judging by current market sentiment and positioning, the AI story seems closer to the 1996-97 stage of the dot-com bubble than to 1999-2001. The speculative behaviour and valuations that we saw in the late 1990s have yet to be matched today.

Moreover, while the dot-com bubble was based on numerous start-ups, many of which with valuations that ultimately collapsed to zero, the AI boom revolves around global technology leaders like Nvidia and Alphabet, with established revenues and track records. That means there will be a higher floor under any drop in asset value, which suggests that the bubble is more likely to deflate than to burst violently.

The writer is an international economist. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2025

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

Diwali bonanza By all indications, this Diwali heralded robust gains for India Inc, as automobile, white goods, and consumer durable sectors witnessed an unprecedented surge post-implementation of GST 2.0 in late September. Strategic tax rationalisation enabled enterprises to recalibrate pricing, catalyzing heightened consumer demand and amplifying purchasing power, thereby invigorating business sentiment. However, these ephemeral gains underscore the imperative for structural reforms. With GDP growth oscillating around

6.5 per cent — commendable globally yet short of the aspirational 8 per cent — India must accelerate export competitiveness, nurture technological innovation, modernise infrastructure, and generate high-quality employment. Addressing these systemic lacunae is essential to transcend episodic prosperity, ensuring that future festive cycles engender not only transient consumption spikes but sustained, inclusive, and transformative economic momentum. N Sadhasiva Reddy Bengaluru

Festive sales spike With reference to the news report ‘From durables to autos, firms ring in sparkling festival sales’ (October 20), in a country like India where the average propensity to consume is high, popular festivals like Diwali boost the aggregate consumption demand in the economy. One hopes that aggregate supply of goods and service would keep pace with it and prices remain under control. With the goods and services tax (GST) rationalisation, it is a win-win for both producers and consumers. Banks for their part have rolled out offers to consumers to encourage them to spend. This, however, is just

one side of the story. Banks across the country have dampened the spirit of consumers who depend on cheque transactions for their livelihood, with cheques getting stuck for clearance. It is really deplorable scenario indeed. S Ramakrishnasayee Chennai

Global economy holds When US President Donald Trump imposed a wave of punitive tariffs in April, many feared it could be the last straw that would break the back of the global economy. However, the world seems to have weathered the storm without slipping into a recession. As highlighted by the IMF in its latest World Economic Outlook, prudent fiscal and monetary policies of governments and central banks, coupled with the proactive measures of private firms that front-loaded imports before the tariffs took effect, helped cushion the impact. Nevertheless, policymakers must not lower their guard. Continued vigilance and coordinated policy action are essential to manage the uncertainty that still hangs over the global economy. M Jeyaram Sholavandan (Tamil Nadu)



Tomahawks in Ukraine war

Using these US missiles is a dangerous proposition

Sridhar Krishnaswami

With the situation in the Gaza holding and tenuously at that, President Donald Trump has turned his attention to another major issue that has been on his radar for quite sometime — Ukraine, a conflict zone that is soon to enter its fourth year.

The silver lining for the warring nations, Europe and rest of the world is that the American President has said that he will be meeting his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin soon in Hungary. And the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky would have already dropped by the White House for the sixth in-person meeting with President Trump since he came to office this January.

GAME CHANGER

The Ukraine conflict is entering a critical phase with Washington mulling over a possibility of arming Kyiv with Tomahawk missiles, seen as a military game changer as well as an important lever of influence on Moscow. “If this war doesn’t get settled, I may send Tomahawks,” President Trump has said.

“A Tomahawk is an incredible weapon. And Russia does not need that. If the war is not settled, we may do it. We may not. But we may do it,” he added.

One underlying assumption is that just the talk of sending over Tomahawks could bring President Putin to the negotiating table.

As President Zelensky put it, “We see and hear that Russia fears the Americans might provide us with Tomahawks, which signals that this kind of pressure could be effective in achieving peace”.

Strategists are pointing out a number of things that speak of not just technical and logistical difficulties but also the fact that mere talk of sending over Tomahawks is unlikely to bring President Putin to the table.

Militarily an argument is made that Tomahawks with its range could massively dent the rear areas that support the Russian frontlines.

With this comes a sobering assessment that offering the missile is one thing but to make it functional would take a substantial amount of time.

For starters it is pointed out that Tomahawks are generally fired from ships and submarines and Kyiv does not have platforms in its navy for this purpose.

It is said that the US military itself has a long way to go in



LAUNCH. Kyiv does not have platforms to fire Tomahawk missiles

perfecting ground based launch of this missile.

Even if some in the NATO may be pressuring Washington to supply Kyiv with Tomahawks, there are also those in Europe who see wisdom in supplying Ukraine with more medium range missiles rather than triggering any escalation of tension between Moscow and capitals of Europe. Kremlin has said that the possibility of using the Tomahawk is causing “extreme concern” and at a “dramatic moment in terms of the fact that tensions are escalating from all sides”.

A well known hawk and former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was quite blunt of a nuclear response. “It’s been said a hundred times, in a manner understandable even to the star-spangled man, that it’s impossible to distinguish a nuclear Tomahawk missile from a conventional one in flight...The delivery of these missiles could end badly for everyone. And most of all, for Trump himself,” Medvedev said.

SECOND THOUGHTS

The administration in Washington is well aware of the fact that the challenges of the Russian-Ukraine war that President Putin started as a “Special Military Operation” goes much beyond a land grab strategy which threatens to engulf not just Europe but the world in a nightmare not seen since the days of the Second World War. Which is perhaps why President Trump seems to have had second thoughts on Tomahawks during his latest meeting with President Zelensky.

Aside from raising concerns of depleting the American stockpile, President Trump said: “We’d much rather not need Tomahawks. We’d much rather get the war over...It could mean a big escalation. It could mean a lot of bad things could happen”.

The writer is a senior journalist who has reported from Washington DC on North America and United Nations

US passport’s fading aura

Singapore, South Korea, and Japan now top the Henley Index; US slips out of the Top 10 for the first time

THE WIDER ANGLE.



PARAN BALAKRISHNAN

The latest Henley Passport Index reveals a historic shake-up in global mobility: Asia is now dominating the top rankings, while the US has fallen out of the leading ten for the first time in the list’s 20-year history. Tiny Singapore leads the pack with visa-free access to 193 destinations, followed by South Korea (190) and Japan (189).

The index, according to the website, ranks the world’s passports according to the number of destinations their holders can access without a prior visa.

Luxembourg, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland tie for fourth place with 188 destinations, a margin comparable to an athlete losing a race by a fraction of a second. But the unmistakable story is Asia’s rise: predictions of an Asian Century are fast becoming reality. There’s a touch of irony when considering that over 300 South Koreans were detained by America’s ICE earlier this year and mostly deported.

The US now ranks 12th, tied with Malaysia, with visa-free access to 180 of the 227 destinations tracked. At its zenith, the American passport was near the top of global mobility indices. In 2014, it shared the number one ranking.

For millions of Americans, this meant spontaneous trips, academic exchanges, and a sense of belonging to a globally mobile elite.

The passport was, and still is, a mark of privilege and connectivity.

Several factors explain the decline. One is reciprocity: the US allows only 46 nationalities visa-free entry, ranking 77th on Henley’s Openness Index. Low incoming hospitality has diplomatic consequences. Brazil revoked visa-free access for Americans in April, citing reciprocity concerns.

China’s expanding visa-free regime deliberately excluded the US. Smaller jurisdictions including Papua New Guinea, Myanmar, and Vietnam also tightened entry rules.

The more affluent Asian countries are now catching up with Europe, which once dominated global mobility. This shift signals more than airport convenience. It reflects changing currents in influence, diplomacy, and economic clout, with Asian nations leveraging openness, strategic

The more affluent Asian countries are now catching up with Europe, which once dominated global mobility. This shift signals more than airport convenience

partnerships, and regional integration to surge ahead in the mobility stakes.

Where does India stand? We all know Indian passports aren’t muscular travel documents. India has just gone into decline once again, dropping to the 85th spot, enjoying visa-free access to 57 destinations, down from 80 with access to 60 countries last year.

In 2020, we plunged to an all-time low of 90. Still, India’s limited mobility is unlikely to have much of an impact on most people’s travel plans as the major countries generally demand visas from Indians.

India’s vast population and millions who want to migrate mean most countries have visa curbs for Indians. But some countries see advantages to India’s huge numbers. Thailand allows a visa-free stay for 60 days for Indians. In 2024, 2.1 million Indians travelled to Thailand and the country is targeting 2.5 million Indian travellers this year. Vietnam, too, now offers visas-on-arrival for Indians and, as a result, 507,000 travelled there in 2024. In the first eight months of 2025, 443,000 Indians have visited Vietnam.

EFFECT OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

What difference does economic growth make to the Henley Passport Index? China offers a possible answer. It has moved steadily upward in the last decade. In 2015, China was ranked at a lowly 94th spot and now is at 64th spot. By comparison, India was in the 76th spot in 2014 but fell to 88 in 2015.

We’ve hovered in the same region through the last decade. Odd though it may seem, we’re on a par with Mauritania. And we’re one spot behind Burkina Faso, Madagascar (which last week had a coup) and Senegal.

Presumably, it’s a small consolation we’re well ahead of archrival, Pakistan, which sits in lowly 103rd position. Pakistan keeps company there with Yemen and is just ahead of Iraq and Syria. It’s even lower down the list than Nepal, which is in the 101 spot and Bangladesh and North Korea, which come in at 100. Right at the bottom is turmoil-ridden Afghanistan.

The Henley Passport Index doesn’t pretend to be an indicator of economic rankings. It does the rankings based on information it collects from the International Air Transport Authority. But inevitably, visas and the need for them give an indication of a country’s economic strength. Many Asian countries are getting economically stronger than before.

And politics, inevitably, must play some role in whether visa-free entry is allowed to a country. In 2024, the US was in 7th place along with Canada and Hungary. Why the demand that more Americans get visas? Could it be the Trump Effect at work?

Henley’s chairman Christian Kaelin calls it a “fundamental shift in global mobility. Nations that embrace openness and cooperation are surging ahead, while those resting on past privilege are being left behind.”

STATISTALK.

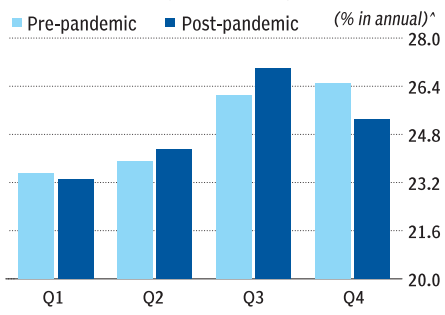
Compiled by Dhuraveel Gunasekaran | Graphic Visveswaran V

India’s festive economy: rural spark, urban slowdown

According to Ambit Capital, India’s 2025 festive season reflects a mixed economic scene. High-frequency indicators highlight rural resilience, with stronger liquidity and consumption potential than urban centers. Since mid-2024, rural consumer sentiments index has outpaced urban levels, driven by robust agricultural activity and rising wages, positioning rural areas for healthier festive spending compared to stressed metros. Meanwhile, corporate wage bills slowed sharply to 7% in FY25, below nominal GDP growth, indicating strain in formal employment markets. Household leverage now restrains consumption, while tighter regulations and repayment pressures limit retail credit, dampening discretionary spending despite festive optimism. Key trends:

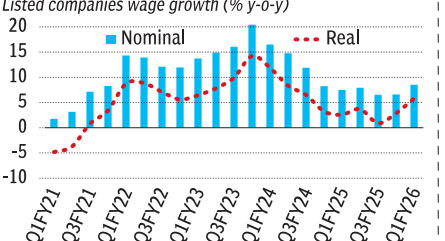
Festive season’s importance has increased in the post-Covid period

Quarter-wise share of private consumption



Formal labour markets show signs of struggle

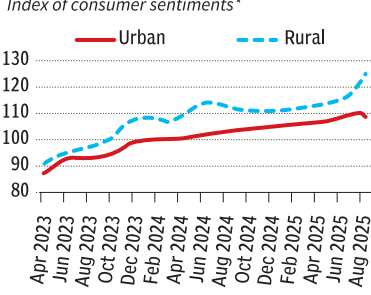
Corporate wage bill decelerates in nominal terms, real growth remains strong



Note: *Pre-pandemic pertains to FY16-19 and post-pandemic refers to FY23-25
*The CMEI’s Index of Consumer Sentiments tracks Indian households’ views on income, jobs, and spending to gauge economic optimism.

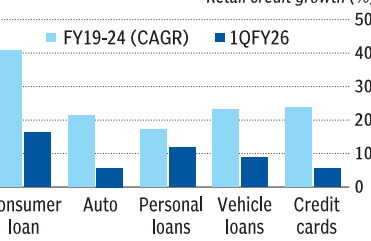
Rural sentiments outshine urban, reflecting stronger consumption potential

Index of consumer sentiments*



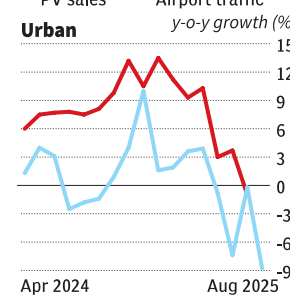
Non-housing consumption credit disbursement slows

Slowdown in credit would impede leveraged consumption



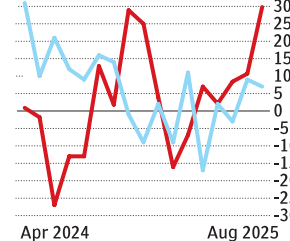
High frequency indicators suggest that rural areas are much better placed than urban

y-o-y growth (%)



Rural

y-o-y growth (%)



thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

October 22, 2005

FII inflows here to stay: Chidambaram

The Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, allayed fears of possible large-scale pullout of portfolio investments by foreign institutional investors (FIIs). He said that FII investment so far in the current fiscal stood at \$4.3 billion. For the calendar year 2005, the Minister said that the FII investments level is already \$8.2 billion.

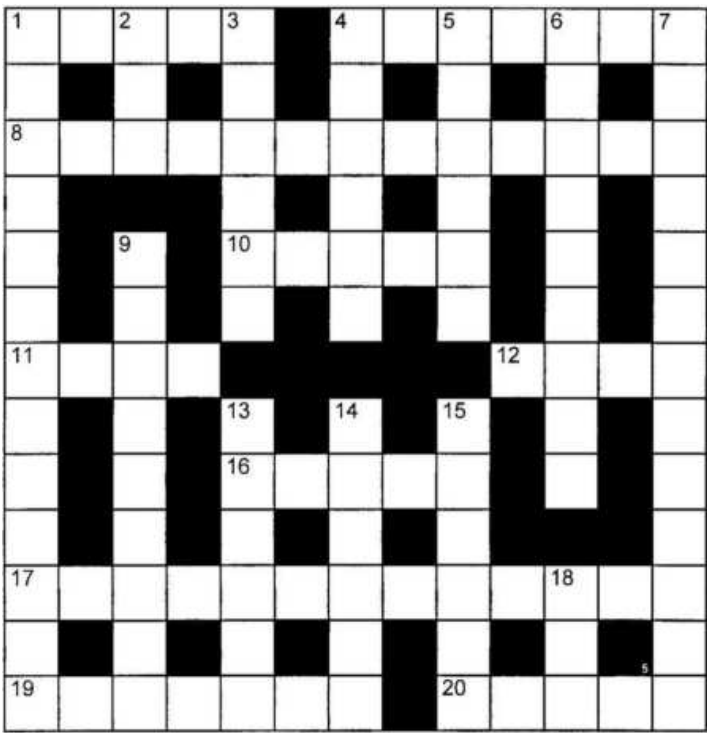
‘Trade deficit not alarming’

The Finance Minister, Mr Chidambaram, said that the trade deficit seems to be large, but certainly a healthy sign for a growing economy and therefore not a cause for worry. Trade deficit in the first half of the current fiscal touched a level of \$20.32 billion as against \$11.88 billion in the same period last year.

Sensex bounces back with 134-pt gain

Stock prices rose on Friday reversing a three-day decline as value buying and statement by the Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, that foreign investors would continue to invest in India, buoyed sentiment. The relaxation of foreign investment in the telecom sector also resulted in buying interest among the investors. At close, Sensex rose 133.83 points (1.7 per cent) to 8,068.95.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2807



EASY

ACROSS

- Bit left over (5)
- Marked with bands (7)
- Those speaking in dialogue (13)
- Seeing that; because (5)
- Freedom from difficulty (4)
- Cremation pile of combustibles (4)
- Joint moving foot (5)
- Ornament, decoration (13)
- Violin, viola section (7)
- Fanatical, raging (5)

DOWN

- Condition of being without resource (13)
- To desert (3)
- Examine in detail (6)
- Wood clubs with hollowed faces (6)
- Grubbed up (6)
- Original version, model (9)
- Not committed to either side (13)
- Take apart, limb from limb (9)
- Dropped (6)
- Flocks of geese flying (6)
- Confine animal with rope (6)
- Recede (tide) (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Ditch the bit left over from battle (5)
- Sprite as put out by dance-leader looking tigrish (7)
- Those who speak in dialogue bury our Colts anyhow (13)
- From that time of wrongdoing, race abandoned by artist (5)
- Slacken off to see a different shape it makes (4)
- Funeral pile may be a part of happy release (4)
- Lean around top of knee, or joint that was turned (5)
- Extra decoration for me to back: ringer hits men out (13)
- Lots of racehorses get pulled by those with influence (7)
- Fanatical as an Academician with an offer to make (5)

DOWN

- Fleckless quality will move fewer on the Loch (13)
- Rodent rarely attacks thistle-heads (3)
- Study S American nation and see two-thirds of it (6)
- Behaves amorously if one is prying but gets upset (6)
- Utterly defeated by detour one took by mistake (6)
- Model gets professional to use machine in the office (9)
- Impartial sister dined out with half the team (13)
- Take one apart for a dime, Mrs? Be awkward to do so! (9)
- In a marsh, everything that has come down from above (6)
- Around end of June pelts lots of geese in flight (6)
- The entry in terrace without a race to tie it up (6)
- Decline to be known as Robert Browning’s wife initially (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2806

ACROSS 1. Chump 4. Tonnage 8. Rigmorole 9. Act 10. Unnamed 12. Club 14. Station 17. Alas 18. Hashish 20. Cap 21. Intricate 23. Sincere 24. Exert

DOWN 1. Circumstances 2. Urgent 3. Playmate 4. Two 5. Need 6. Arable 7. Establishment 11. Dutch 13. Conspire 15. Happen 16. Pirate 19. Pike 22. Tee

OUR VIEW



Non-banks are making markets nervous again

As sudden banking strains in the US show, the growth of non-banks is a mixed blessing, especially if they use bank funds for lending. The motto should be ‘better safe than sorry’

Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, goes an old saying. Presumably, the financial system of the West has learnt a thing or two from its 2007-08 crisis that was triggered by defaults in the US subprime mortgage market. That may explain why its latest crisis, this time in the US subprime market for auto loans, has not led to a larger meltdown—so far. Sure, Jamie Dimon, CEO of JP Morgan, an investment bank that had to write off \$170 million in bad debt to a car-loan company, Tricolor, has warned that “if you see one cockroach, there are probably more.” But after the initial panic following the disclosure by US lenders Western Alliance Bank and Zions Bank that they had been hit by bad or fraudulent loans, sparking fears of problems in the wider financial sector, no new bugs have been sighted. For now, the hope is that these may turn out to be isolated incidents. But memories of the 2023 collapse of California-based Silicon Valley Bank have made markets nervous.

For financial sector regulators, non-banks—or non-depository financial institutions (NDFIs) in the US and non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) in India—have always been a mixed bag. On one hand, they help channel credit to borrowers, and on the other, their expansion increases risk-taking and interconnectedness in the financial system when a large part of their funding comes from banks. The rising exposure of traditional banks to non-bank lenders means that the latter’s vulnerabilities can quickly transmit to the banking industry, amplifying shocks and complicating crisis management. Presciently, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has cautioned against risks arising from the growing links between banks and non-

banks in its *Global Financial Stability Report* for October 2025. Non-banks now hold around half of the world’s financial assets, it notes, with the exposure of many banks in the US and Eurozone to non-banks now exceeding their Tier 1 capital cushion that lets them absorb losses during repayment crises. The fact that non-banks typically operate with less transparency and regulatory oversight than banks means their leverage levels and credit exposures are often harder to gauge. As a result, trouble in private credit markets could unexpectedly spill over into the broader financial system. It is no surprise, therefore, that regulators tend to keep a wary eye on non-banks. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is no exception.

In India, the rapid expansion of NBFCs in recent years has heightened concerns about hidden frailties in the financial sector, especially after defaults by two large NBFCs, IL&FS in September 2018 and DHFL in June 2019. The net result has been a growing convergence of the regulatory framework governing NBFCs and banks. The Scale-Based Regulatory Framework for NBFCs (with stricter regulation of bigger players) that RBI introduced in October 2022 is in consonance with this. In addition, RBI has periodically fine-tuned risk weights for bank lending to NBFCs. In November 2023, for instance, the central bank hiked them to restrain loans to the sector. However, concerns about the slow growth of credit in recent times have made RBI relax its vigil somewhat. In February this year, it lowered the risk weight for bank loans to NBFCs by 25 percentage points to 100% in a bid to spur lending. Yet, as events in the US show, ‘better safe than sorry’ should be the motto when it comes to complex and intricate links between banks and NBFCs.

THEIR VIEW

Deloitte’s AI debacle in Australia is a warning for all early adopters

That a report riddled with AI hallucinations was sent to a government should be a wake-up call



ATANU BISWAS
is professor of statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata.

An AI fiasco in an Australian project by Deloitte raises the question of whether the global consultancy industry is being left vulnerable by its use of artificial intelligence. Deloitte was commissioned by Australia’s Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) last December to carry out an “independent assurance review” of its ‘targeted compliance framework,’ an automated system that penalizes jobseekers who failed to meet their ‘mutual welfare’ obligations. The contract was worth around US \$290,000. A researcher from Sydney University, Chris Rudge, observed that Deloitte’s 237-page report, which was submitted in July, was riddled with references to non-existent sources and experts.

After examining it, Deloitte confirmed that some of its footnotes and references were inaccurate and acknowledged using Azure OpenAI GPT-4o, a generative AI system, to produce parts of the report. The fabricated quotes and references were snipped out and an amended report was submitted in September. Deloitte also agreed to partially refund its consulting charge.

Fabricated references by GenAI arise from the hallucinations that AI tools are found to suffer. Examples abound of AI falsehoods. Shortly after ChatGPT’s launch, Samantha Delouya of *Business Insider* asked it to rewrite an article

about a Jeep factory left idle by rising production costs. ChatGPT produced an almost flawless piece, but included fictitious statements from Carlos Tavares, the CEO of Jeep-maker Stellantis. These seemed plausible, akin to what a CEO might say when confronted with the difficult task of terminating employees. Yet, they were entirely fictional.

In early 2023, ChatGPT was asked by two journalists of pollster FiveThirtyEight to write a piece on public perceptions of AI chatbots. The chatbot cited a 2021 Pew survey, saying that 71% of Americans believe that the increased capability and sophistication of computers and robotics will benefit society, typically, while only 27% think otherwise. However, the Pew survey it cited didn’t exist. The FiveThirtyEight crew found a 2021 Pew survey with the opposite conclusion: only 18% reported feeling more excited than worried, 37% said they felt more concerned than excited, and 45% said they felt equally excited and concerned.

AI-fed media falsehoods have been a scandal in the US, but hallucinations have impacted other fields too. Two New York lawyers were sanctioned in 2023 for submitting briefs with ChatGPT-generated non-existent cases. This June, a senior UK judge warned lawyers they could face criminal charges if they use fictitious AI-generated cases for arguments. Air Canada was held accountable in 2024 after a passenger received misleading policy advice from its website chatbot. Concerns about AI fabrication have also led to academic publishers retracting thousands of papers.

What leads AI tools to hallucinate? Data is AI’s lifeblood. It learns, adapts and makes decisions based on data. A frequently stated estimate is that GPT-4 was trained with 7.5 trillion words, for example. To train language models, AI developers use high-quality data from scholarly publications, books, news stories, Wikipedia and filtered internet content. Still, this is not enough. Blog

entries, social media posts and website comments comprise the remaining data, which is of low quality and may be biased or prejudiced.

Also, remember that GenAI models are ‘stochastic parrots’ and not truth-identifying machines. They only make probabilistic assessments of what answer to give without any sentient grasp of what their statements actually mean. Thus, a bot’s ‘reasoning’ may not always be correct. So AI-generated untruths may be caused by more than just inaccurate inputs; even if the model is trained on truthful material, GenAI output can still be untruthful.

Why is the Deloitte incident significant amid a deluge of AI hallucination cases? It had an impact on a national government: Australia’s. While Canberra’s DEWR emphasized that the fundamental study of the country’s welfare system was not affected and that Deloitte’s conclusions and suggestions were still relevant, it compelled Deloitte to publicly admit the use of GenAI for a paid government report. The Australian government has since hinted that more stringent AI-usage provisions might now be included in its future consulting contracts.

The Deloitte AI debacle should serve as a warning to professional services across every economy. Despite the clear temptation to use AI for quick drafts and thus pack in more work with fewer human resources, the rush to automate reports and the like may harm their reputations. With better oversight and accountability, Deloitte’s report could have met expectations. But somehow, a report with unvetted AI inputs was sent to a government whose policy choices impact billions of welfare payments and millions of people.

The allure of AI is irresistible, but we must never forget that it must amplify human expertise to be of value. The use of AI as a substitute for human intelligence, rather than as a collaborator, is a dangerous path. Humans must stay accountable for AI-aided work.

MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

India’s sunshine law: Clouded by the data privacy bill

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

In March 2003, the Supreme Court passed a historic verdict that filled a legislative gap. It made the disclosure of wealth details and criminal records of election candidates mandatory, via self-sworn affidavits. It based its verdict on the right of voters to know, so that they could make informed decisions. These affidavits would have self-declared information that was far more reliable than the grapevine and press reportage; unless reported by a candidate, any data dissemination could potentially attract defamation charges. Politicians eventually welcomed the change after a few grumbles that the judiciary had invaded the legislative turf. One senior politician and minister, who was known to be wealthy and had a clean image, protested that the revelation of his wealth would expose him to extortion. But that was a mild protest. Everyone agreed that such disclosures were in the public interest and that, on balance, this outweighed the privacy protection concerns of individual candidates. Politicians are in public life, and their

privacy claims do not have priority over public accountability. After all, transparency and accountability are the very foundation of good governance and robust democracy. So, although the right to vote is not a fundamental right, the right to know about candidates has acquired constitutional status.

The Right to Information (RTI), a landmark law that codified a constitutional right, was born two years later in October 2005. As we observe its 20th anniversary this month, there is alarm that its potency has gotten significantly diluted in practice.

As an aside, we may note the similar fate of another landmark law, the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Code of 2016, whose effectiveness has been watered down over the years thanks to weak enforcement and a gridlock of judicial challenges. The lynchpin of this law, its strict time limit for bankruptcy resolution, has been breached repeatedly, undermining the law itself.

The RTI, regarded as one of the best transparency (or ‘sunshine’) laws in the world, empowers every citizen to ask questions of the government, which is obliged to provide answers. Over the past two decades, it has helped expose corruption, enforce accountability and incentivize proactive disclosures, while giving marginalized citizens

a tool to challenge an opaque state. Yet, despite its achievements, legislative changes and institutional inertia are risks to its power. Frequent denials of information, rising RTI request pendency and long vacancies in appointments to Information Commissions (ICs) are reducing its effectiveness.

As of 30 June, more than 400,000 appeals and complaints were pending before all 29 ICs at the state and central levels. Of these, 18 reported waiting periods of more than a year. Six ICs have been non-functional for long and two are entirely defunct; three of them, including the Central Information Commission, were functioning without a head. Appointment delays and the resultant inertia may be linked to an RTI law amendment in 2009 that compromised the autonomy of ICs, which are meant to be constitutional bodies.

A more serious threat to the RTI has come from the passage of the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act of 2023. Section 8(0)(j) of the RTI law allowed for a denial of

“personal information” unless “the larger public interest justifies the disclosure of such information.” The RTI law was amended to remove its public-interest override. This removal was justified on the basis of judicial principles derived from landmark cases, especially the *Puttaswamy* case of 2017 that recognized privacy as a fundamental right.

Undoubtedly, there has always been a conflict between individual privacy and the public right to know. But the RTI was not an ideal sunshine law to begin with. It was the culmination of a decades-long countrywide campaign by civil society activists. The law was thus contested, incremental and hard-won.

The DPDP amendment of the RTI turns a discretionary balancing test into a default veto: public authorities can more easily refuse even serious disclosures by invoking privacy. It gives bureaucrats unbridled power to deny information, fundamentally altering the balance between privacy and public interest.

Without a clear framework to assess and override privacy claims, the RTI’s efficacy stands endangered. What was once an exception (privacy) will become a default bar. This reversal shifts the burden onto citizens to argue their case. Many public information officers will simply refuse disclosure, citing privacy, and ICs may not be in a position to police each demand rigorously.

The rules that make the DPDP law operational have not been notified yet. To save the RTI, it is important for the apex court to interpret the privacy law in harmony with it. It must reaffirm that public interest in exposing corruption, maladministration or abuse of power can trump privacy. If privacy harms override the public interest, these harms must be precisely articulated. Proactive disclosures by public authorities should be mandated and priority accorded to filling vacancies in all ICs, adopting digital tools and reducing pendency. The Right to Information will wither if nobody can enforce it.

More than 100 RTI activists have been murdered, reminding us that transparency exacts a heavy price. The RTI is a crucial instrument in improving India’s democracy. Diluting it through stealth amendments instead of a democratic debate risks undoing all the gains of this sunshine law.



JUST A THOUGHT

“In the subprime mortgage industry, bankers handed out iffy loans like candy at a parade because such loans meant revenue and, hence, bonuses for executives in the here-and-now.

THOMAS FRANK

Hot question

Stubble burning needs sustainable solutions

As the National Capital Region (NCR) chokes from the customary lethal post-Diwali pollution, it is noteworthy that stubble burning, the other major cause of bad air as the cooler weather sets in, has not contributed significantly to the high levels of toxicity in the air this year. The early data for the burning of paddy stubble between September 15 and October 15 showed an appreciable drop from last year. Punjab and Haryana, traditional leaders in this practice, saw such incidents drop 64 and 96 per cent, respectively. Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh have seen drops of 19-45 per cent. Concurrently, the NCR's air quality in this period has ranged from "moderate" to "satisfactory". State administrations are taking credit for this development, pointing to their energetic efforts to thwart stubble burning through a mixture of incentives, penal threats, and the provision of infrastructure. But the late monsoon withdrawal has delayed harvests, so many farmers are likely to begin clearing their field of paddy stubble in late October and November. The efficacy of state policies to cope with this higher volume of stubble clearing within a shorter window, therefore, will be put to the test.

There are principally two ways to address stubble burning. The first involves crop residue management (CRM), where stubble is treated in the paddy field by mulching and chemical treatment to decompose the residue. "Happy seeders" also enable farmers to directly sow the next crop on the residue of the previous one. States subsidise purchases of CRM machines to the extent of 50 to 80 per cent. Off-site measures entail taking the stubble to processing centres to be converted into pellets for use in animal feedstock or as fuel for power plants. But there are weaknesses in both methods. Punjab and Haryana are said to possess a sufficient number of CRM machines to cover all paddy farms but in Punjab in particular, only a third of farmers are willing to use them. The reluctance stems from an erroneous notion that CRM machines impact productivity and make crops vulnerable to pest attacks, a problem that can be solved through an education drive. As for offsite measures, an implicit disincentive is that crop residue has to be taken to processing centres at the farmer's cost. Both state governments this year addressed the issue by adding hefty incentives to farmers for off-site measures and coordination with Indian Oil Corporation for supplies to its ethanol plant in Panipat.

Doubts about this policy mix lie in its sustainability. Such generous subsidies may not be sustained in the long run for the two states, which are in a financially precarious position. Although there are penalties for stubble burning, they are difficult to enforce because of strong opposition from farm lobbies. Experts have suggested direct cash transfers to farmers to buy CRM machines, which are currently being sold at inflated prices on account of the subsidy element. But the genuinely sustainable solution involves the hard work of incentivising farmers to stop growing water-intensive crops such as rice — collateral damage from the Green Revolution — and diversify to other crops that require less water and have shorter growing periods that would preclude stubble burning. Northern states have begun offering one-time grants for crop diversification but, for this to work, farmers need vibrant markets. The catch is that this issue demands deeper agri-markets reforms — which politically powerful farm and middlemen lobbies have successfully managed to thwart.

Deep-sea opportunity

India must get the basics in place

India's vast marine frontier, stretching over 11,000 kilometres (km) of coastline and 2 million square km of exclusive economic zones (EEZs), hides both untapped wealth and unaddressed weakness. In this context, a new NITI Aayog report, "India's Blue Economy: Strategy for Harnessing Deep-Sea and Offshore Fisheries", rightly calls out India's underperformance in the deep-sea and offshore segment. The numbers highlighted in the report are striking. India has only four vessels owned by the Fishery Survey of India (FSI), compared to 1,883 from Sri Lanka and 1,216 from Iran in the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC) region. Its marine exports, worth about \$8 billion, draw the bulk of the fish from land-based aquaculture and only a tiny share comes from open-sea fishing. Contrast this with India's marine potential. The country's EEZs, between 12 nautical miles and 200 nautical miles offshore and beyond, harbour an estimated 7.16 million tonnes of fish, but the lack of modern fleets and regulation keeps this potential dormant.

The report identifies outdated legal frameworks, particularly the Merchant Shipping Act (1958), which regulates only commercial shipping, and the Marine Fishing Regulation Acts (MFRAs) of coastal states and Union Territories, which pertain to only within 12 nautical miles and not to deep-sea areas. Without a separate "Vessels Act", Indian fishermen lack authorisation and protection for deep-sea operations, leaving the field open to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. The NITI Aayog thus recommends a ₹8,330 crore three-phase plan. Phase-I (2025-28) should aim at establishing regulations, mapping resources, and building 10-15 minor deep-sea landing centres; Phase-II (2029-32) should induct modern, automated vessels via cooperative ownership models; and finally Phase-III (post-2033) must consolidate gains, promote value-added exports, and embed sustainability.

While the road map is ambitious, the present economic context also matters. External shocks often derail attempts to carry out internal reforms. The recent American tariffs, combining countervailing and anti-dumping duties approaching 60 per cent, have impacted shrimp exporters, especially in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, and Odisha. With the United States accounting for nearly 40 per cent of seafood exports, India's over-reliance on one market is a structural risk. India must diversify. Global trade rules are also shifting. The World Trade Organization's Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, adopted in 2022 to curb harmful subsidies contributing to overfishing and illegal fishing, remains to be ratified by India. New Delhi's hesitation clearly stems from a legitimate concern. Premature cuts in subsidies could undermine small and marginal fishermen, who depend on fuel and vessel support.

Market access is not the only issue. Governance of commons remains yet another challenge. Overfished coastal waters are a textbook case of resource depletion. As Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom showed, sustainable use of shared resources requires decentralised governance, clear access boundaries, cooperative monitoring, and local enforcement. The deep sea cannot afford to become another open-access tragedy and a race for extraction. Instead, India's cooperative fisheries model and new digital platforms for vessel tracking can anchor a polycentric governance structure, easing pressure on coastal stocks, enhancing export resilience, and creating new livelihoods.

The GST model for power

Implementing the ambitious electricity law changes can be easier with the promise of an Electricity Council



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

Is it time for India's ailing power distribution sector to celebrate? Earlier this month, the Union government released the proposed amendments it wishes to introduce to the Electricity Act, 2003. The official justification for the changes in the legislative framework for power distribution is that the sector has been suffering from huge losses, with regulatory delays weakening its financial viability and cross-subsidisation of tariffs, where higher tariffs on industry impact industrial competitiveness, constraining economic growth.

Hence, the Union power ministry on October 9 released the Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2025, to a wide range of stakeholders, seeking public comments and suggestions. The Draft has made several good suggestions to address the concerns afflicting the power distribution sector. No surprise that they have also been generally welcomed by many industry players, experts, and commentators. A closer look at the proposed changes, however, will reveal many aspects that the government must bear in mind if its stated goals for power distribution reforms are to be achieved.

Take the first proposal on tariff recovery for distribution companies. On paper, over 63 power distribution entities operating in 32 states and Union Territories show the average tariff collection efficiency at over 96-97 per cent. At the aggregate level, this may not look like a very alarming number for a sector that by March 2024 had accumulated a total debt of ₹7.53 trillion and a loss of ₹6.3 trillion. But the problem is that their receipt is much below what they should be collecting if the regulators had issued timely orders on tariff revisions. In the absence of such revisions, even a decent rate of bill collection hides a more serious financial challenge for most of the distribution agencies.

Why is there a huge gap between what they should ideally collect and the level of tariffs enforced by the regulators? Of the 32 states and Union Territories, only 13 have seen their electricity regulators issue timely tariff orders for 2024-25. In other words, more than half the states will be collecting tariffs based on what was decided a year or two earlier. How

delayed are these tariff orders? Of the 63 distribution utilities, 57 had got their tariff orders for only up to 2022-23, with almost half of them being delayed, including those in Delhi.

The proposed amendments to the Electricity Act, 2003, have envisaged a bold remedial step in this area. In order to prevent delays in tariff revisions, the law will empower the state electricity regulatory commissions to determine tariffs suo motu, so that fresh tariffs are implemented from the start of a new financial year. Remember that the delayed tariff orders are not solely the result of regulators taking an inordinate amount of time to finalise their decisions. The delays take place also because distribution entities (many of which are administratively controlled by the state governments where they operate)

RAISINA HILL
A K BHATTACHARYA

do not submit their tariff petitions on time. For the states, a tariff revision is often a politically avoidable situation.

More reassuring is the proposed law that will make it mandatory for regulatory commissions to fix tariffs that reflect the actual costs of purchasing and supplying power to end-consumers. State governments will still be free to support specific consumer classes that may need concessional power by offering subsidies on their behalf. The objective is to put an end to the pernicious practice of cross-subsidies in tariffs, where industrial consumers incur a substantially higher cost for their power consumption to subsidise the consumers the state desires to support.

Yet another amendment proposed by the government is to facilitate competition within a state among power distributors and allow consumers to make a choice. This will essentially permit a new power distributor to enter an area and use the existing distribution network for a fee charged by its owner to offer electricity to consumers. This will also facilitate what is described in the power sector as open access. Apart from reducing costs and delays in creating dedicated distribution infrastructure for the last-mile supply of power, it would also improve competition and expand consumer choice.

There is no denying that all these changes are

From ministries to markets

There are reports that India is looking to set up a sovereign wealth fund (SWF). The idea of an SWF isn't new. The first SWF was created in 1953 by Kuwait to invest its oil wealth for future generations. Since then, two waves of such funds have reshaped how nations manage their assets. The first wave in the 1970s and 1980s came from oil-rich countries like Abu Dhabi and Brunei, seeking to stabilise volatile commodity revenues, and Singapore, aiming to be fiscally prudent by professionalising how government companies were run. The second wave, in the 2000s, was driven by fast-growing, export-led economies such as China, Korea, and Russia. These countries wanted to diversify their reserves away from US Treasuries and earn better, long-term returns.

Today, SWFs collectively manage over \$11 trillion, making them some of the most powerful investors in the world. Within these funds, Temasek stands out as both a pioneer and a departure. While it shares the essential characteristics of sovereign wealth funds as enunciated in the Santiago Principles, it serves as an example of what's possible when the state behaves as a smart owner. Temasek wasn't built on oil or foreign-exchange reserves. It began when Singapore transferred ownership of companies like Singtel, Singapore Airlines, and DBS Bank into a single investment holding company. Temasek then diversified globally, reinvesting profits and expanding beyond national borders. It pioneered the "state-as-shareholder" model, proving that public ownership and commercial performance can go hand in hand.

Temasek went on to inspire a generation of funds across Asia: Malaysia's Khazanah Nasional, Abu Dhabi's Mubadala, Indonesia's INA, and Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund. Each learned to blend national strategy with professional investment discipline — a model India can draw on.

Turning to India, the government's listed equity holdings are worth roughly ₹44 trillion (\$495 billion). If those shares were pooled under one managed

fund, it would instantly rank among the top 10 sovereign wealth funds in the world. And that's just the listed portion.

India's challenge is that these assets are scattered across ministries. Shares are technically held in the name of the President of India, while administrative control rests with the relevant ministry. Oil companies sit under the Ministry of Petroleum, banks and insurers under the Ministry of Finance, power firms under the Ministry of Power, and so on. This fragmentation creates duplication, weak oversight, and a lost opportunity.

THE
OCCASIONAL
ASIDE
AMIT TANDON

Ministries are designed to set policy, not to run companies or make investment decisions. In today's complex business world, they're simply not equipped to play fund manager. Pooling all government equity under one sovereign wealth fund would bring coherence, accountability, and professional oversight. The fund's architecture, governance structure, and mandate need careful thought.

Take just the impact on the treasury. At present, dividends and disinvestment proceeds flow directly into the central treasury. Shifting ownership to a fund mustn't create a sudden fiscal hole.

Other SWFs offer a way forward. In Norway, the equity is legally owned by the state, while being managed independently by Norges Bank Investment Management under strict transparency and governance rules. India already has a precedent for this in its National Pension Scheme (NPS), where ownership and fund management are separated. A similar arrangement could see public sector unit (PSU) equity transferred from ministries to a central holding company — perhaps under the Cabinet Secretariat, if the idea of a fund is too extreme — with professional oversight, sectoral experts, and clear lines of accountability.

The SWFs offer other lessons too. Abu Dhabi's ADIA separates strategic direction (decided by its board) from investment execution (done by professionals). Temasek has shown that separating owner-

much needed in India's power distribution sector. But will the Modi government be able to pull it off? Political resistance to these changes, particularly from states and thousands of workers in state-owned distribution companies, could be a major hurdle. Changes in land acquisition laws and farm-sector legislation had to be rolled back since there was political resistance to accepting them in many states. Even the new labour codes, which have been passed by Parliament, are yet to be notified because not all states have agreed to embrace those changes.

Why talk only about political problems in bringing about changes in land, labour or farm-sector laws? What happened just about three years ago should not be forgotten. Almost all the changes that the government is now proposing in the Electricity Act, 2003, had been proposed in August 2022. The Electricity Amendment Bill of 2022 was introduced in the Lok Sabha. The Modi government, then in its second term and enjoying a bigger majority than now in its third term, faced a major pushback from trade unions and power-sector workers. Immediately, the 2022 Bill was sent to the Standing Committee of Parliament for its examination. The country did not hear of that Bill again till at least the general elections of 2024. And since that Bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha, it was buried along with the dissolution of the House in 2024.

Is there any hope now that the Modi government will be able to overcome any political resistance to those proposals in the form of a new amendment Bill for the power distribution sector? Some recent developments may inspire hope. One, the buzz in New Delhi's corridors of power is that the Union government, in the wake of uncertainties caused by United States President Donald Trump's tariffs and visa policies, is now gearing up for a series of bold and reformist policy measures to sustain the country's growth momentum. The reform of the goods and services tax (GST) rates, along with an improvement in its institutional structure for redressing appeals and the promise of ending the inverted duty structure, is one such example.

The second development offering hope for the proposed changes is a little-noticed provision in the draft amendment Bill. This is about the creation of an Electricity Council. The new body is expected to facilitate consensus-based reforms in the power sector. Remember that power is in the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution, and hence the views of the states cannot be easily ignored. The Electricity Council is modelled on the GST Council. It is to be chaired by the Union minister for power, with state electricity ministers as members and the Union power secretary as member-convenor. The Electricity Council is expected to advise the Centre and the states on power policy matters, foster consensus on reforms, and coordinate their effective and efficient implementation. Hopefully, a body like the Electricity Council will encourage the states to be part of this process to bring about the much-needed changes in the power sector and halt the downhill journey of the power distribution companies.

ship from management improves transparency and boosts valuations. Khazanah Nasional follows a strict fiscal rulebook defining when the government can add or withdraw funds, ensuring financial discipline. And Ireland's Strategic Investment Fund shows that sovereign funds can also invest domestically while maintaining commercial rigour.

Originally, most of these funds were built as rainy-day buffers — to provide a cushion during downturns or commodity price crashes. But in recent years, they've evolved into strategic investment arms, helping countries build national industries and future-proof their economies. Today, sovereign funds invest in green energy, rare minerals, artificial intelligence, and critical technologies — sectors that shape global competitiveness.

India must do the same. A sovereign wealth fund can invest not just abroad but also in India's clean energy transition, semiconductor ecosystem, and infrastructure pipeline. This will turn passive ownership into active economic strategy.

As R Shyamsunder, a private equity professional and former Temasek managing director, puts it, a "Bharat Sovereign Wealth Fund" could be transformative. Even a modest 2 per cent annual divestment could raise over \$10 billion a year, trimming the fiscal deficit by around 30 basis points. But the bigger prize is the multiplier effect — its ability to attract global partners and co-investors, drawing tens or even hundreds of billions in foreign capital over time.

At its core, an SWF is about rethinking how the Indian state manages wealth. Our current system was designed nearly 70 years ago, for a very different era. The world has changed; our structures haven't.

An SWF, combined with the scale of our pension assets and the deft management of our foreign currency and gold reserves, will give India greater economic heft, expand its global influence, and build enduring national wealth. It's time to move from ministries to markets.

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Making AI work for you



AMBI PARAMESWARAN

Technological breakthroughs don't always live up to the hype. A decade ago, we were told that 3D printing will replace manufacturing of many types of products. A company even demonstrated building a house using a 3D printer. But we are still buying and using products made in factories. Yes, 3D printers have become more and more affordable and in consumer products marketing most

designers use 3D printers to create prototypes, instead of wood or plastic moulds.

Virtual reality and artificial reality, too, seem to have not grown the way they were supposed to take over our real world. IoT, or internet of things, has had a slow start but we are seeing more of it everywhere. I was impressed that a B School in Mumbai is using this technology to issue books to students. But has it taken over our world? Have refrigerators started ordering for milk, bread and eggs, as they were supposed to? No, not yet.

In contrast AI, especially generative AI, has had a great start. And a lot of it is not just hype. ChatGPT, from its late 2022 launch, now boasts of more than 700 million worldwide users. In India, too, ChatGPT has had a great beginning. So have all the other GenAI platforms

like Gemini, Perplexity, CoPilot, Claude and others.

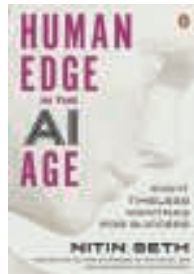
There is widespread fear that ChatGPT and its ilk will replace humans causing widespread job losses. These arguments reminded me of the protests that computerisation faced in public sector banks in India (our own Luddite Moment).

So it was with great interest that I dived into the book *Human Edge in an AI Age* by Nitin Seth. He is also the author of two other books on related subjects (*Winning in the Digital Age* and *Mastering the Data Paradox*). An alumnus of IIT Delhi and IIM Lucknow, Nitin worked at McKinsey, Flipkart and Fidelity International before setting up Incedo Inc, a digital, data and AI services firm with a global footprint. He knows what is happening and is ready to tell it as it is.

In the first section, ominously titled "AI is redefining every aspect of life and business", Mr Seth lays out the cards. AI is on an irresistible march and nothing is

going to stop it. At one time we thought AI will not surpass human capabilities, but that is happening. AI will fundamentally reshape every industry and all jobs will change in the AI Age. It is not a question of whether it will happen or not, but when it will happen.

His hypothesis is that the first wave, happening right now, will affect 11 to 22 per cent of all jobs and 2 to 5 per cent of jobs will be lost. The second wave will be from 2030-35 when 45 to 60 per cent of all jobs will be significantly affected and around 15 to 35 per cent of jobs will be lost. The third wave will be 2035-2040 when almost all jobs (90-95 per cent) will be impacted and a staggering 35-50 per cent will be lost. In terms of industries, disruption is happening now in retail, media/content and



Human Edge in the AI Age: Eight Timeless Mantras for Success
by Nitin Seth
Published by Penguin
496 pages ₹799

financial services. Next sectors to be affected will be healthcare, manufacturing and education. We are already hearing of pharma companies training doctors on the use of AI; and doctors are lapping this up. The last sectors to be affected could be agriculture, government/public services and construction/infrastructure.

So is all lost? Not at all, says the author.

In the second part of the book, Mr Seth presents "Eight timeless mantras for success in the AI Age". The first mantra is that we need to enhance our problem-solving

skills. How to structure a problem, how to define a core problem, and which framework we should use; learning these will help us work with AI better. The second mantra is be ready to embrace

change. Figure out new ways of learning instead of resisting change. The art of learning to learn is going to decide how you can navigate your job in the AI age. The third mantra is quite different: Connect with the self through spirituality. The author is a big believer of Vipassana meditation and wants you to embrace a mindfulness journey. I will let you discover the other five mantras for yourself.

The book is not a "light" read and at more than 450 pages it is packed with examples, charts, diagrams and even some photographs from the author's personal library. But it is an engrossing read. If you want to know how the AI wave is going to affect your business or job and how you can get ready, you will find this book an engaging and engrossing read.

The reviewer is a bestselling author of 12 books. His latest is *Marketing Mixology – Four Essential Ingredients for Marketing Success*

Editor's

TAKE

Diwali aftermath: Delhi chokes again

Unless the Government wakes up and the public accepts its role in polluting the capital, the festival of lights will continue to herald the season of smog

It was yet another well-lit Diwali that people long for all year, as houses and streets were lit and there were fireworks in the skies and crackers bursting all over. It was yet another Diwali celebrated with joy and gaiety. But the morning after was not that pleasant, as once again, the capital woke up to a blanket of toxic haze instead of sunshine. Despite court orders, Government warnings, and awareness drives, Delhi's air quality plummeted to dangerous levels.

According to data from the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), 36 out of 38 monitoring stations in Delhi slipped into the "red zone" on Diwali night, recording "very poor" to "severe" levels of pollution. Four areas – Dwarka (417), Ashok Vihar (404), Wazirpur (423), and Anand Vihar (404) – crossed the dreaded AQI mark of 400, placing them squarely in the "severe" category. By 10 pm, Delhi's overall AQI stood at 344 – a figure that only worsened as the night deepened and the firecrackers continued long past the Supreme Court's permitted hours of 8 pm to 10 pm. It was no surprise though and was expected, going by past experience. Each year, the same script plays out: the Government blames citizens, citizens blame the administration, and courts pass directions that go up in smoke on Diwali night. Delhi's stint with bad air starts with Diwali year after year, and no one takes responsibility, though everyone is to blame – Government, judiciary, and people – but accountability is never fixed. On Diwali night, all forget that there are old people, patients, and children gasping for fresh air. The Supreme Court has time and again issued guidelines on the sale and use of "green firecrackers," yet enforcement on the ground is missing. State authorities, despite invoking Stage II of the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), have failed to ensure timely implementation or strict compliance. Political will is missing and administrative inertia is always in place.

Citizens, too, must shoulder their share of blame. The disregard for court directives, the indifference to the impact of pollution on children and the elderly, and the tendency to treat public health as someone else's problem – all reveal a disturbing apathy. Civic responsibility must not stop at social media outrage. When residents knowingly burst crackers past midnight or burn waste in their colonies, they become complicit in poisoning the very air their families breathe. The consequences are grim. For the next few months, respiratory illnesses will spike. Hospitals will see a surge in cases of asthma, bronchitis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. And the worst is yet to come. The festival fireworks merely mark the beginning of the season of smog. In the coming days, the burning of crop stubble in fields will add another layer of toxins in the air. The combination of heavy air, temperature inversion, and emission build-up will turn the city into a gas chamber.

It is a grim situation and demands a collective awakening. The Government must move beyond ad hoc firefighting, and courts must push for accountability, not just guidelines. Delhi's pollution crisis is a mirror to our national conscience – reflecting our inability to act in unison for a shared good.

Nitish Kumar bets big on women voters

As Nitish Kumar seeks a record tenth term amid fading health and political uncertainty, it is the women of Bihar who may once again decide his fate



KALYANI SHANKAR

In electoral politics, voters play a crucial role. Their support will be key in determining whether Nitish Kumar secures his tenth term as Chief Minister.

For two decades, Kumar has prioritised women's issues, resulting in important political reforms. As he approaches what may be his last election, understanding the support of women for him is vital.

Nitish's health has declined, and he is rarely seen in public, showing signs of confusion. This has led the BJP to consider appointing its own Chief Minister. The future of both JD(U) and Nitish remains uncertain.

While Nitish Kumar may face criticism on various issues in the upcoming polls, his support from women voters continues. Nitish Kumar's ban on alcohol has garnered strong support from women and has contributed to his prolonged tenure in office. In a state where poverty and patriarchy are significant issues, Kumar's policies have delivered benefits, including bicycles, jobs, cash grants, and regulations on an abusive husband's drinking.

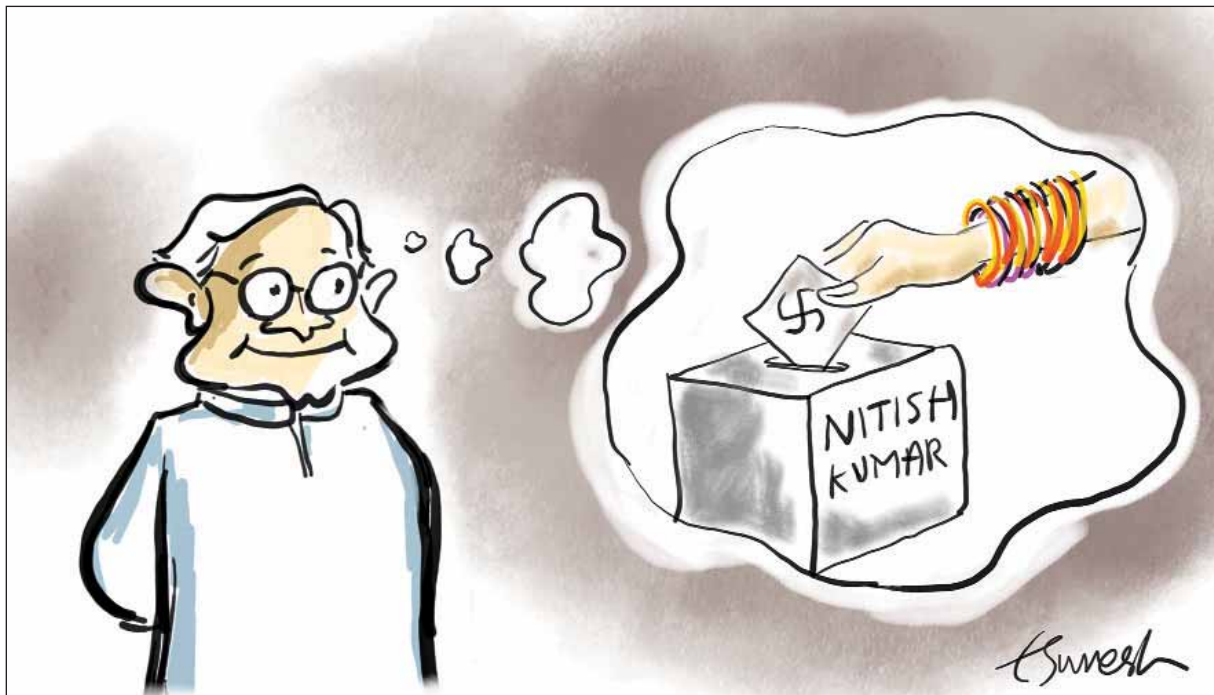
In 2010, Bihar recorded a high turnout of women voters, a trend that has persisted. Kumar has gained strong support from women, thanks to improved law and order, which has made them feel safer and more confident to vote.

Support for Kumar varies by demographic: upper-caste, non-Yadav OBC, EBC, and Dalit women tend to support the NDA, while Muslim and Yadav women largely favour the Grand Alliance.

In the previous elections, the NDA targeted women voters, winning 60.5 per cent of seats in constituencies with a higher proportion of women than men. Of the 243 total seats, the NDA secured 72 in female-majority constituencies, while the Mahagathbandhan won 42. This shift in electoral behaviour highlights the growing influence of women in Bihar politics.

One of the reasons is that with the rise of education and empowerment among women, they can significantly influence electoral outcomes, prompting political parties to revise their manifestos to better appeal to them. A primary motivator for voting is the belief that every vote counts.

The upcoming Bihar elections will demonstrate the significant role women voters play in India. Since 1962, the number of women voting has increased. In 1962, 63.3 per cent of men voted, while only 46.6 per cent of women did. By 2014, the difference was down to 1.5 per cent, and in 2019, women even voted more



IN 2010, BIHAR RECORDED A HIGH TURNOUT OF WOMEN VOTERS, A TREND THAT HAS PERSISTED. KUMAR HAS GAINED STRONG SUPPORT FROM WOMEN, THANKS TO IMPROVED LAW AND ORDER, WHICH HAS MADE THEM FEEL SAFER AND MORE CONFIDENT TO VOTE

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than men by 0.17 per cent. This change is partly due to the education of women in the 1970s, which helped them understand and appreciate their right to vote.

Their influence can be observed in how female voters supported UP Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath and Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar during the elections.

Their backing, particularly in rural areas, has been essential for issues such as liquor bans, reflecting broader societal concerns. Nitish Kumar recently provided `10,000 to 1.25 crore women and increased social security pensions from `400 to `1,100 for 11.2 million families. Households also receive 125 units of free electricity per month. Women benefit from a 35 per cent reservation in police jobs and 50 per cent in local government positions, along with low-interest loans through the Jeevika programme. However, some women who were not included in the beneficiary list have voiced frustration, feeling unfairly excluded.

Kumar has several negative aspects, such as his declining health and diminishing influence within his JD(U) party.

There is no number two in his Cabinet, as there are no significant leaders. Additionally, it is not a done deal for him to become the Chief Minister, as Home Minister Amit Shah stated this week that the elected MLAs will choose the next Chief Minister. The BJP

wants to have its own Chief Minister, but it lacks strong local leaders. If the NDA wins, Nitish will have to fight for his position, although the BJP has realised that they need him during elections.

Political parties recognise that women voters are essential for electoral success and are responding with cash transfer programmes. These programmes involve direct payments into women's bank accounts, providing them with financial independence and dignity, and enabling them to cover personal and family expenses.

Nitish is often underestimated, but he has proven to be essential for the coalition. He bets big on women-centric schemes ahead of the Bihar Assembly polls.

He has maintained his significance by earning the loyalty of voters and skilfully managing his relationships with various political groups. In this election, new leaders are ready to step up, while Nitish Kumar wants to become Chief Minister for the tenth time.

However, younger leaders may struggle to emerge unless Nitish makes room for them. Some think Nitish should step aside gracefully. The BJP and JD(U) each contested 101 seats in the elections, and the results will determine who will be the next Chief Minister. Nitish led the coalition in the polls, and JD(U) wants him to continue as Chief Minister.

The Pioneer

SINCE 1865

When civic sense ends at the doorstep



SANJAY CHANDRA

2ND OPINION

THE PIONEER

I travelled to Pune to attend a literature festival. I was struck by the cleanliness along the roads during the 45-minute drive to my destination. I sorely miss this in most of our cities. The heaps of waste thrown by us are not a pleasant sight. A friend had once observed that we are extremely conscious of individual hygiene but loose civic sense when it comes to maintaining the same outside our homes.

Most of the ladies in the household would keep a strict watch on the sweeping and dusting inside the entire house but will not think twice about throwing the dirt on the road outside. I often find discarded wrappers lying around in

my tower lift and in the common areas of the society despite the availability of waste bins. Mine is one of the upscale condominium complexes in Gurugram, or so I would believe. Almost all the residents are either working or retired professionals. The littering by the adults is beyond comprehension; and their children indulging in such acts reflects poorly on the education being imparted both at home and in schools. We, as a family, have many a time carried the empty wrappers home if we could not locate a waste bin. It is not that we are the only people who are guilty.

Many developed countries also face the same issues. My uncle once visited Singapore for vacation. We were having a relaxed evening together as he narrated anecdotes from his visit. The small country is considered very clean. He was disappointed at the way a few of the roads were littered with waste. I spontaneously observed that this must have been the Little India section. He was offended and retorted that it was the Government's responsibility to inculcate discipline and ensure that the roads remained clean. Japan is an extremely consumerist society. Their manufacturing industry thrives on this. They keep developing newer and better products by the year, if not months. The people, at least in the cities, find it easier, and probably also economical, to leave the outdated gadgets, even the refrig-

erators and TVs, near the garbage bins, to be picked up by the municipality van. This was almost 25 years ago. Things may be better now. But the view, if you happened to be passing through lanes, was certainly not Instagram-worthy. In this regard, at least some of our cities and their municipalities have done a much better job.

I was in Indore a few years ago. The garbage vehicle would move from one house to the next to pick up segregated waste, its imminent arrival announced by the catchy music playing on the audio system. Even the construction debris were neatly stacked outside the plots, to be picked up by another agency later. But that is not enough.

We also need to pitch in. Many of us still fight with the shopkeeper if we do not get the groceries or the fruits and vegetables in disposable plastic bags. The neighbour upstairs does not hesitate to shrug off his stress by throwing the cigarette stub in the balcony below. Another maid thinks she is giving heavenly blessings to the ignorant masses below by showering food waste from above. Another friendly neighbour thinks he is purifying the land by spitting on the road.

The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative

The Pioneer

SINCE 1865

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Asrani — The eternal smile of cinema

Asrani worked as a voice artist with All India Radio in Jaipur and studied at the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune, before moving to Bombay, as he had no interest in joining his father's carpet business. He later taught at FTII from 1988 to 1993.

Making his debut in *Hare Kaanch Ki Choodiyan* in 1967, he went on to work in more than 375 films over a career spanning five decades. Asrani was a successful lead actor in Gujarati cinema during the 1970s and 1980s. During the same period, he appeared in over a hundred Hindi films as a character actor, a testimony to how much in demand he was.

His camaraderie with superstar Rajesh Khanna was legendary, with the two featuring together in twenty-five films. From *Sholay* to *Chhoti Si Baat*, *Chupke Chupke* and *Golmaal*, his roles brought smiles to millions.

Though known for comedy, his performances in *Mere Apne* and *Satyakam* revealed his depth as an actor. With razor-sharp wit, impeccable timing, and expressive charm, Asrani remains one of the most beloved character actors of Indian cinema — an enduring icon remembered with love and respect. His contributions to Indian cinema transcend genres and generations, leaving an indelible mark on audiences and fellow artists alike.

BAL GOVIND | NOIDA

Expedite appointment of ad hoc Judges

There are about eighteen lakh pending criminal cases in the High Courts. In January, the Supreme Court permitted High Courts to appoint ad hoc judges not exceeding ten per cent of their sanctioned strength.

However, it had earlier mandated that such appointments could not be made if a particular High Court was already functioning with eighty per cent of its sanctioned strength.

Recently, the apex court relaxed this restriction because none of the country's twenty-five High Courts had sent names for ad hoc appointments. High Courts such as Allahabad, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka are overburdened with pending cases awaiting disposal.

Former Chief Justices SA Bobde and Ranjan Gogoi had strongly advocated the appointment of ad hoc judges, as retired judges bring valuable experience and judicial insight.

Moreover, Article 224A of the Constitution is clear on this matter. The Centre and the Supreme Court must expedite the process of appointing ad hoc judges in the interest of justice and the relief of long-suffering litigants. Swift action would help reduce pendency and restore faith in the judicial system.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Promoting vegan meat in schools

In an era of growing environmental and ethical awareness, the introduction of vegan meat alternatives in government school meals could represent a meaningful step towards sustainability. Several Indian companies now produce plant-based meats from soy, wheat, and pea protein, providing nutritious, cruelty-free substitutes for conventional animal products. Vegan meats, being free from cholesterol, hormones, and other animal-derived ingredients, offer health benefits while promoting compassion for animals.

Replacing eggs and traditional meats in school meals with such alternatives would encourage children to adopt ethical and sustainable eating habits from a young age. Students could enjoy familiar flavours and textures without contributing to animal suffering or the overexploitation of natural resources. Beyond immediate health and ethical benefits, this initiative could spark curiosity about sustainable food systems, instilling long-term awareness of environmental responsibility.

By embracing this change, government schools could set a benchmark for inclusivity, well-being, and empathy in public nutrition programmes. Such a policy would reflect a forward-looking vision — nourishing both young bodies and the planet, while cultivating kindness, ethical awareness, and mindful choices among future generations.

VIJAYKUMAR HK | RAICHUR

THE GLOBAL ECONOMY'S SEARCH FOR A NEW EQUILIBRIUM

The global economy today resembles a weary juggler running out of tricks. China, once the factory floor of the world, finds itself trapped by its own success. Its mighty export engine has stalled as global demand weakens, while domestic consumption struggles to fill the gap.

India, on the other hand, has risen steadily on internal purchasing power, yet its domestic demand still falls short of matching the nation's industrial capacity. Its exports, too, face persistent constraints. The United States, cushioned by the dollar's enduring privilege, long ago traded manufacturing resilience for financial ease. Tariff walls provide symbolic comfort but cannot revive its lost industrial spirit. Now, it stakes its future on artificial

intelligence — an alluring but capital-heavy pursuit that generates wealth, not employment. Europe, meanwhile, drifts between fading relevance and policy paralysis, unable to escape the shadow of American influence. Amid this disarray, calls for a global "reset" ring hollow. Nations unable to renew themselves channel their unease into conflicts, trade wars, and protectionist impulses — manifestations of deeper structural imbalance.

The world is not collapsing, but it is clearly disoriented, groping for a new equilibrium it has yet to conceive, let alone create. In this uncertain search, economic imagination may prove the rarest and most vital resource of all.

R NARAYANAN | MUMBAI

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

Forest conservation for disaster-proofing India's future

Unless addressed through integrated, nature-based strategies that link forest conservation, water security, and disaster management, India's climate future risks becoming one of escalating disasters rather than sustainable resilience

FIRST
Column



India is standing at a critical juncture in its climate trajectory, facing an alarming rise in extreme weather events that threaten both human lives and the nation's ecological equilibrium. Over the past few years, cyclones, cloudbursts, and flash floods have not only grown in frequency but also in ferocity — marking a distinct shift in the country's climatic rhythm. Once viewed as rare or seasonal occurrences, these disasters now form a near-continuous backdrop to India's annual monsoon cycle, exposing its deep vulnerability to the evolving dynamics of climate change. Meteorological data show that the North Indian Ocean — which includes both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea — has experienced a steady increase in sea surface temperatures of 0.8°C to 1.2°C over the past century, with the Arabian Sea warming at nearly twice the global average in recent decades.

In recent times, Cyclone Biparjoy approached the Gujarat coast in 2023, necessitating the shifting of over 100,000 persons across Gujarat and Rajasthan. Later that year, Cyclone Mocha struck the Bay of Bengal, causing extensive flooding in Myanmar and Bangladesh; Cyclone Tej affected parts of the Arabian Sea coast; Cyclone Hamoon caused damage in Bangladesh; Cyclone Midhili impacted Odisha and West Bengal; and Cyclone Michung damaged coastal Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

The following year, 2024, brought more devastating events. Cyclone Remal claimed over 33 lives across West Bengal, Mizoram, Assam, and Meghalaya, while Cyclone Fengal led to 19 fatalities in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. The monsoon season triggered catastrophic events like the Wayanad landslides in Kerala, killing over 420 people. The Himalayan region too faced immense damage, with Himachal Pradesh enduring 51 cloudbursts and flash floods between June and August, resulting in 31 deaths and 33 missing persons, while deadly floods in Assam claimed more than a hundred lives.

The trend of extreme rainfall continued into



2025, particularly in the Himalayan region. Intense cloudbursts and flash floods hit Uttarkashi, devastating villages such as Dharali in Uttarakhand, Kishtwar in Jammu and Kashmir, and Sahastradhara in Dehradun. Cyclone Shakti unleashed heavy rains to cause floods in Maharashtra's Marathwada region, a historically drought-prone area, highlighting how vulnerability is expanding across India's diverse landscape.

The occurrence of extreme climatic events is related to the atmospheric transport of water vapour, metaphorically termed "flying rivers", which causes a significant impact on regional hydrology, just like the terrestrial river systems. In the Indian subcontinent, two flying rivers are critical: one originates from the Arabian Sea and the other from the Bay of Bengal. Cloudbursts typically occur when the warm, moist monsoon winds clash with colder air masses over the Himalayas, leading to the rapid formation of intense cumulonimbus clouds and thunderstorms. Strong updraughts trapping small raindrops allow a massive volume of water to accumulate. When these updraughts abruptly weaken, water precipitates all at once, resulting in a cloudburst. The torrential downpour in the rugged terrain and steep slopes with narrow valleys accelerates the flow and, with the land's absorption capacity overwhelmed, devastating flash floods and debris flows follow.

The stability of flying rivers directly

influences the health of India's terrestrial hydrological systems and water security. Disruptions — such as shifts in their spread, timing, or intensity — have a cascading effect on ground rivers.

For a nation with a critical dependence on the monsoon, the interaction between these atmospheric moisture flows and the nation's forest cover is exceptionally vital, representing a bidirectional dependence. The health and unique biodiversity of Indian forests are sustained by the flying rivers, and in turn, the forests themselves contribute to the sustenance of the regional hydrological cycle by influencing the formation, movement, and precipitation of atmospheric moisture.

Studies in tropical regions confirm that forests significantly influence precipitation by recycling a substantial portion of rainfall back into the atmosphere via evapotranspiration. Extensive forest covers modulate moisture circulation patterns by enhancing infiltration, reducing surface run-off, and promoting groundwater recharge, contributing to the stability of regional flying rivers.

Deforestation and land-use change pose a significant threat to this crucial relationship. Altering forest cover can disrupt wind patterns, potentially changing the trajectory and intensity of the moisture-laden air masses. Specifically, forest degradation and the conversion of forests to agriculture or urban areas reduce evapotranspiration, thereby decreasing the amount of moisture recycled back into the atmosphere.

Large-scale deforestation, particularly in critical regions like the Himalayas, Western Ghats, Central India, and the Northeast, risks altering the local and regional climate patterns — impacting monsoon onset, the number of rainy days, the duration of the rainy season, and the intensity of precipitation, thereby affecting the reliability of the flying rivers and the health of the agricultural economy. This vulnerability is further compounded by climate change, which can alter the dynamics of atmospheric moisture movements and increase the frequency of extreme weather events, placing additional stress on both the forests and the atmospheric moisture flows.

Heavy downpours escalate into disasters in India. The affected area spreads with river inundation and emergency dam discharge, leading to catastrophic losses in agriculture, widespread infrastructure failure, and the tragic loss of human and livestock life. Crucially, they are intensified by anthropogenic factors, including unplanned development, encroachments, deforestation (which accelerates erosion and landslides), and the obstruction of natural drainage systems. While immediate disaster management receives attention, there remains a significant policy gap so far as the prioritisation of addressing the deep-seated, human-driven root causes is concerned.

Recent studies reveal that India is grappling with a severe and intensifying pattern of extreme weather events. The Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology in

Pune has reported a 52 per cent increase in the frequency of Arabian Sea cyclones over the last four decades. Studies reveal a threefold rise in monsoon extremes between 1950 and 2023, and that seven of the ten deadliest floods in India from 1985 to 2020 were connected to the flying rivers.

Currently, an accurate prediction of extreme weather conditions is reported to be possible up to three days in advance, though fine-tuning the intensity and exact location remains a challenge. To effectively translate these forecasts into saving lives and property, India must urgently move beyond mere prediction to implement comprehensive early warning systems that integrate local factors like geography, demographics, and infrastructure with rapid communication and administrative response.

The ultimate goal must be the creation of hyperlocal climate action plans based on realistic risk assessments to achieve disaster-proofing in every city and district. One, however, cannot ignore the fact that forest conservation and restoration efforts are not only vital for biodiversity protection and carbon sequestration but are critically important for maintaining the health and stability of the flying rivers and the subcontinent's ecological and economic well-being. The increase in the cases of encroachments of forests, forest land diversions for non-forestry purposes, and alarming indications by the Forest Survey of India's State of Forest Reports regarding qualitative changes in forest areas must be taken seriously, and the restoration of forest ecosystems and watersheds prioritised.

Recognising the interconnectedness of flying rivers and forest conservation is a paradigm shift as it elevates the importance of large-scale, transboundary atmospheric phenomena in national water security and calls for framing nature-based strategies to address weather-related disasters. This necessitates the existence of a stronger forestry sector and an empowered National Disaster Management Authority for streamlined coordination across ministries, departments, between the Central and State governments, and even neighbouring countries; backed by a strong political will, financial commitment, and scientific expertise. By integrating this understanding into policy and practice, India can better prepare for the challenges of climate change and safeguard its ecological and economic future.

Questioning the IAF without understanding air power is a strategic mistake



GS
BEDI

There is considerable confusion in the air about the role of Air Force in Operation Sindoor. However, a close scrutiny reveals that it stems from the lack of proper understanding of the air power.

To begin, the assertion that the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) was "fully ready and already airborne" waiting for the IAF lacks operational logic. Air forces do not achieve superiority through early airborne presence or "waiting in the air"; they do so through the intelligent orchestration of planning, timing, and mission effectiveness.

Air campaigns are designed around objective achievement, escalation control, and strategic messaging — not the theatrics of who launched first. The IAF's conduct during Operation Sindoor must be viewed through the prism of strategic restraint and precise force application, both of which ensured that escalation did not spiral uncontrollably. To overlook this is to misunderstand not only the mission but also the fundamental tenets of modern air warfare.

Air campaigns do not occur in a technological vacuum; they are outcomes of years of threat assessments, acquisition policies, and force modernisation efforts. The IAF's planning and execution are guided by a continuous evaluation of adversary capabilities, regional trends, and indigenous technology developments. Its emphasis on networked operations, precision munitions, and electronic warfare integration in recent years exemplifies the very opposite of technological blindness. Indeed, the same institution that seamlessly integrated indigenous platforms like Tejas, Akash, and Astra into the combat matrix cannot be dismissed as guilty of flawed planning.

Some people have made claim that the number of squadrons had "no role to play" in Operation Sindoor.

This assertion demonstrates a superficial understanding of force structure. The number of available combat squadrons directly influences operational flexibility, rotation capability, and sustainability during prolonged contingencies. Numbers are not symbolic — they define how many targets can be struck simultaneously, how many formations can remain on patrol, and how resilient the force remains under attrition. Attempting to delink quantity from quality in aerial warfare contradicts every known military planning principle.

The allegation of "poor preparation and training" during earlier operations, specifically referencing the Balakot air strikes, ignores the precision, professionalism, and strategic disci-



pline demonstrated during that mission. The operation achieved desired political-military objectives without provoking uncontrolled escalation or international backlash — an outcome that can only emerge from exceptional planning, rehearsed coordination, and high pilot skill. The deliberate misinformation campaign later undertaken by Pakistan to conceal the actual damage sustained further underscores the effectiveness of the IAF's execution.

The assertion that Beyond Visual Range (BVR) missiles, drones, and Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) systems render manned aircraft obsolete does not hold ground. This argument collapses when confronted with the global trend among advanced air powers. The United States, possessing unmatched superiority in unmanned and network-centric systems, continues to invest heavily in next-generation manned fighters like the F-35 Lightning II, the B-21 Raider stealth bomber, and the Next Generation Air Dominance (NGAD) programme — each of which will operate alongside, not instead of, unmanned assets.

Air combat remains an inherently cognitive domain requiring human intuition, adaptability, and ethical judgement — qualities no artificial system currently replicates. If conventional dogfights were truly obsolete, there would be no reason for the F-35 to retain a gun pod while carrying Meteor-class long-range missiles.

Air power, at its core, is about layered capability — where manned and unmanned assets combine in mutually reinforcing roles. Drones and autonomous systems extend range, persistence, and surveillance; manned fighters deliver the rapid, flexible, multi-domain decision-making that machines cannot. Only a balanced force structure fulfils national requirements. Suggesting a purely unmanned or missile-dominated paradigm not only ignores the evolving hybrid nature of warfare but risks undermining

the very foundations of deterrence credibility.

A casual analogy with US and Chinese theatre command structures also reflects conceptual carelessness. The American and Chinese theatreisation models function in geostrategic contexts vastly different from India's. Each of their theatres addresses distinct geographic expanses separated by oceans or extensive buffer zones. A simultaneous multi-theatre war is strategically improbable for those nations. By contrast, India's northern and western theatres are contiguous, interdependent, and likely to become active simultaneously in the event of a two-front conflict. Blindly transplanting foreign models without considering this geographic and geopolitical uniqueness contradicts the very logic of theatreisation, whose essence lies in optimising command for realistic war scenarios — not in administrative experimentation. For India, balanced integration must enhance coordination without diluting specialised domain expertise.

Armed forces remain instruments of national power, not targets for rhetorical assaults. Constructive debate strengthens institutions; unsubstantiated generalisations corrode public trust in the guardians of national sovereignty. The IAF's record of professional evolution — from analogue cockpits to networked combat systems, from regional air defence to multi-domain integration — reflects adaptability, discipline, and foresight. Its role in humanitarian operations, joint exercises, and indigenous innovation further underscores its strategic maturity and institutional integrity.

To attribute every challenge of modernisation or inter-service coordination solely to the Air Force is intellectually dishonest and professionally unfair. National defence is a composite enterprise where every service, every civilian agency, and the national industrial base share responsibility. Blaming one arm of the defence apparatus for systemic complexities only weakens the collective resolve essential for credible deterrence.

Sound strategic analysis demands balance, evidence, and respect for institutional ethos. Casting aspersions on the integrity and competence of an entire service demeans not only its personnel but also the very standards of military discourse. The IAF, through its evolution, modernisation, and professional conduct, has consistently upheld the highest traditions of national service. To question its moral and operational foundations without substantiated evidence is not critical scholarship — it is poor taste dressed as commentary, and it contributes nothing to the cause of serious defence analysis.

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MAYANK
ARORA

In a world where courtroom robes are brushing shoulders with the metaverse and algorithms, and law associates are being replaced by AI assistants, not only the young lawyers but the entire legal profession can no longer afford to sit in isolation. While the sound of the gavel may still echo tradition, the winds outside the courtrooms are whispering a big change. For young litigators, the mantra seems evidently clear: evolve or be extinct.

Artificial Intelligence isn't knocking at the legal door — it's already taken its place and now has a ringside view of the entire legal ecosystem. Tools like Harvey AI and Jurisphere are helping lawyers draft, research, and strategise in ways unimaginable a decade ago. Those of us who have not seen AI in action are missing a great deal in understanding how these tools have become great levellers for smaller law firms and law chambers with limited resources, who are now able to compete with the giants and deliver quality legal work in the blink of an eye. Equipped with the right technology and the skills to use it, the Goliaths of the system can be outsmarted not by matching them blow for blow, but by out-thinking, out-preparing, and outmanoeuvring them through the help of these tools.

Whether it's sifting through document-heavy matters, drafting templatised versions of applications and petitions, or gleaning facts from the tome of papers that have been dumped on you either by your own client or the opposite party, AI is accomplishing this in a matter of seconds with sharper quality and precision than a trained and seasoned legal mind. Think of it as your junior associate or colleague — efficient but not infallible. Those of us who are still boarded on the vessel of tradition and not embracing these tools or upskilling ourselves to use them may find ourselves outskilled and outworked soon — it's just a matter of time. "The past needed lawyers who knew the law and advocated the truth, now we need lawyers who can outrun the systems designed to suppress the truth."

The age of digital adoption and footprints is also the age of digital overreach. With data breaches, online frauds, digital footprint deletion and algorithmic profiling becoming courtroom regulars, litigators are fast becoming digital defenders. Privacy is the new battleground of conflicts, and understanding technology and being well-versed in interdisciplinary areas of knowledge will be the key to cracking future



cases. The next-gen lawyer will need to not just be legally sound; she will have to be technologically fluent, emotionally tuned, and strategically fearless. "Law is no longer just about precedents — it's evolving in real time to stay relevant."

But here's a twist in the tale: there is still one part of practice that I feel will evolve but remain largely unruddered. As the profession leans towards extreme digitisation, the soul of law is still likely to remain analogue. Cross-examination, courtroom craft, the pause before a punchline, the strategic nod, a revealing cross-examination in a strategic trial — this lawyering craft, no software or AI can execute in a courtroom, howsoever good it may be. For example, the ability to cross-examine that can break or dispel narratives will become the new-age craft that will decide the fate of cases and lawyers alike. In trial lawyering, the craft will be mightier than the algorithm for times to come.

A citizen's faith in justice doesn't come from AI reading briefs and judgments. It comes from watching their own lawyer stand up and fight for them in court.

To all young lawyers, my core advice will be that to future-proof your legal career, don't just chase trends and be predictable — you must now anticipate tectonic shifts in the profession. Remember, the courtroom of tomorrow won't be won by memory alone — it'll be won by mastering AI tools that break down 5,000 pages of documents into a single trail of truth; digital forensics, where what you delete says more than what you write; contract automation; and real-time evidence gathering. We are in a day and age when corporations are training bots to scan for risk, investigators are using AI to build digital trails, and governments worldwide are deploying technology to manage narratives.

So, who protects the common citizens, and who ensures that legal protections keep pace with legal weaponisation? The answer: lawyers who are honest and digitally empowered, but above all — those who stay grounded.

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OPINION

The
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{ OUR TAKE }

Bursting the green myth

Air quality index in Delhi on Diwali night should serve as a wake-up call on firecrackers

An analysis of Delhi’s pollution monitoring stations on the night of Diwali showed that the hourly PM2.5 levels in the city this year touched an average of 786, the highest since 2021, and more than 30 times what is considered safe by India’s own standards. And it was not difficult to guess why. This told a story that the city has heard too often: the aftermath of Diwali.

The Supreme Court’s experiment with “green” firecrackers was meant to balance tradition with science. It didn’t work along the expected lines. “Green” firecrackers, as this newspaper and many scientists have explained, are only less polluting, not non-polluting. The apex court’s October 15 order tried to impose guardrails — only certified “green” crackers, sold for three days, burst within fixed hours. But it was a policy impossible to enforce in a city of more than 20 million and several million more in its surrounding satellite cities of Gurugram, Noida, Ghaziabad and Faridabad. It became apparent early on that authorities across the National Capital Region (NCR) would not be able to ensure compliance at any stage. Shops sold regular firecrackers with impunity, and sales spilled far beyond the designated window. By night, NCR residents celebrated the most firecracker-laden Diwali in years. Even if “green” firecrackers had dominated the market — and evidence suggests they did not — they would have barely dented the toxic arithmetic. When PM2.5 levels rise 800% above safe limits, cutting one emission source by 30% changes little.

What this policy failure reveals is that public health can’t be compromised in response to dodgy claims of custom and tradition, or for market compulsions. Delhi’s air crisis has many causes — vehicular emissions, crop burning, construction dust, along with unfavourable meteorological conditions — but firecrackers are one of the few that can be completely avoided. Choosing not to burst them is the simplest and direct form of civic responsibility that citizens can exercise. Governments, too, must find the courage to prioritise health over populism. If enforcement is impossible, the answer is not to dilute the few enforceable rules. Public sentiment often sways when tradition is invoked, but traditions are not sacrosanct; they are mostly invented, and, hence, susceptible to change. In the case of firecrackers, civil society must take the lead in shaping public conscience, as it once did with seat belts, smoking bans, and single-use plastics. The message has to become common sense: Festivities should not come at the cost of the air we breathe. Civic campaigns could make this message ring loud and clear.

Conservative turn in Japan’s politics

The choice of Sanae Takaichi as the 104th prime minister (PM) of Japan marks an interesting turn in Japanese politics, which is in step with the rise of conservative politics globally. The first woman to be appointed to the post, Takaichi will be the fourth PM in five years. Ironically, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) preferred Takaichi to succeed Shigeru Ishiba, who resigned in September after the party posted heavy poll losses, because of her conservative views. The LDP, which has held power in Japan during most of the post-war period, believes her ultra-nationalist credentials and conservatism could stall the slide towards the Sanseito, a hard-Right start-up. In office, Takaichi’s first task will be to provide a stable government and revive the economy: The LDP had parted ways with Komeito, a pacifist party, and is now in alliance with the Japan Innovation Party or Ishin, founded in 2010. Ishin and Takaichi hold similar views on rewriting Japan’s pacifist constitution and increasing spending on defence. Takaichi has been unapologetic about Japan’s role in World War II, which will have a bearing on the country’s relations with China and South Korea, victims of Tokyo’s militarism.

In recent years, India and Japan deepened their partnership, covering infrastructure, technology and defence, and working jointly to strengthen the Quad. Takaichi, a protégé of the late Shinzo Abe, a friend of India, is likely to stick to this path, though Quad has receded into the background since the return of Donald Trump as the US president, who has privileged American economic interests over strategic matters. Takaichi has been quoted in favour of Tokyo negotiating a better deal with Washington on trade matters, a stance that will resonate in New Delhi.

Trump’s empty boast around H-1B visa fee

True reform would have addressed the green-card backlog. But the US’s message that foreign talent is expendable has reversed brain drain, which benefits India

The headlines screamed disaster. Donald Trump’s \$100,000 H-1B visa fee was supposed to crush Indian dreams. Immigration lawyers sounded the alarm, the Indian media fumed, and social media erupted over the fate of Indian engineers who built America’s tech future. Then came the fine print. The rule applies only to new H-1B petitions filed for people outside the US or a few status changes. It doesn’t affect the hundreds of thousands already there or most renewals. In reality, it changes almost nothing. It was another Trump taco — a policy built to roar, not to reform.

That was a relief, but also revealing. The fee turned out to be a toothless tiger, yet its roar did real damage. It showed once again that Washington has traded policymaking for performance. America’s message to global talent was unmistakable: You can work here if you pay, but don’t ever expect to belong. Anti-immigrant groups cheered the \$100,000 fee as a great victory, waving it like a trophy. In truth, they were celebrating an illusion — a

loud, empty gesture that fixed nothing and fooled many.

Tech companies didn’t complain for long. Microsoft, Google, Amazon, and Meta can afford the cost. What mattered to them stayed untouched — the decades-long green-card backlog that keeps foreign engineers dependent, the golden handcuffs that make the system work in their favour. The H-1B visa was meant to attract talent; instead, it traps it. A worker waiting for a green card cannot easily change jobs or start a company. For many Indians, the wait can stretch beyond 50 years. The result is modern day indentured servitude — legal, efficient, and deeply profitable for employers.

These workers rarely complain because their future depends on their sponsor’s goodwill. They work longer hours, accept less pay, and live with constant uncertainty. For the companies that employ them, it’s the perfect setup: Skilled talent with limited freedom, ambition contained by design. That’s why Big Tech keeps lobbying for more H-1Bs but never for green-card reform. Permanent residents can leave; visa holders can’t. The imbalance is intentional and keeps the system full of people who can’t move or compete.

Over 1.2 million immigrants are stuck in the employment-based green-card queue, most of them from India. Many have lived in the US for decades, paying taxes and driving innovation, yet remain “temporary”. Their chil-

dren risk deportation when they turn 21. This new rule, like so many headline-chasing moves before it, does nothing for them. It doesn’t shorten the wait or make the system fairer; it simply creates noise without progress, pretending to act while leaving the core problem untouched.

For India, though, this dysfunction has become an advantage. Washington’s message that foreign talent is expendable has quietly reversed a decades-old flow of brains and ambition. Talented Indians who once built their lives around the American dream are now building their futures at home.

The pandemic proved innovation no longer needs a US address. India’s digital economy has reached critical mass. Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune, and Gurgaon now offer what Silicon Valley once did — capital, mentors, talent, and global reach. Returnees and Indian-Americans like me are founding companies in India in Artificial Intelligence (AI), clean energy, and biotechnology and venture investors are following them. Every act of exclusion from Washington speeds up this shift. When the US closes doors, the world opens them.

Supporters of the Trump fee claim it protects American jobs. It doesn’t. Industries that rely on high-skill workers — from chipmaking to software — are already short of talent. Raising costs or adding red tape won’t create new engineers; it just sends work abroad. The geography of innovation is changing, and this policy accel-



Vivek Wadhwa



The pandemic proved innovation no longer needs a US address. India’s digital economy has reached critical mass. SHUTTERSTOCK

ates it. America’s success has always come from attracting the best minds, not shutting them out. Nearly half of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children. Turning that pipeline into a toll road weakens the country that once led by openness — and strengthens those that still believe in merit.

Real reform would take the opposite approach. It would increase the number of employment-based green cards and perhaps, tie them to home-ownership. Every skilled immigrant who buys a home could get a faster path to residence. That single step could spark an economic boom — new homes, jobs, and tax revenue. The US should also recapture unused green-card slots, remove per-country caps, and decouple legal status from employer control so that talent can move freely. These aren’t radical ideas; they’d strengthen the economy and restore fairness. But that reform never comes. True change would shift power from corporations to individu-

als — from those who control visas to those who hold them.

Once, America attracted the world’s best by offering opportunities. Now it greets them with red tape and empty gestures. The \$100,000-fee fixed nothing, it only reminded the world that America’s openness can no longer be taken for granted.

India, meanwhile, gains what America loses. Its innovators are returning with global experience, building companies that serve world-wide markets, and creating high-skill jobs at home. The country that once exported its talent is learning to keep and import it.

The Trump taco sizzled for a month and then fell apart, like most things built for headlines. Nothing changed except the message — that in Washington, theatre has replaced thought. And in that void, India is quietly winning.

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Electronic evidence on trial: Courts must clarify

In this digital communication era, liberty, rights and conflicting claims are largely dependent on the authenticity of electronic records relied on by parties to disputes. Whether it be election disputes, criminal cases, or commercial cases, at every stage, the shift to electronic records renders traditional documentary evidence principles obsolete.

Since the Information Technology law was brought (albeit a decade late), there have been various attempts to define the contours for showing the authenticity of electronic records, which remains an ongoing exercise. In response to contemporary challenges, complemented by technological interventions, the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinyam (BSA), 2023, which replaced the Indian Evidence Act (IEA) of 1872, attempted to offer a conducive mechanism for the electronic evidence. Yet, older disputes continue to be tested under the IEA, keeping the issue alive.

This is not a purely academic debate. Questions about the admissibility of electronic evidence arise in the full spectrum of litigation, whether in a routine property dispute before a district court, a corruption trial involving intercepted phone records, or an election petition hinging on digital proof. Since trial courts and district courts are the first points of entry for most litigants, the lack of clarity on whether an electronic record is primary or secondary, and what certification it requires, has a cascading effect on the course of justice. Each such dispute has the potential to travel up the judicial ladder, multiplying confusion and inconsistency along the way.

On July 14, 2025, in *Kum. Shubha @ Shubhashankar v. State of Karnataka*, the Indian Supreme Court endorsed its 2020 ruling in *Arjun Panditrao Khotkar v. Kailash Kushanrao Gorantyal*. It reiterated that Sections 65A and 65B of the IEA (now Sections 62 and 63 of the BSA) form a complete code on electronic evidence, leaving little scope for other provisions such as Sections 62–65 of the IEA. While this position may have been workable under the IEA, the changes in Section 57 of the BSA — recognising electronic and digital records as primary evidence in prescribed form, call for a fresh look. Under the BSA, electronic records have the same legal effect as documents, but must comply with Section 63 (earlier Section 65B of the IEA) for admissibility.

This provision has had a chequered history. In the 2005 Parliament attack case (*Navot Sandhu*), the Court allowed secondary electronic evidence to be admitted even

without a Section 65B certificate, relying instead on general provisions such as Sections 63 and 65 IEA. This effectively diluted the safeguards of Section 65B. Hard cases often create bad law, and the Parliament attack case had almost effaced the safeguards in Section 65B of the IEA by allowing electronic evidence without strict certification, a precedent that risked eroding the reliability of digital proof across the justice system.

It took almost a decade to correct the course. In *Anvar PV v. PK Basheer* (2014), the Court overruled *Navot Sandhu*, holding that Sections 65A and 65B form a complete code and that electronic evidence without certification cannot be admitted under general rules for documentary evidence. Later, in *Sonu* (2017), the Court clarified that the certificate requirement had to be raised at the first instance. Conflicting rulings followed. In *Tomaso Bruno v. State of UP* (2015), the Court said Section 65B had to be read along with other provisions of the IEA, while *Shafi Mohammad v. State of HP* (2018) relaxed the certification requirement when the device producing the evidence was not in a party’s control.

The matter was finally settled in *Arjun Panditrao Khotkar* (2020), where a three-judge Bench reaffirmed that Sections 65A and 65B of the IEA constitute a complete code. It made the certificate under Section 65B(4) mandatory for secondary electronic evidence, while permitting original electronic records to be produced without such certification.

But this clarity under the IEA raises new questions under the BSA. By treating original electronic records as primary evidence through Section 57 (corresponding to Section 62 IEA), the BSA changes the legal landscape. The position in *Arjun Panditrao* that made Section 62 redundant now needs to be reconsidered. Courts generally interpret evidentiary law literally, and the BSA, designed as a technology-compliant law, is no exception.

However, in *Kum. Shubha @ Shubhashankar* (2025), the Supreme Court missed an opportunity to clarify the scope of Section 57 BSA and the meaning of primary electronic evidence.

Such clarity would have provided much-needed guidance to trial courts, high courts and, ultimately, litigants. The journey of electronic evidence in India over the past 25 years shows how delays in judicial clarity have caused confusion. As the saying goes, a stitch in time saves nine. A few timely lines from the Court in 2025 could have spared years of uncertainty for lawyers, judges and ordinary citizens relying on electronic evidence. Clear and authoritative guidance from the Supreme Court is essential, not only to settle the law but also to strengthen the efficiency and credibility of India’s justice delivery system, which depends on consistency and clarity of judgments.

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Sidharth Luthra



Bharti Yadav

{ SANA E TAKAICHI }

PRIME MINISTER, JAPAN

At this moment, rather than feeling happy, I feel the hardship that is to come. There is an overwhelming amount of work that we must do together

Addressing a gathering of LDP workers

Trade to trust: Rebuilding Canada–India partnership

Canadian foreign minister Anita Anand’s visit to Delhi and Mumbai last week marks a new juncture in Canada–India relations. The return of Donald Trump to the White House, Mark Carney’s rise to the prime minister’s office in Ottawa, and a transformed global landscape have all shaped this moment — one where both countries appear poised to refocus their relationship after a reset earlier this summer. Ottawa and Delhi have decided to anchor this reset on economic security, enabling both countries to support each other’s economic interests in ways that strengthen sovereignty and resilience. This approach represents a major departure from the past.

For years, Ottawa has viewed India largely through a familiar prism: A bulwark against China, an attractive market, a source of immigrants, and a key node in the Indo-Pacific. Going forward, India must be seen as a peer and strategic partner — one to engage across critical domains such as emerging technologies, energy, the climate crisis, agriculture, and defence. Trump’s return has only heightened India’s importance, given its high growth rates.

Focusing on economic security means making India more than just a trade partner. The ambitious joint statement following Anand’s visit testifies to that intent. Building a mutually beneficial partnership that enhances resilience, reduces dependencies, manages supply-chain risks, and deepens coordination on digital and clean-energy technologies will be crucial.

Anand’s agenda in New Delhi and Mumbai did not revolve solely around trade and investment. Past discussions have focused excessively on negotiating a trade agreement at the expense of crafting a broader strategic partnership. Securing an interim or comprehensive trade agreement will take time, especially as both sides balance parallel negotiations — India with the US and European Union, and Canada with other partners. Attention must now move beyond tariffs toward investment, standards, and technology exchange.

India is rapidly scaling its capabilities across multiple sectors — defence manufacturing, semiconductors, space, clean energy, critical minerals, and infrastructure. These strides make New Delhi a viable, if still complex, long-term partner. Yet the two countries lack a dedicated technology-focused mechanism — akin to the US–India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (ICET) or the EU–India Trade and

Technology Council — that could spur collaboration on semiconductors, cybersecurity, space, AI, and telecoms while harmonising standards for secure and trusted digital trade. The absence of coordination on standards and rules, particularly in defence and electronics where dual-use concerns loom large, will require deliberate engagement. Both sides must rebuild trust on governance and transparency, addressing issues such as export controls, non-tariff barriers, and intellectual-property protections.

Energy cooperation is a critical pillar. Canada’s strengths in conventional energy, renewables, and critical minerals can help meet India’s energy needs. But ambition must be tempered with realism. The lack of an effective bilateral energy architecture, combined with distance and price constraints, could stymie cooperation. Shipping Canadian LNG and minerals across the Pacific is neither cost-effective nor practical. India is also locked into long-term deals with suppliers such as the UAE and Qatar. On critical minerals, India’s current focus on Latin America and Africa may make it difficult for Ottawa to become a preferred source in the near term. Still, establishing a joint energy dialogue and framework

to negotiate energy issues could bridge gaps. Canada must also differentiate itself in India’s crowded energy landscape — offering not just resources, but technology, investment, and credibility in the clean-energy transition.

Delivering this economic-security partnership will require trust, institutional capacity, and political steadiness. Canadian firms will face regulatory hurdles navigating India’s federal system, while India’s emphasis on self-reliance and selective industrial liberalisation may constrain their participation in sensitive sectors. Both sides will also need to manage the politics surrounding the Nijjar case. That reckoning will form part of a broader process of reset and reconciliation, as diplomats work to build political, legal, and economic frameworks to manage challenges and expand opportunities. For Ottawa and New Delhi, an economic-security-focused partnership would lend ballast to a relationship long prone to episodic crises. It offers both countries a long-term pathway to diversify, hedge against global uncertainties, and jointly shape the emerging economic and technological order in the Indo-Pacific.

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Karthik Nachiappan

EDITORIAL

Stop victim-blaming

Victim-blaming in rape cases is an appalling tendency that is often associated with India. After every horrific rape incident, politicians deliver sermons on what women should or should not do to avoid falling victim. West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's remarks on the Durgapur rape case reflect a regressive mindset. It is particularly deplorable coming from a woman Chief Minister who is responsible for the safety and security of women in her State. A 23-year-old MBBS student from Odisha was gang-raped in Durgapur, in a shocking crime occurring barely a year after protests erupted over the rape and murder of a doctor at Kolkata's RG Kar Medical College. The Chief Minister said the survivor should not have been out at night. Such prescriptions, however well-intended they may be, smack of a patriarchal mindset. It's a familiar refrain that often follows incidents of sexual violence in the country. Patriarchal cultural norms make even a brief night stroll feel costly. The insinuation that the medical student was somehow responsible for the crime because she was out late at night is simply outrageous. This is not the first time that the TMC supremo has come up with her own theories regarding rape cases. In 2012, she dubbed the Park Street Rape case "fabricated", while in other cases, she floated political conspiracies and failed love affairs as the reasons for the sexual assaults. Banerjee is the latest in a long list of politicians who have made disquieting remarks on women's issues, especially around sexual violence. Strangely, in no other crime is the onus placed on the victim instead of the perpetrator. Nobody would say the victim of wallet-snatching somehow 'asked for it. But, when it comes to rape and sexual crimes, we get to hear a spate of questions: Why was she wearing that revealing dress? Why was she out late at night? Why was she drinking? Was she having an affair with the perpetrator? The answer to all these questions: It doesn't matter. When we ask such questions, we are only reinforcing a social stereotype that a woman belongs to the confines of her house. Patriarchy typically functions by placing the burden of not becoming a rape victim on women themselves. This is moral policing by a society that has failed to keep women safe. Rape happens because men think that they can get away with it. It is the responsibility of governments, administrations, and workplaces to provide safe environments. Instead of looking for failed love affairs and political conspiracies, politicians like Banerjee must focus their attention on making the school curricula gender-sensitive. Dishing out advice to female victims of violence seems to have become a national pastime for many politicians. Former Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dixshit had once advised women not to be so adventurous after journalist Soumya Vishwanathan was killed while driving home after a night shift.

Chinese Communist Party implements "Purge Surge"

Confirmation came from the Chinese authorities on October 17 that nine prominent members of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had been expelled from the all-powerful party that controls every aspect of life in modern China. The announcement came just days before the Central Committee's Fourth Plenum began on October 20.If rumors prior to the four-day conclave are correct, then only 168 of 205 members (82%) of the Central Committee and 159 of 171 (93%) alternates are present at the Fourth Plenum. Even worse, perhaps just 17 of 44 (39%) PLA members are there. If these estimates are correct, this would underscore how severe Xi's purge of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been in recent months.

The highest-ranking victim of the nine military detainees was He Weidong, once the Central Military Commission's (CMC) vice-chairman. That meant he was number two in the organ controlling the PLA. People's Armed Police (PAP) and China Coast Guard.The other outcasts dismissed were Miao Hua, former head of the Political Work Department; He Hongjun, former deputy head of the same department; Wang Xiubin, former deputy chief of the CMC's Joint Operations Command



Center; Lin Xiangyang, former commander of the PLA Eastern Theater Command; Qin Shutong, former Political Commissar of the PLA Ground Force; Yuan Huazhi, former Political Commissar of the PLA Navy; Wang Houbin, former commander of the PLA Rocket Force (PLARF); and Wang Chunning, former commander of the PAP.Zhang Xiaogang, the Ministry of National Defense spokesperson, stated, "With approval from the CPC Central Committee and the CMC, the military's

top anti-corruption watchdog CMC Discipline Inspection Commission conducted investigations on them successively. The probe found the nine people had committed serious violations of party discipline and are suspected of severe duty-related crimes, involving huge amounts, with an extremely serious nature and egregious impact."Zhang noted that the Central Committee had expelled them from the party and had transferred their cases to military procuratorial authorities for

further review. The nonet had already been stripped of military rank and status.Zhang added that this announcement "once again demonstrated the CPC Central Committee and the CMC's firm resolve to carry the anti-corruption campaign through to the end". As a result, China's armed forces, he claimed, are "cleaner, more consolidated, and possess stronger cohesion and combat capability".The demise of these figures is not a surprise, for investigations had been

announced previously. For instance, Miao Hua was removed from the CMC in June. Miao, along with He Weidong and He Hongjun appear to be the worst offenders, for they were singled out for "strict disciplinary action".K Tristian Tang, an Associate Fellow at the Research Project on China's Defense Affairs, noted, "The common link between Miao Hua, He Weidong and He Hongjun, and the charge of 'serious job-related crimes', lies in the PLA's personnel management system. He

Weidong served as the CMC vice chairman overseeing personnel affairs, while Miao Hua and He Hongjun were the top two officials in the CMC Political Work Department, which manages personnel matters. In other words, problems in the evaluation and promotion of general officers appear to be the central issue."Tang suggested "the nine appear to have formed an improper network centered around Miao Hua and He Weidong". Miao advanced the fastest, and seven of the nine disgraced personnel previously served in the Eastern Theater Command. Only Yuan Huazhi and He Hongjun did not enjoy this regional connection, but both had direct subordinate relationships with Miao. Several of them also spent extended periods with the 73rd Group Army, and such overlaps likely fostered personal connections.Tang concluded, "The purge of these nine generals represents one of the most visible examples of CMC Chairman Xi Jinping's ongoing effort to overhaul and tighten control over the PLA's personnel management system. Xi aims to address the military's long-standing problems in promotion and personnel oversight. This explains why political work and discipline within the PLA this year.

Diwali celebrations at Akshardham Temple, New Jersey brings together culture and community



The festival of Diwali was celebrated with great enthusiasm and fervour at the Akshardham, New Jersey.As per a statement, at BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham in Robbinsville, the celebration of Diwali saw the coming together of devotion, culture, and community come together in harmony, reminding that Diwali is not just a festival of lights, but of shared hearts.It noted that from October 18 through October 26, Diwali and New Year will be celebrated with the glowing with thousands of diyas,

melodies of devotion filling the air, and families gathering in the same spirit that has brightened homes for generations.Earlier, US President Donald Trump also extended wishes on the occasion of Diwali."Today, I send my best wishes to every American celebrating Diwali—the "Festival of Lights," Trump said in a statement. "For many Americans, Diwali is a timeless reminder of light's victory over darkness. It is also a time to bring families and friends together to celebrate community, draw strength from hope, and

embrace a lasting spirit of renewal. As millions of citizens light diyas and lanterns, we rejoice in the eternal truth that good will always triumph over evil. To every American celebrating Diwali, may this observance bring abiding serenity, prosperity, hope, and peace," he said. Sergio Gor, Special Envoy to the President, attended Diwali celebrations at India House alongside Ambassador of India to the US Vinay Mohan Kwatra.In a post on X, Kwatra said, "Pleasure to host Ambassador and Special Envoy to the President Sergio Gor yesterday at India House for Diwali celebrations before his visit to India."Diwali is a five-day festival that starts on Dhanteras. On Dhanteras, people buy jewellery or utensils and worship God. The second day is called Naraka Chaturdashi. It is also called Chhoti Diwali or Small Diwali.The third day of Diwali is the main day of the celebrations.People worship Lord Ganesha and Goddess Lakshmi on this day and offer prayers to bless them with wealth and prosperity.The fourth day of Diwali is devoted to Govardhan Puja. The fifth day is called Bhai Dooj.

'Iron Lady' Sanae Takaichi becomes Japan's first woman prime minister

Japan's Liberal Democratic Party President Sanae Takaichi was elected Prime Minister by parliament on Tuesday, to become the country's first woman leader.Takaichi avoided a runoff with a victory in a first round of voting in the Lower House, garnering 237 votes against Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan leader Yoshihiko Noda's 149, Kyodo reported.The official Japanese news agency said that 64-year-old Takaichi won 237 of 465 votes cast in the lower house of Parliament to become the Japan PM.Among the challenges that the new PM faces is a sluggish economy and uniting the ruling party which has been rocked by scandals and internal conflicts.On Monday Takaichi, who has been looking for a new political partner, reached a formal agreement with Osaka Governor Hirofumi Yoshimura, who leads the JIP, also known as Nippon Ishin no Kai.



Takaichi, a protege of the late former PM Shinzo Abe, was on Tuesday morning already moving ahead with forming a Cabinet ahead of her formal election as prime minister. No lawmakers from the JIP -- which is also known as Nippon Ishin no Kai -- are expected to join the Cabinet.As part of the agreement, both parties will work together on several key reforms, including reducing the number of lawmakers in Japan's parliament by 10 per cent and overhauling the social security system.The JIP's long-

standing proposal to make Osaka a "secondary capital" alongside Tokyo is also expected to be included in the joint agenda.JIP's parliamentary leader, Fumitake Fujita, said that the decision to form a coalition with the LDP had strong support within the party."There was not a single cautious, opposing, or critical opinion," Fujita told reporters after a party meeting on Sunday.Takaichi has reportedly offered "several ministerial posts" to JIP members to strengthen the alliance.

POEMS

In Praise of Mischief

Boys will be boys, the saying goes,
even if that boy will one day
age into Messiah. One would
never guess looking at this scene:
child prone on his mother's lap, raised
hand about to strike his exposed
buttocks yet again. Is that why
he's getting paddled, for mooning
the market sellers that morning
while his mother picked through a cart
of onions? They sneered with contempt,
"Nazarenes, surely." Mary blushed,
recalling her own mother's plea
to be the kind of woman whose
name never wagged on busy tongues.
After all these years nothing's changed.
My mother wore that same red dress
to el mercado one Sunday
after church when I stayed behind
for a Christmas play rehearsal.
I, the archangel messenger,
to Mary: You will bear a son.
Virgin birth, the boys scoffed, daring
to toss their angelic undies
at the arms of a saint. The nuns
screached at the disrespect and told
the mothers, who disciplined
their sons on the spot.

By Rigoberto González

India poised to become a credible alternative in the billion-dollar clean energy race

As the global shift toward clean energy accelerates, a strategic contest is unfolding for control over the minerals that power modern technology noted a research report by Kotak Mutual Fund. Among them, Rare Earth Elements (REEs), the 17 metallic elements vital for electric vehicles, wind turbines, smartphones, and defence systems are fast being called the "new oil" of the 21st century.

"Invisible to most, rare earths are quietly powering the shift toward cleaner energy, stronger economies, and a smarter, more sustainable world," noted the report. India, with an estimated 6 per cent of the world's rare earth reserves, is now emerging as a credible alternative source in this billion-dollar opportunity. Though currently



contributing less than 1 per cent of global REE production, India's vast geological potential, spanning coastal states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Gujarat, offers immense promise for the future.Under the National Critical Mineral Mission (2025), India has prioritized the exploration, mining, and processing of these critical resources. The recent removal of IREL (India) Limited from the U.S. export control list marks a pivotal step, paving the way for enhanced global collaboration. IREL's upcoming Visakhapatnam facility will produce samarium-cobalt magnets domestically, a milestone toward technological self-reliance.Through initiatives like KABIL (Khanij Bidesh India Limited) and participation in the US led Mineral Security Partnership

(MSP), India is asserting its growing geopolitical and economic importance in the global critical mineral ecosystem. Globally, China continues to dominate the rare earth supply chain, accounting for around 70 per cent of mining and 90 per cent of refining. However, with the US, Australia, and others seeking to diversify, India's emergence could reshape the balance. "China's share is expected to fall from 69 per cent to 51 per cent in mining and 90 per cent to 76 per cent in refining by 2030, according to the IEA. This trend reflects a broader international effort to develop more balanced and resilient supply chains." the report highlights.Backed by reforms under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act (MMDR) and Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, India is encouraging

private investment, R&D, and sustainable processing, traditionally the biggest challenges in REE production.With demand projected to rise by up to 700 per cent by 2040, India's progress in this field could not only secure domestic supply chains but also position it as a global leader in clean-tech manufacturing under the 'Make in India' initiative."Demand for rare earth elements (REEs) will surge as the world shifts to clean energy and digital technologies, with usage projected to rise 300-700 per cent by 2040," noted the report.As the world moves toward an energy-secure, low-carbon future, India's rare earth push represents more than a mineral opportunity, it's a pathway to industrial resilience, technological advancement, and strategic autonomy.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

A life-saving call

Push for organ donation must turn into action

THE Centre's directive asking all hospitals to set up organ and tissue donation teams in their ICUs is both timely and overdue. Despite decades of advocacy, organ donation in India remains distressingly low — around 0.9 donors per million population, compared to over 30 in countries like Spain. As a result, lakhs of patients die each year waiting for transplants that never come even as many viable organs go unutilised. The National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation (NOTTO) has now urged every hospital to create a dedicated team comprising brain-stem death committee members and counsellors to guide families through the process. It is a necessary move because many potential donations are lost for want of timely counselling, awareness and coordination. Often, by the time grief-stricken families are approached, the window for organ or tissue retrieval has closed irreversibly.

Yet directives alone will not suffice. Many hospitals, especially in smaller towns, lack transplant coordinators, trained ICU staff and even the basic infrastructure to preserve and transport organs. The private sector continues to dominate transplants, while government hospitals lag far behind. Without substantial investment in training, logistics and incentives, the "all hospitals" mandate may remain a noble aspiration.

Equally important is public trust. Myths, fear and misinformation still surround the idea of organ donation. Awareness campaigns must shift from token observances to sustained, empathetic outreach that normalises donation as an act of compassion, not sacrifice. Public education and transparent systems can bridge this trust deficit. The new directive is a good beginning, but it must evolve into a coordinated national effort — one that joins policy with empathy, logistics with humanity. Only then will India's promise of giving life beyond death become a reality rather than a policy note gathering dust.

Row over namaz

Don't spare politicians who fan the flames

ALL citizens should be equal in the eyes of the law, but there are times when some are more equal than others. A case has been registered against three women under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) Rules, 1959. They allegedly defied restrictions regarding protected monuments by offering *namaz* on the premises of Pune's historic Shaniwar Wada. After the prayer video went viral, BJP workers led by Rajya Sabha MP Medha Kulkarni and others staged a protest at the site and sprinkled *gaumutra* (cow urine) to 'purify' the place. It's baffling that the Archaeological Survey of India and the police did not construe these actions as "prohibited activities" within a protected monument as per the rules.

Shaniwar Wada, a palace built by the Peshwas in the 1730s, was largely destroyed in a fire in 1828. Revered as the seat of Peshwa power, it is also a symbol of Pune's history and culture. All that remains now are the fortification walls and massive doors. However, that's no excuse for lax security on any day. The police have to be on their toes to ensure that miscreants, no matter which religion they belong to, don't indulge in any unauthorised activity on the premises. Rather than waiting for the law enforcement agency to complete its probe, the MP communalised the issue and indulged in hate-mongering. Her objective seems to have been to send a 'zero tolerance' message to the minority community.

The incident has drawn criticism not only from Opposition parties in Maharashtra but also from the Ajit Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party, which is part of the BJP-led Mahayuti government. Ironically, it was barely three weeks ago that RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat had laid stress on national unity and stated that diversity should not cause divisions. Both the RSS and the BJP should go all out to rein in rabble-rousers who threaten the country's secular fabric. Letting the police work without any interference can be an important step in this direction. The virus of communalism, if allowed to spread in any city or state, can have dangerous consequences for the whole nation.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 1925

The Gujranwala conference

THE success or failure of a public meeting or conference may be judged by the number of people attending it, by the quality of the speeches made and the position of the speakers, as well as by the nature and value of its deliberations or resolutions. Judged by these tests, the session of the Punjab Provincial Political Conference held at Gujranwala recently was a remarkable success. In spite of the disintegration of the political life of the province and the vast amount of public attention and energy which is being almost exclusively devoted to sectarian and communal activities, the conference was fairly representative of all important sections and communities of the province. As to the quality of the speeches, some of them were of a high order. Not only did Sarojini Naidu speak twice at the conference with her customary eloquence, but some of the other speeches, especially those of the President and some others whose names are familiar in the province, fulfilled the general expectation. The resolutions passed at the conference also covered a very wide range of subjects. The condition of political prisoners, the position of Indians in South Africa, the Gurdwara movement and the question of the release of Akali prisoners, the Patna resolution, the bar against persons convicted of political offences in the matter of election to local bodies, the removal of untouchability, the question of the fusion of political parties and the Hindu-Muslim problem were among those discussed at the conference.

Why BRICS makes Trump see red

US President perceives a threat to the dollar from the bloc, though India is not keen on common currency



SUSHMA RAMACHANDRAN
SENIOR FINANCIAL JOURNALIST

US President Donald Trump's latest outburst against BRICS comes amid India's preparations for taking over the bloc's presidency. The acerbic comments echo his remarks made a few months ago just before the BRICS Summit in Rio.

His earlier rant about the bloc's anti-Americanism was countered by both Russia and China, which asserted that the group had no animosity towards any country. Yet he has now again spoken out about a perceived threat of de-dollarisation by bloc members, which would have to face hefty US tariffs. This has come along with a claim that American opposition is prompting members to drop out of BRICS.

His tirade has worsened India-US tensions at a time when a meeting between Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi could be on the cards at the October 26-28 ASEAN summit in Malaysia. They have not met ever since the US imposed 50 per cent tariffs on India.

Why is Trump so worried and angered by the bloc? The answer lies partly in the need to assure his domestic constituency that the US is still the dominant force in the world. More significantly, the US President seems to be painfully aware of the collective economic might of the grouping that was formed originally by Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). The bloc now has 10 members, with another 10 as partner countries.

The group accounts for 30 per cent of the global GDP compared to only 25 per cent for the



FALSE ALARM: There is little evidence to back Trump's claim that countries are deserting BRICS. AP/PTI

advanced economies of the G7 in terms of purchasing power parity. The population of the BRICS bloc is also an overwhelming 45 per cent of the world compared to only 10 per cent for the G7 nations.

What should be a even greater concern for the US is the fact that countries are lining up to join the bloc. Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the UAE and Indonesia are the new entrants, while another 10 countries attended the Rio summit in July as strategic partners. These nations, which have sought to join the bloc, include Belarus, Cuba, Malaysia, Vietnam and Nigeria. The only country which has formally declined to join after seeking to become a member is Argentina. Saudi Arabia has been sitting on the fence for the past year. Thus, there is little evidence to back Trump's claim that countries are deserting BRICS.

Trump's repeated assertions that the bloc is aiming for de-dollarisation are also not precisely correct, though there are definite concerns over the predominance of the dollar in global trade and financial systems. The fact that Western countries were able to effectively block Russia's financial transactions by withdrawing

As India prepares to assume the BRICS presidency, it needs to chart an independent path on economic policies for its own good.

the SWIFT messaging system has also prompted efforts to develop alternative systems.

The concept of a common BRICS currency was initially mooted by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in 2023. The idea was rejected by India, given the difficulty of replacing the dollar as reserve currency. It could also have led to a focus on using China's yuan as a replacement, which is

not a desirable option for Delhi. However, there is continuing discussion over the use of national currencies for carrying on trade. In the case of India and Russia, the rupee-rouble exchange mechanism had been instituted during the Soviet era. It has now been revived with the aim of enabling payments for oil purchases to be made through the rupee route.

Similarly, China has been moving its trade with Russia to the yuan to reduce dependence on Western financial systems. But it would be premature to say that there is a definite move towards de-dollarisation as has been declared by Trump. The fact is that the dollar continues to be the dominant reserve currency. As much as 57 per cent of global currency reserves continue to be denominated in the dollar, though this is a dip from 70 per cent in 2001.

The focus instead is now on digital currencies, with even BRICS members moving towards developing their own systems. The digital rupee of the Reserve Bank of India is still at the pilot stage, but it could be used in future in trade deals with other countries. Yet there is no doubt that other BRICS members are keen to evolve a cur-

cy system that could prove to be an alternative to the dollar. The Rio summit saw the unveiling of BRICS Pay, a blockchain-based digital payment system. Studies have also been endorsed for creating a cross-border clearing platform and bilateral currency trade corridors.

India, however, is cold to any suggestion of a common currency or the concept of de-dollarisation, especially as it would likely involve greater reliance on the yuan. Its strategic ties with the US continue to deepen despite the apparent tensions on economic issues, while the relationship with China remains a fraught one. It is also in the unique position of being a member of the Quad along with being a founder member of BRICS. It is thus doing a fine balancing act to ensure that it is able to manage these conflicting ties smoothly.

In the case of the Quad, India was scheduled to host this year's summit, but differences with the US may lead to it being shifted to 2026. As far as the other Quad members are concerned, strategic ties are on track, with several defence agreements signed recently with Australia, while a security cooperation declaration with Japan was released in August.

As India gets ready to assume the BRICS presidency in January 2026, it is seeking to drive deliberations on areas that will find broad consensus, not controversial issues. It will focus on the voice of the Global South, structural reforms within the bloc, counterterrorism and economic resilience while moving towards people-centric initiatives.

India is bound to face greater assertiveness from fellow BRICS members like Russia, China and Brazil in moving towards de-dollarisation or the creation of an alternative currency. It will take all of New Delhi's diplomatic skills to navigate these currents. India needs to chart an independent path on economic policies for its own good.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

It takes a community of nations, working as one global family, to address global challenges. — António Guterres

Merciless assault on a majestic tree

AMRINDER BAJAJ

ONE of the reasons why I bought a house in Gurugram was the presence of an old *peepal* tree that dominated the landscape. It grew near the wall of an abandoned school and, generous as trees always are, spread its branches beyond the compound to shade cars parked underneath.

It reminded me of the *peepal* in my childhood home. From that superb representative of its species an abiding love for trees was born. The beauty of flowers was overrated and tragically transient. They had their moments of glory, but were soon reduced to drooping caricatures of their former selves. Trees were there for life — permanent yet ever-changing. Yellowing leaves dropped like tears in March and, for a short while, bare branches spread heavenwards in prayer.

Almost overnight, tightly rolled soft brown leaves appeared at the tip of every branch. As the days grew hotter, they unfurled into sword-tipped, fresh, young leaves that glinted silver in the sun; it was as if the tree had painted its nails green. Finally, dark green leaves broad as an adult's palm waved the heat away like myriad little fans. So what if there were no flowers to speak of? Flowers were nothing but pretty little things. Their flamboyance and fragrance had but one purpose — to seduce — while an entire world existed in the shade of a tree. Canopied by its love, I felt an incredible peace.

The same feelings resurfaced years later as I watched these changes occur in my newfound friend while sitting in the balcony with a steaming cup of tea. I felt a kinship with it that I felt for no human. I was grateful for its quiet companionship, though I talked with it at times.

Then the unbelievable happened. I had gone to Kasauli for an invigorating week and told the towering pines on sloping hillsides about my dear friend waiting for me back home. Little did I know that the school had been taken over by mercenaries who wanted to use every inch of real estate, and the *peepal* occupied a lot of space — both above and below the ground.

At first I did not realise what had happened, though something did seem amiss. I was neither awakened by the song of birds nor entertained by the flutter of parrots. The ugly high-rise building in the distance seemed to come closer. My heart sank as realisation dawned — my dear friend had been beheaded!

Horror-struck, I watched the stump standing gallantly upright, while its crown lay guillotined on the ground. It took but a few minutes to destroy what had taken nature decades to build. The felling of a mighty tree, the killing of a tusker, the assassination of an emperor were of equal import to me.

My heart bleeds and my eyes brim over with tears as I gaze at the tree's raw wounds, but nobody else gives two hoots for my friend.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Litmus test for alliances

Apropos of 'Bihar alliances on shaky ground'; the upcoming Assembly election will be a litmus test for the ruling and Opposition coalitions. Leaders of both camps are nurturing ambitions for the top post, thus making things difficult even for the BJP, which is known for its alliance management skills. The entry of Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj Party was initially expected to make the fight triangular, but his decision not to contest the election himself might again make it a bipolar contest. This gives rise to the suspicion that there is a secret pact between him and RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav, who is perceived to be the CM face of Mahagathbandhan. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar is surely facing the toughest battle of his political career because of anti-incumbency of 20 years.

RAVI SHARMA, DHARIWAL

Wrong to go public against IAF

Refer to 'Why we shouldn't look at Op Sindoor through a flawed lens'; Air Marshal R Nambiar (ret'd) has aptly given a point-by-point rebuttal of an article by Vice Admiral Harinder Singh (ret'd) that contains many misconceptions about the IAF. Going public against a sister service was inappropriate and uncalled-for. Instead, the retired Vice Admiral should have contacted the CDS and the Air Chief and sought their permission to give a presentation to the military top brass. An in-house discussion could have been held, but he chose to go public. This should be avoided in the interest of national security.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Focus on sustainable growth

Recent international reports have highlighted that the global economy is experiencing a period of instability and uncertainty. Factors such as slowing growth rates, political tensions and rapid technological changes indicate that the coming years will be challenging for nations worldwide. It is essential for countries to adopt policies that are both flexible and pragmatic. Over the past few years, the world has faced economic shocks, inflationary pressures and geopolitical tensions. Yet, the global economy has demonstrated resilience, thanks to prudent government policies, proactive private

sector participation and the cooperation of citizens. However, this resilience cannot be taken for granted. Only through coordinated efforts can the global economy achieve lasting stability and sustainable growth.

ANGEL GUPTA, RAJPURA

Cocking a snook at SC order

Refer to 'Diwali's dark side'; it is a matter of grave concern that the Supreme Court's direction to use only green firecrackers for a stipulated period on Diwali was largely flouted across the country. Unfortunately, people burst crackers well past midnight, aggravating air and noise pollution. Such irresponsible behaviour adversely impacts public health, especially of children and senior citizens. Fire incidents, which sometimes cause loss of life and property, are attributable to an excessive use of fireworks. The police and the local administration turn a blind eye to these goings-on. The need of the hour is to carry out random checking of vulnerable spots at night time and bring the violators of the SC order to book.

MD SHARMA, SHIMLA

Asrani was a great comedian

Asrani was a wonderful comedian who entertained audiences for decades. He excelled in the role of a 'side hero' with superstars like Rajesh Khanna and Amitabh Bachchan. He played his most iconic character of a cocky jailer in *Sholay*. Other movies in which he made his presence felt included *Namak Haraam*, *Bawarchi*, *Abhimaan*, *Chupke Chupke*, *Chhoti Si Baat*, *Rafoo Chakkar*, *Satyakam* and *Mere Apne*. Asrani's wife Manju featured as his better half in *Aaj Ki Taaza Khabar*, in which he played the hilarious part of Champak Bhoomiya.

BIDYUT KUMAR CHATTERJEE, FARIDABAD

Sholay's jailer is no more

Asrani, a legendary comedian, was a simple and down-to-earth person. He worked hard to carve a niche for himself in the film world. He is fondly remembered for playing the role of a jailer (with a Hitler-style moustache) in *Sholay*. His classic line, '*Hum angrezon ke zamaane ke jailer hain*', will always remain in moviegoers' hearts and minds.

JASVINDER SINGH HUMSAFAR, MALOUDH

A trade deal with US will boost confidence



DHARMAKIRTI JOSHI
CHIEF ECONOMIST, CRISIL

THE Reserve Bank of India (RBI) recently raised its gross domestic product (GDP) growth forecast for India by a good 30 basis points to 6.8 per cent this fiscal. The International Monetary Fund followed suit, raising it to 6.6 per cent from 6.4 per cent. Ergo, India will continue to be the fastest-growing large economy in 2025. However, it will not be the only country whose growth forecast is being upgraded. The US, countries in the Euro area and emerging markets are also expected to grow faster, for varied reasons. This is because global economic activity has been resilient despite higher tariffs and persistent geopolitical uncertainties.

The US economy is being driven by investments in artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies and infrastructure, particularly in data centres. This has increased demand for construction and other necessary inputs for data centres, both domestically and internationally, particularly from Europe and Asia. According to S&P Global, nearly half of the projected 1.9 per cent GDP growth in the US in 2025 will be attributed to such investments. Although

some view AI investments as risky, they are currently supporting economic activity in the country.

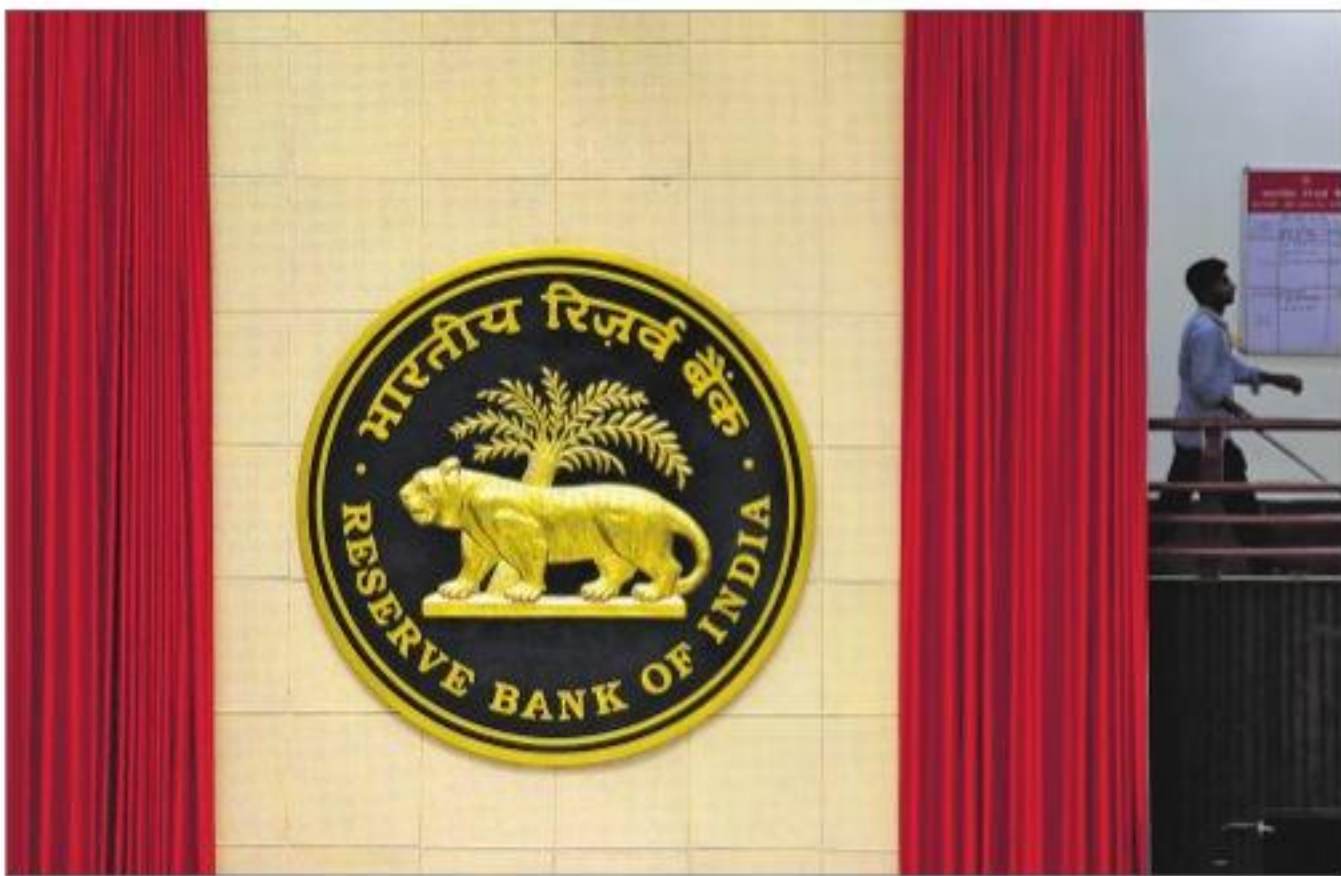
In emerging markets and Asia, growth is expected to have two distinct phases. The first half of the year benefited from accelerated exports to the US to skirt the higher tariffs set to take effect in the second half of the year. This trend may not continue in the latter part of the year as tariffs rise.

India faces the highest tariffs in Asia. Although sectors such as pharmaceuticals and smartphones, which constitute a fourth of India's exports to the US, have been exempted, the absence of a trade deal will lead to substantially higher tariffs in the second half of the year. Yet, India's growth forecast has been raised.

The current fiscal began on a robust note, with GDP growth rising to 7.8 per cent in the first quarter and exceeding expectations. This was driven by private consumption, government capital expenditure and the services sector and triggered upward revisions in forecasts.

Factors beyond the country's control but with significant economic implications have been largely favourable. Crude oil prices are expected to decline to an average of \$64 per barrel this fiscal from \$78.9 per barrel in the previous one. Lower crude prices help keep inflation and the current account deficit (CAD) in check, supporting growth.

Monsoon rains were above normal in calendar years 2024 and 2025, with the country receiving 8 per cent more



UPGRADE: The RBI has raised the gross GDP growth forecast by 30 basis points this fiscal. REUTERS

rainfall than the long period average at the all-India level. However, rainfall distribution was uneven, with the number of regions experiencing excess rainfall doubling in 2025.

While there has been crop damage in Punjab, Rajasthan, Haryana and Telangana, other regions are expected to perform well. Additionally, rice and wheat stocks are above buffer norms and winter crops, which are largely irrigated, are expected to benefit from improved groundwater and reservoir levels.

The resilience of the Indian economy is supported by healthy external indicators and strong balance sheets. The CAD is low (0.2 per cent of the GDP in the first quarter) and is expected to stay below 1 per cent of the GDP for the full fiscal.

Financing a low CAD can be

challenging in today's uncertain environment with volatile capital flows. In recent months, India has experienced net capital outflows. However, a low CAD combined with a healthy foreign exchange reserve means India is not reliant on foreign inflows for its financing.

Nearly half of India's exports are services, which have been less affected than goods trade by the new US tariff regime. In the first five months of this fiscal, services exports grew 10.6 per cent, outpacing goods exports growth at 3.9 per cent.

Large- and mid-sized corporations have strong balance sheets. A recent study by Crisil Ratings highlighted that corporate credit quality is robust, with ratings upgrades outnumbering downgrades by more than two-to-one. Despite healthy balance sheets, cor-

A stronger balance sheet, low inflation and robust consumption are keeping India's growth engine humming.

The days of the Aravallis in Haryana seem numbered



MD SINHA
FORMER PRINCIPAL CHIEF CONSERVATOR OF FORESTS, HARYANA

THE Supreme Court recently heard matters concerning the Aravalli hills in Haryana — complaints against the proposed Aravalli Safari project in Gurugram and another relating to the Forest Definition issue in relation to Haryana. Even as Haryana has defended the project in court, both these matters have an important bearing on the long-term ecological conservation of the Aravallis in Haryana.

Earlier, on March 4, 2025, the Supreme Court had directed the states to set up expert committees to identify forests as per the dictionary meaning within six months, while hearing a slew of writ petitions challenging the Forest Conservation Amendment Act, 2023. These amendments dilute its provisions to a large extent, nullify-

ing the protection accorded by the judgments of the Supreme Court on such lands under the category of "forests as per dictionary meaning."

Pursuant to this, the Government of Haryana came up with a definition which essentially lays down that areas below 40 per cent canopy density shall not be considered forests as per the dictionary meaning — taking a cue from the definition proposed by Goa. Notably, the average annual rainfall in Goa is 3,000 mm while it is around 500 mm in the Aravallis — which leads to very different kinds of forests, respectively. Thus, such a copycat approach only indicates a lack of due application of mind — or perhaps something else entirely.

The Aravallis in Haryana are scrub forests/grasslands with canopy (read tree) density around 10-20 per cent — barring a few patches where better moisture has allowed magnificent Dhauk forests to come up. This definition effectively ensures that most of the Aravallis in Haryana, other than those areas protected under the forest laws, would lose what little protection they have till date due to the judgments of the Supreme Court in the *Godavari*/MC Mehta cases. This would



FOREST ENDANGERED: That the Aravallis are vital to the ecological security of Haryana has been ignored in favour of the potential monetary gains. SANDEEP JOSHI

yield a bonanza worth hundreds of thousands of crores to realty and mining companies, especially in Gurugram and Faridabad.

While the spirit of the directions of the apex court was to guide the states to take positive steps towards forest conservation, this definition does the opposite. With only 2 per cent of the area under natural forest cover in the state, one would have expected a more proactive approach towards conservation, but it was not to be.

While still coming to terms regarding this restrictive for-

est definition, in a coordinated move, the Department of Mines and Geology has proposed another novel definition for the Aravallis. In a letter, couched in pseudo-scientific jargon, it has proposed that the height criterion of 100 metres (only hills higher than 100 m shall be Aravallis — please do not ask me why!). In addition, it says that only "Mesoproterozoic rocks" should be considered the Aravallis and "Neoproterozoic intrusives" should be excluded as these are "younger, unrelated to orogenic events; do not form

If an Aravalli hill is not a billion years old and 100 metres high, Haryana says it does not count.

linear, continuous ranges; their inclusion would dilute the geological identity of the Aravalli-Delhi fold belt."

Let me explain this in simple words. The Mesoproterozoic era is the geological period from 1.6 billion to 1 billion years ago and the Neoproterozoic era 1 billion to 540 million years ago. So, basically, the proposal states that if the hill/rocks are not at least 1 billion years old or greater than 100 metres in height, they don't deserve protection — feel free to do as you will with them. Such erudition beggars the imagination. For want of a better analogy, it is akin to saying that if my parents are below 80 years of age and above six feet in height they won't get medical treatment!

One shudders to even think of what new criteria such creative minds will come up with next. You don't know whether to laugh or cry.

The Aravallis in Haryana have survived for nearly 3 billion years, but their days now seem to be numbered. The Amendments to the Forest Conservation Act enacted by Parliament; the definition of forests adopted by the Government of Haryana; this novel age- and height-related criteria and the amendment of the PLPA,

the second half.

The ongoing reforms in the goods and services tax (GST) will enhance compliance and further formalise the economy over time. These reforms will also boost private consumption, which makes up 57 per cent of India's GDP.

Lower GST rates will support middle-class consumption, complementing the income tax cuts and interest rate reductions introduced this year. It will help reduce inflation. These changes are likely to make consumption a more significant driver of growth compared with investment this fiscal.

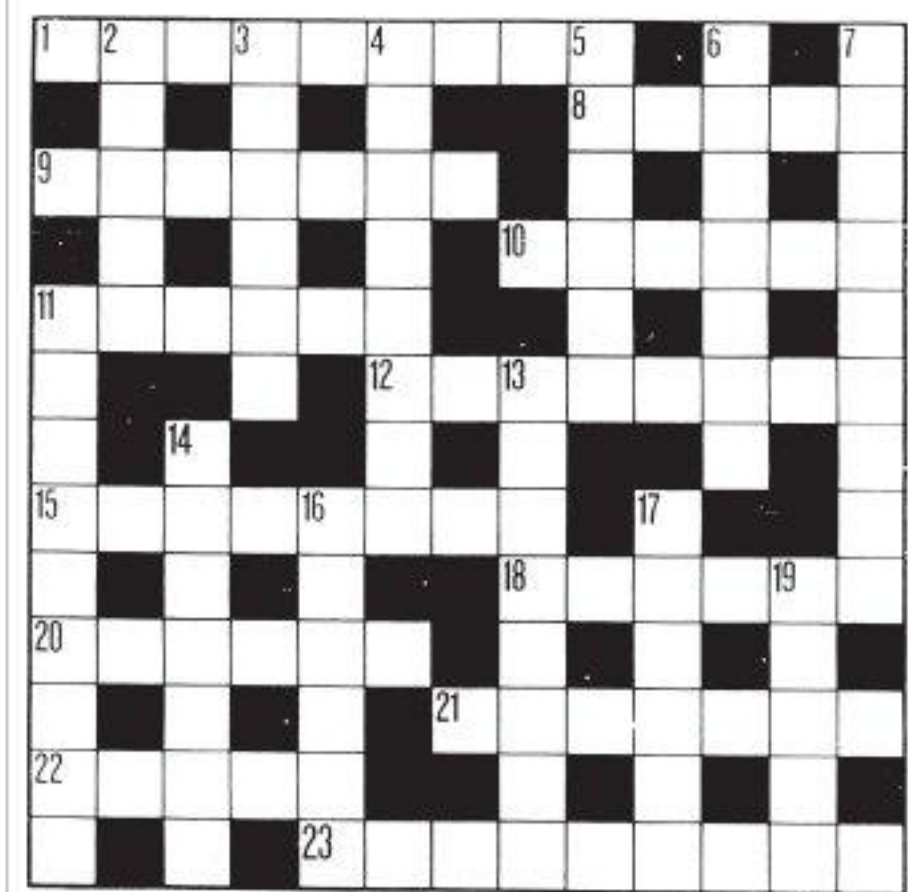
Securing a trade deal with the US would alleviate uncertainty and boost confidence, particularly benefiting labour-intensive industries such as textiles, gems and jewellery and seafood, which together represent nearly a quarter of India's exports to the US.

These sectors, with over two-thirds of the contribution from micro, small and medium enterprises, have been rendered uncompetitive in the US market by the extremely high tariffs.

Despite its domestic strengths, the Indian economy is vulnerable to adverse global developments owing to its increasing integration with the world in terms of trade and capital flows.

High public debt levels in many countries, inflated asset prices (especially safe-haven assets like gold) and ongoing geopolitical and tariff uncertainties make the global environment complex and could challenge India's resilience.

QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Vertical cliff (9)
 - 8 Meaning (5)
 - 9 Bram Stoker's vampire (7)
 - 10 North American pen for horses (6)
 - 11 A skiing race (6)
 - 12 Overjoyed (8)
 - 15 Driven out (8)
 - 18 Vigour (6)
 - 20 Special faculty (6)
 - 21 Horseman's footrest (7)
 - 22 Of little weight (5)
 - 23 Controversial issue (3,6)

Monday's solution

Across: 1 Custard, 4 Ad lib, 7 Aura, 8 Abdicate, 10 Penmanship, 12 Fodder, 13 Infamy, 15 In good time, 18 Keep at it, 19 Garb, 20 Rapid, 21 Go-ahead.

Down: 1 Cramp, 2 Serenade, 3 Debase, 4 Aficionado, 5 Lear, 6 Brevity, 9 Take in hand, 11 Navigate, 12 Flicker, 14 Boxing, 16 Embed, 17 Peep.

- DOWN**
- 2 Of the country (5)
 - 3 Loud silly laugh (6)
 - 4 Headlong (4-4)
 - 5 Accompanying guard (6)
 - 6 Thankless person (7)
 - 7 The genuine article (4,5)
 - 11 Flattery (5,4)
 - 13 Evade (8)
 - 14 Regretful acknowledgement of error (7)
 - 16 Extent of distance (6)
 - 17 Unidentified (6)
 - 19 Haggard (5)

SU DO KU



EASY

FORECAST

MONDAY'S SOLUTION									
1	6	5	4	7	3	8	2	9	
9	8	3	1	6	2	7	4	5	
2	7	4	5	8	9	1	3	6	
6	5	2	7	3	4	9	8	1	
8	4	7	2	9	1	6	5	3	
3	1	9	6	5	8	2	7	4	
5	9	1	3	2	7	4	6	8	
4	2	6	8	1	5	3	9	7	
7	3	8	9	4	6	5	1	2	

CALENDAR

■ Shaka Samvat	1947
■ Aashwin Shaka	30
■ Kartik Purnishte	6
■ Hijari	1447
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 1, up to 8:17 pm	
■ Priti Yoga up to 4:06 am	
■ Swati Nakshatra up to 1:52 am	
■ Moon in Libra sign	

SUNSET: 17:45 HRS			WEDNESDAY 06:29 HRS		
CITY			MAX MIN		
Chandigarh			33	19	
New Delhi			33	20	
Amritsar			31	18	
Bathinda			34	18	
Jalandhar			31	18	
Ludhiana			31	19	
Bhiwani			31	22	
Hisar			31	19	
Sirsa			33	22	
Dharamsala			26	11	
Manali			20	08	
Shimla			21	12	
Srinagar			24	08	
Jammu			32	16	
Kargil			19	01	
Leh			15	-01	
Dehradun			31	16	
Mussoorie			23	13	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

GLOBAL PARTNERS IN DEFENCE CAN BE CATALYSTS, NOT CRUTCHES

NDIA'S bold push for self-reliance in defence is no longer aspirational—it is now turning into a tangible reality. The recent flagging off of the first batch of BrahMos missiles from the Lucknow facility, within just five months of its virtual inauguration, signals a significant milestone in the country's journey toward indigenisation. With contracts worth ₹4,000 crore signed with foreign nations and a projected turnover of ₹3,000 crore from the Lucknow unit alone, the message is clear: India is open for defence business. However, as impressive as this progress is, we need to be clear-eyed. India's journey toward defence self-reliance is still in progress. To maintain momentum, the country must strike a pragmatic balance between national ambition and global collaboration.

The 'Make in India' initiative has propelled domestic defence production to ₹1.27 lakh crore in 2023-24—a remarkable 174 percent increase since 2014-15. With an ambitious target of ₹3 lakh crore in production and ₹50,000 crore in exports by 2029, India is clearly on a determined path. However, to sustain this upward trajectory, the country must bridge critical gaps in advanced technologies, manufacturing expertise, and adherence to global standards. Strategic foreign partnerships and joint ventures remain essential to fill these voids, ensuring that India's self-reliance drive remains robust, competitive, and globally relevant.

This is where foreign partnerships, particularly joint ventures, come into play. With liberalised foreign direct investment policies in the sector and a focus on tech transfer, these collaborations are essential bridges between aspiration and execution. Strategic tie-ups not only infuse vital capital and innovation into India's defence ecosystem, but also ensure our products remain globally competitive. The BrahMos missile itself, a product of Indo-Russian collaboration, is a shining example of how joint ventures can yield world-class systems that serve both strategic and commercial interests. To scale up, India must continue engaging with like-minded nations that see value in shared security while manufacturing together.

In defence, isolationism can foment stagnation rather than self-reliance. India's goal should be strategic autonomy, not strategic solitude. As we build our own capabilities, foreign partnerships must remain part of the blueprint—not as crutches, but as catalysts. India can and must lead in global defence manufacturing. It will get there faster, and more securely, by walking alongside partners.

MIND THE GAP BETWEEN ROYALISTS & REPUBLICANS

THE British royalty's modern history is a meandering march of scandals. The century since Elizabeth's birth has seen the house of Windsor embroiled in an abdication, a series of extramarital affairs, several instances of casual racism, bribery charges, and 'the battle of the Waleses' that ended in a fatal car crash. The latest to join the family's hall of infamy is the third of her four children, Andrew. Days before the posthumous publication of a memoir by Virginia Giuffre, who had accused the prince of sexual abuse, the 65-year-old father of two gave up his royal titles and honours last week. That it took more than a decade of her initial accusation, six years since his mother stripped him of public duties, and three years since he settled Giuffre's case out of court is testament to the royal obsession with optics over propriety.

Evidently, the Firm—as Elizabeth's father first called the business of monarchy—has been unable to shake off Andrew's links to Jeffrey Epstein, the convicted child trafficker who died behind bars, and his close associate, Ghislaine Maxwell, the imprisoned daughter of a British newspaper magnate. The publication of Andrew Lownie's unflattering book two months ago did not help. However, what made Andrew's clumsy attempts to distance himself from Epstein altogether impossible is the release of the American financier's private jet's flight logs that showed several trips together.

Royalists questioned whether the prince could maintain the Royal Lodge, a 30-room mansion southwest of Heathrow leased to him by the Crown Estate, after paying Giuffre an estimated \$12 million to settle the case. Documents made public recently show how little Andrew is required to pay through most of the 75-year-old lease after a substantial sum was paid upfront in the 2000s. It's clear that though British MPs are piling pressure on their government to formally strip Andrew of all royal titles, there is little appetite to see the monarchy go. They would do well to keep an eye on the massive 'No kings' protests happening across the US—aimed at Trump's tyranny, but termed to reinforce republicanism. They would also do well to read Giuffre's memoir, *Nobody's Girl*, that's out on stands Tuesday. Maybe there will be more gritted teeth behind stiff upper lips.

QUICK TAKE

A BRIDGE NOT TOO FAR

A promising innovation might point us to a way out of a regrettable trend with a sustainable solution. The University of Pennsylvania has used novel material mixes to 3D-print complex bridge designs that use less concrete—a material estimated to account for about 8 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions. The lattice-like designs are said to ensure that such bridges would be durable enough. Now, 3D printing of bridges isn't totally new to India—IIT Hyderabad printed a 7.5-metre prototype last year for its campus with help from a startup. If the expertise is nurtured, it could possibly improve India's dismal record at constructing and maintaining bridges. That would be a future worth walking across to.

THE politics of awarding Nobel prizes is sometimes as murky as war itself. This year, the Nobel Peace Prize Committee provided interim relief. It did not award Donald Trump the prize. Instead, it went to the Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado, a person whose slow politics has, in a way, helped birth an organic sense of peace for Venezuela.

The prize to Machado actually raises the question of the creativity of peace in India today. It's in this context that one must raise the issue that discussions about peace and about Gandhian thought have been impoverished for the last three decades.

There have been two exceptions to this mode of thinking. The first has been the thinker Ela Bhatt.

Bhatt has often been seen as the founder of the Self Employed Women's Association and nothing more. But in later years, she was in many senses deeply involved in peace and peacemaking with the likes of Jimmy Carter. She pointed out that peace cannot be worked out of a handbook. It is not a technology. Peace, she said, has to emerge as a metaphysic, out of the local languages, out of indigenous modes of thought. In this context, she emphasised that Gandhi gave currency to the words *satyagraha*, *swadeshi* and *swaraj*.

She also pointed out that peace has to be a form of storytelling. Without myths, stories, and inspiration of struggles, peace does not acquire the everyday clarity, resonance and poetics it desperately needs.

She said that one of the things to emphasise is the importance of the role of women in peace. She cited the examples of Manipur and Kashmir, where war was a known act, a ritual of waiting. She emphasised that when war becomes waiting, women seem to wait not only for peace, but for their husbands and children to come back every day. The final point that she emphasised—and I think it was very crucial—was that peace can't be a contract. Peace, she said, in a deep and fundamental way, has to be part of a dialogue or conversation. It has to be built like a weave.

And in this sense, a sense of peace was very close to what C V Seshadri, the second intellectual thinker about Gandhism and peace, brought forth.

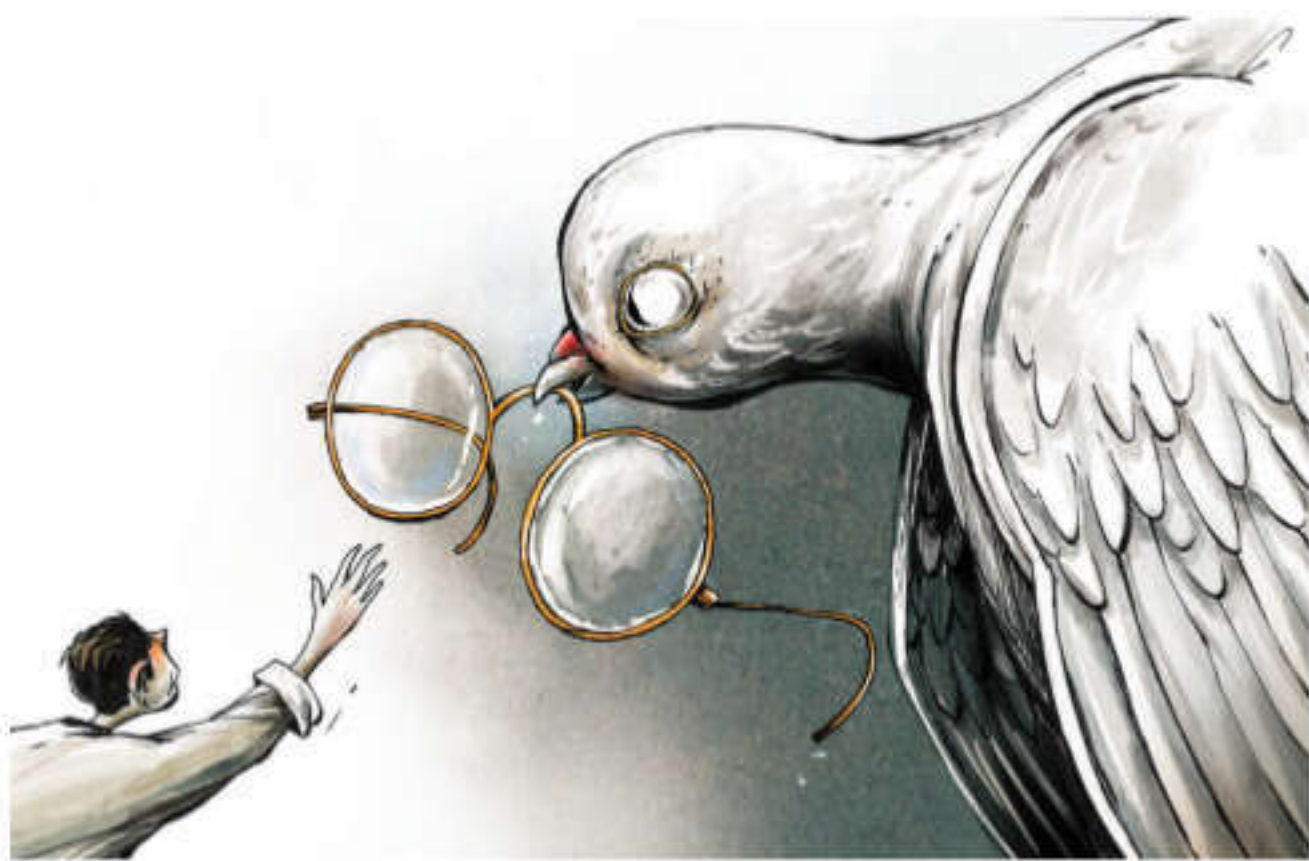
Seshadri was an extraordinary scientist, a chemist who built a laboratory in a slum that became one of the coun-

The Nobel Prize encourages us to think of peace in a broader context. In this imagination, there cannot be a chasm between the regional and the national or international

WARP AND WEFT OF PEACEMAKING AMID VIOLENCE

SHIV VISVANATHAN

Social scientist associated with the Compost Heap, a group researching alternative imaginations



SOURAV ROY

try's most famous research institutes.

Seshadri regarded Gandhi as another scientist. Gandhi, in fact, was a senior 'scientist' whose innovative work he felt needed to be emulated. Gandhian innovation was a crucial part of scientific innovation. Seshadri emphasised that in a deep and fundamental way, Gandhian thought in peace required as much innovation as science. In fact, peace operated with less certainty than science.

He also emphasised two other things. Peace is not impersonal. It becomes autobiographical, and it's the autobiography as experiments that often constitute the making of a movement, providing a deep sense of the values that go into the making of peace.

He differentiated between disciples

and exemplars in any ethic. Disciples tend to follow the leader; disciples often mimic the leader. But an exemplar, in a deep and fundamental sense, is an innovator. S/he tends to go beyond the leader. In that sense, the exemplar is an original.

These thinkers pointed out that peace cannot emerge merely from instant contracts. Neither can it emerge from instant diktats of the kind Trump today provides. Peace is something that has to be worked and reworked on as a wheel. And the wheel is one of the most beautiful metaphors for peacemaking. One has to emphasise the importance of Seshadri and Bhatt today because there's a paucity of thinking about war and peace. Peace can never be just local. Peace,

WASTE LAND: A NATION OF LANDFILLS

C P SURENDRAN

The author's latest volume of poetry is *Window with a Train Attached*

lected and recycled. We don't collect too good and we litter. But how much do we recycle? There is no clear data on this.

In Europe, there is a hierarchy of waste management that prioritises prevention, reuse, recycling, and recovery, achieving a municipal recycling rate of 49 percent. The Nordic countries exemplify the best practices. In Sweden, 65 percent of municipal solid waste is incinerated, generating energy for a significant portion of Stockholm's homes, while recycling rates remain high at 49 percent. Finland mirrors this success, with landfilling dropping below 1 percent since 2020.



A growing India means growing solid waste, especially in its cities. But we seem to have no plan for it except to transfer it from one place to another. Why not use technology to recycle and generate power from waste, as other nations are doing?

In these countries, waste is almost lovingly sorted and managed, transforming what was once discarded material into energy or reusable resources. We are an energy-deficient country. When was the last time you heard someone raise a question in parliament or a state assembly on recycling waste into power? Or indeed, waste into anything?

Kerala, where I come from, wastes no opportunity to pat its back while dumping trash into fields and canals. Kochi, Kozhikode, and Thrissur are mosquito breeding centres. Waste mismanagement in the state is probably one reason it holds records in disease outbreaks.

In a deep and fundamental sense, has to be both local and cosmopolitan, international. It's in this sense that today if we think of peace, we think of the Gaza Strip.

Gandhi would have pointed out that there is a Gaza Strip in each mode of governance. One has to examine the Gaza Strip locally and internationally. In this context, we have to think simultaneously of what happened in Manipur and is happening in Kashmir.

Simultaneously, we have to provide a certain sense of peace, belonging, and kinship to what's happening in the Gaza Strip, to Palestinians.

Both Seshadri and Bhatt differentiated between *swadeshi* and *swaraj*, explaining that these are not dualistic concepts. Rather, they merge into each other as part of a complex weave of microcosm and macrocosm. *Swadeshi* can never be purely local and *swaraj* cannot be merely holistic. Instead, *swaraj* must weave in the parts, because the parts make the whole.

The second point that Seshadri emphasised was the distinction between autobiography and choreography. He said that autobiography is the experiment of the self, and this self-experimentation is the beginning of peace. Choreography, then, is the collective attempt of the self to create holistic group peace, which demands a certain notion of memory.

Seshadri further emphasised that structures of violence are often more innovative than peace. Within this context, he pointed out that peace requires a richer, more fluid notion of goodness to capture the essence of what is happening today.

The final point he made was that peace is plural; it cannot be a monologue.

It must include several voices—the marginal, the migrant, and the normal. It cannot be achieved without incorporating a sense of marginality. We need to make a new connection between region, nation and the Anthropocene. We have to make sure that diversity, dialogue and plurality sustain both parts and the whole.

It is time we dream of the Anthropocene differently. We need to create a new sense of man with a new sense of nature more symbiotic than contractual. We need to create an ecology. This sense of ecology has to add to the new imagination of peace for the future to be a different kind of world.

(Views are personal)
(svcsds@gmail.com)

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Hijab politics

Ref: *Politics, not faith, fuels hijab row in Kerala* (Oct 21). The editorial succinctly highlights that politicians added fire to the frying pan by mixing communal tinge to the hijab row. Any religious component of a student's outfit defeats the concept of uniform in every sense of the word.

Sanath Kumar T S, Thrissur

Judicial independence

Ref: *Collegium nod to Centre's request raises questions* (Oct 20). I can't resist applauding the editorial today criticising the collegium's surrender to an executive decision which is unhealthy for an independent judiciary. Justice Sreedharan is an outright, bold and straightforward judge with landmark judgements, just like Justice Muralidhar.

VO Harindranathan, Chennai

Remote option

Ref: *Progressive policy, predictive pitfalls* (Oct 20). Offering a remote work option could reduce the burden on coworkers and help prevent negative consequences in the implementation. The Karnataka government should, however, also develop a strategy to support women employed in the unorganised sector, who often lack any safety net.

Sinan Rasheed, Kozhikode

On-ground reality

Ref: *How not to build another ugly city* (Oct 20). The author's perception towards bureaucrats vindicated the age-old rivalry between administrator and academician. It is not denying the fact that bureaucrats are blamed for many infrastructural breakdowns; however, intellectual academicians' learned insights can only be implemented by on-ground practitioners.

Subha Prakash Kanungo, Bhubaneswar

Corruption avenue

Ref: *Potholes, politics and public's patience* (Oct 21). The stench isn't from the potholes—it's from the system that breeds them. Year after year, funds vanish into bureaucratic gutters while officials perfume the air with excuses. Who audits the audacious decay that wears a government badge?

Sandeep Sharma Mooteri, Bengaluru

Teaching cyber-safety

Ref: *Deepfakes, doxxing, digital abuse* (Oct 21). The dark side of digital progress especially targets vulnerable women through fake images and data misuse. It points out gaps in Indian laws and calls for stronger legislation, tech-based solutions and mandatory cyber-safety education.

Thahsina K, Kannur

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Govt must stop blaming past regimes for economic failures

TOP functionaries of the Narendra Modi government must stop blaming the previous regimes for the problems plaguing the country, but they don't. In keeping with this mindset, Union Commerce & Industry Minister Piyush Goyal last week found fault with the trade agreements India had with Japan and South Korea. "Since the signing of the agreements exports to both these countries have hardly grown, only the imports have grown," he pointed out at an event in Delhi. Factually, he is not incorrect. India's Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with South Korea became effective in January 2010 and with Japan in August 2011. Before the Korea pact, India's exports in 2009-10 were \$3.42 billion while imports were \$8.57 billion. By

2024-25, exports rose modestly to \$5.8 billion, but imports jumped to \$21.06 billion. With Japan, the pattern is similar. India's exports stood at \$5.09 billion in 2010-11, and imports at \$8.63 billion. In the last fiscal, exports were only \$6.42 billion while imports had more than doubled to \$18.91 billion. These figures show that the benefits of the trade pacts have been asymmetric, leaving India with widening trade deficits vis-à-vis both nations. However, what Goyal's statement conveniently overlooks is that his own government has been in power for over a decade, long enough to renegotiate, recalibrate, and even rethink these agreements had it truly believed they were lopsided. Instead, New Delhi continued to live with them, occasionally expressing

discontent but rarely taking substantive action to address the issue. It is disingenuous, therefore, to suggest that the economic imbalance with Japan and South Korea is solely the result of Congress-era decisions. To do so is to ignore the continuity of policy responsibility that governance demands. The Modi government cannot, on the one hand, claim credit for every positive economic outcome and, on the other, absolve itself of blame for everything bad. Governance is not a relay race in which the baton of accountability can be dropped at will. After eleven years in office, the alibi of inherited flaws has worn thin. Moreover, Goyal's remarks reflect a deeper malaise: the tendency among ministers to use economic platforms for political signaling.

The venue was a business conference, yet the tone was unmistakably political. This is unfortunate. The Commerce and industry portfolios require measured, technocratic engagement, not rhetorical blame games. Investors and exporters look for clarity and confidence in government messaging; they do not expect ministers to dig up decades-old grievances. Policy credibility is predicated upon consistency, not polemics. It is also worth noting that India's trade challenges are structural and not merely the product of one or two trade pacts. The stagnation of exports to Japan and South Korea must be viewed in the broader context of India's competitiveness. Both countries are highly industrialised economies with so-

phisticated supply chains and stringent quality norms. India's limited export basket—dominated by raw materials and intermediate goods—struggles to find scale in such markets. The solution, therefore, lies not in blaming previous agreements but in upgrading domestic manufacturing, improving logistics, incentivising innovation, and building capacity in high-value sectors. Indeed, the Modi government's 'Make in India' and Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes are steps in that direction. But these programmes will yield results only if accompanied by transparent and stable trade policies, structural reforms, and genuine collaboration with industry stakeholders. Blame games will in no way help exports or the economy.

Media not wrong in dreading the all-powerful DATA body



DR MADABHUSHI SRIDHAR ACHARYULU

With too many definitions as regards the DATA Act implementation of rules under it is creating problems, one too many. Journalists have reason to fear that the Digital Personal Data Privacy (DPDP) Act may soon evolve into a monster. Worried over the impeding devilish garb, members from the Press Club of India (PCI) and the Indian Women Press Corps (IWPC) have shot 35 questions to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeiTy) for urgent clarification.

This stems from the questions raised by the ministry's secretary S. Krishnan during a July 28 meeting he had with representatives of PCI, IWPC, DIGIPUB, and the Editors Guild of India. The media professionals wanted an exemption to the DPDP law, which they perceived was a threat to their democratic functioning. Over 1,000 journalists drawn from 23 elected media bodies sought the MeiTy Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw's intervention, while pointing out that the Act did not provide journalistic exemption.

A 'chilling effect':

The provisions regarding data fiduciaries in the DPDP Act 2023, particularly Sections 28 and 36, could seriously affect journalists. By classifying reporters and media organisations as "data fiduciaries," the Act can potentially threaten source confidentiality and impose impractical consent requirements for newsgathering. The Board and the Government will 'request' information from any "data fiduciary," a definition critics say could include the media personnel.

There are concerns that the Data Protection Board (DPB), whose members and chairperson are appointed by the Central government, could lack autonomy, making it more likely to acquiesce to government demands. Beyond these specific sections, the DPDP Act creates several other serious issues for the press.

No newspaper or website can bear the killing penalties, because non-compliance with the Act can result in fines of up to ₹250 crore. This high financial risk has a "chilling effect" on investigative journalism and accountability reporting, where a single misstep could bankrupt a media outlet.

In addition, the DPDP Act amended the RTI Act by removing a key public interest override. This allows public officials to withhold information by claiming it is "personal data," weakening a critical tool journalists use to expose corruption and hold the government accountable.

Stifling a critical source:

Many whistleblowers

were killed by vested interested leaders, mafia etc. The threat of their identities being exposed could discourage informants and whistleblowers from coming forward, stifling a critical source for investigative journalism.

All in the name of 'consent':

Do individuals involved in journalistic work and organisations need to seek prior or consent from the person about whom they are doing a story, or whose "personal data" such as identification details are contained in a press report?

For a story involving personal data (such as names or photos), a journalist would need to get "informed, clear, and unambiguous" consent from every person mentioned. This is not practical for breaking news, crowd reporting, or investigative stories, potentially making such reporting illegal.

Reporting will be a horrible experience:

Reporting whether for print, broadcast or online media requires several details such as name, age, gender, location, profession, caste, class, income are required to authenticate a story. Without these details, the story will be incomplete, vague, and likely to be rejected. Much of this information is set to fall within the definition of "personal data." Blanking out this type of data will lead to a hollowing out of stories, particularly field reportage and will adversely affect the media, per se. What are the specific clauses in the act that pro-



No newspaper or website can bear the killing penalties, because non-compliance with the Act can result in fines of up to Rs 250 crore. This high financial risk has a "chilling effect" on investigative journalism and accountability reporting, where a single misstep could bankrupt a media outlet.

vide exemption for publishing such details as part of regular journalistic work?

A 'developing news story' can be crime:

In the case of a developing news story such as coverage of a riot, a terror attack, or a natural disaster, spontaneous street interviews, etc., is the person involved in journalistic activity (data fiduciary) required to go through the elaborate process of obtaining consent from the subjects (data principal) according to the provisions and clauses mentioned under Section 5 and Section 6 before reporting the story?

Prior nod for an interview?

Draft Rule 3 demands that the data fiduciary's notice be "in clear and plain language" and given before processing.

How can live spot reporting, spontaneous street interviews, undercover reporting, etc., comply, and will MEITY clarify that journalistic collection in the public interest need not issue advance notices?

Potential threats:

There are 35 questions that are not explained, and each could become a threat. Journalists are seeking suggestions to democratise the process that may likely violate the journalists' right to work granted under Article 19 of the Constitution. They do not have any legal validity, and any number of clarifications may not satisfy the problems of the journalistic profession.

The PCI, along with IWPC, needs to discuss with the principal DG, PIB, and senior officials of the MeiTy

ministry to meet the original demand of the scribes amending the Act to include the line, "journalistic work is exempted".

Definitions and their consequences:

Though they are penal provisions or exceptions, most problems take root in the very definitions. Journalists should understand the implications of the definitions of "automated," "data fiduciary," "data principal" and "data processor" provided in Section 2 of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023.

Fiduciary is a complex principle:

It will make news gathering a near impossible thing for print, electronic media and social media journalists. Unlike previous drafts of the bill and data protection laws in other countries, the final DPDP Act does not exempt newsgathering from its provisions. This forces journalists to operate like any other data fiduciary. A fiduciary is a person or organization acting with a high degree of trust on behalf of another, managing their assets and putting their interests first. A data fiduciary is a specific type of fiduciary under India's DPDP Act. Examples include trustees, financial advisors, and executors of wills. They are primarily responsible for ensuring data is processed lawfully, fairly, and transparently, according to the Digital Personal Data Protection Act 2023.

(The writer is a former Central Information Commissioner, and presently Professor, School of Law, Mahindra University, Hyderabad)

LETTERS

RIP Govardhan Asrani

THE passing away of veteran actor and comedian Govardhan Asrani on October 20 is a loss to the Bollywood film industry. Asrani, was known for playing versatile characters in films like 'Sholay', 'Mere Apne', 'Bawarchi', 'Abhimaan' and 'Chupke Chupke'. Over a career spanning more than five decades, he appeared in over 350 Hindi and Gujarati films, playing everything from comedic roles to supporting characters to leads. He is most fondly remembered for his iconic role of the jailor in the film 'Sholay' where his comic timing, confident presence and delivery made the line "Hum Angrezon ke zamane ke jailer hain!" unforgettable. His craft influenced generations of comedians by bringing dignity, subtlety and art to comedy. He made many future stars realise that making people laugh is not just about slapstick, but about timing, character and presence. Beyond humour, he occasionally showcased his dramatic range in films like 'Aaj Ki Taaza Khabar' and 'Chala Murari Hero Banne', where he also took up the director's chair. He was truly one of India's finest and most loved actors—his humour, expressions, and timeless performances will always live in our hearts.

Jubel D'Cruz, Mumbai

TTD letting down pilgrims with special darshan tickets

THE Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (TTD) is issuing special entry tickets every month. However, those who manage to get the special entry tickets online are not getting accommodation at Tirumala. Due to this, so many poor people are losing their money since there is no option to cancel their tickets. Hence, TTD should provide accommodation to pilgrims at the time of issuing such tickets. Not doing so will be nothing but cheating the people possessing the special entry darshan tickets.

G Narasimha Charyulu, Markapur (AP)

End bias against girls, protect the unborn

THIS refers to 'Karimnagar collector champions social awareness through music' (THI, Oct 20). Kudos to the district collector Pamela Sapathy for taking a rare but virtuous initiative by releasing a musical video album 'O Chinni picchuka...chinnari picchuka...ravamma nee intiki'. It is inspirational, motivational and thought-provoking when it comes to valuing a girl-child and urging people to end discrimination against girls and protect the unborn child. The initiative speaks volumes about not only the nation's social awareness but also its changing social perception. It is indeed a blessing to families having a daughter. People must desist from discrimination against girls and protect the unborn child.

Zubair Khan, Hyderabad

Enforce child protection policies across schools

THE shocking incident of a nine-year-old student in Bengaluru being beaten with a PVC pipe by his school principal is not just an act of cruelty but also a wake-up call to streamline our education system. Schools are meant to nurture, not traumatize; to shape minds, not break spirits. When discipline turns into violence, education loses its moral core. This tragedy reminds us that learning must be grounded in empathy and respect. Parents, educators and authorities must work together to create safe spaces where children grow through guidance and not fear. Strong enforcement of child protection policies and accountability for abuse are no longer optional—they are essential to preserve the sanctity of education and the dignity of every child.

Mohammad Asad, Mumbai

Punish habitual offenders

It is most tragic that a 42-year-old constable from Telangana, Pramod, was stabbed from behind while he was taking a criminal Shaikh Riyaz on his bike. The criminal was being taken after undergoing treatment at a hospital in Nizamabad. Riyaz is accused in 40 criminal cases. One wonders why the police are not thinking of PD Act to ensure that he gets bail after every arrest. It is quite unthinkable that a habitual offender was being taken by a constable on a bike. Hope the Centre, judiciary and the police department will come up with a mechanism that can deter such criminals by an Act in BNS. Incidentally, the police commemoration day began with a tribute to Pramod.

JP Reddy, Nalgonda

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Nandini Sweets sales surpass record 1,100 MT during festival season

BENGALURU: Karnataka's festival season witnessed an unprecedented surge in the sales of Nandini sweets products, with 1,100 metric tons sold this year, exceeding the target set by the Karnataka Milk Federation (KMF) and its member milk cooperatives.

Speaking at a press conference at Vikas Soudha, Minister for Animal Husbandry, K. Venkatesh, highlighted that during the 2024 Dasara and Deepavali festivals, 725 metric tons of sweets had been sold, generating ₹33.48 crore in turnover. Considering increased demand for 2025, KMF coordinated with all member cooperatives to plan sales two months in advance, initially targeting 1,000 metric tons. The final figure of 1,100 metric tons, with a turnover of ₹46 crore, represents a 38% growth over last year—a historic milestone for KMF. Minister Venkatesh attributed the achievement to the quality and purity of the Nandini brand, along with consumer trust and the hard work of the state's dairy farmers. KMF collects an average of 1 crore litres of milk daily, converting approximately 65 lakh litres into milk, curd, UHT products, and sweets, distributed across Karnataka and other states including Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Goa, Kerala, Delhi, and Assam. KMF MD Shivaswamy emphasised strict quality control, confirming that no adulteration was detected across 16 Nandini units and 700 product samples tested statewide.

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

Salute to ATCs, the unsung heroes who ensure safe flight journeys

B V SURYA BHAGAVANULU

TO make a more meaningful relevance of the 64th International Day of Air Traffic Controllers-ATC- (October 20), air travellers must get to understand the job and profession of ATCs.

Celebration of the workforce:

The day commemorates the formation of IFATCA (International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations) on October 20, 1961, to celebrate the 24x7 hours put in by men and women ATC working to ensure that air travel is the safest possible mode of transport. The nature of their job is to always keep aircraft safe, including the take-off, landing and when they are cruising.

Global significance of an ATC:

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) mandates a structured, operationally effective, globally standardised and harmonised air traffic management framework, supported by cost-effective and sustainable communications, navigation and

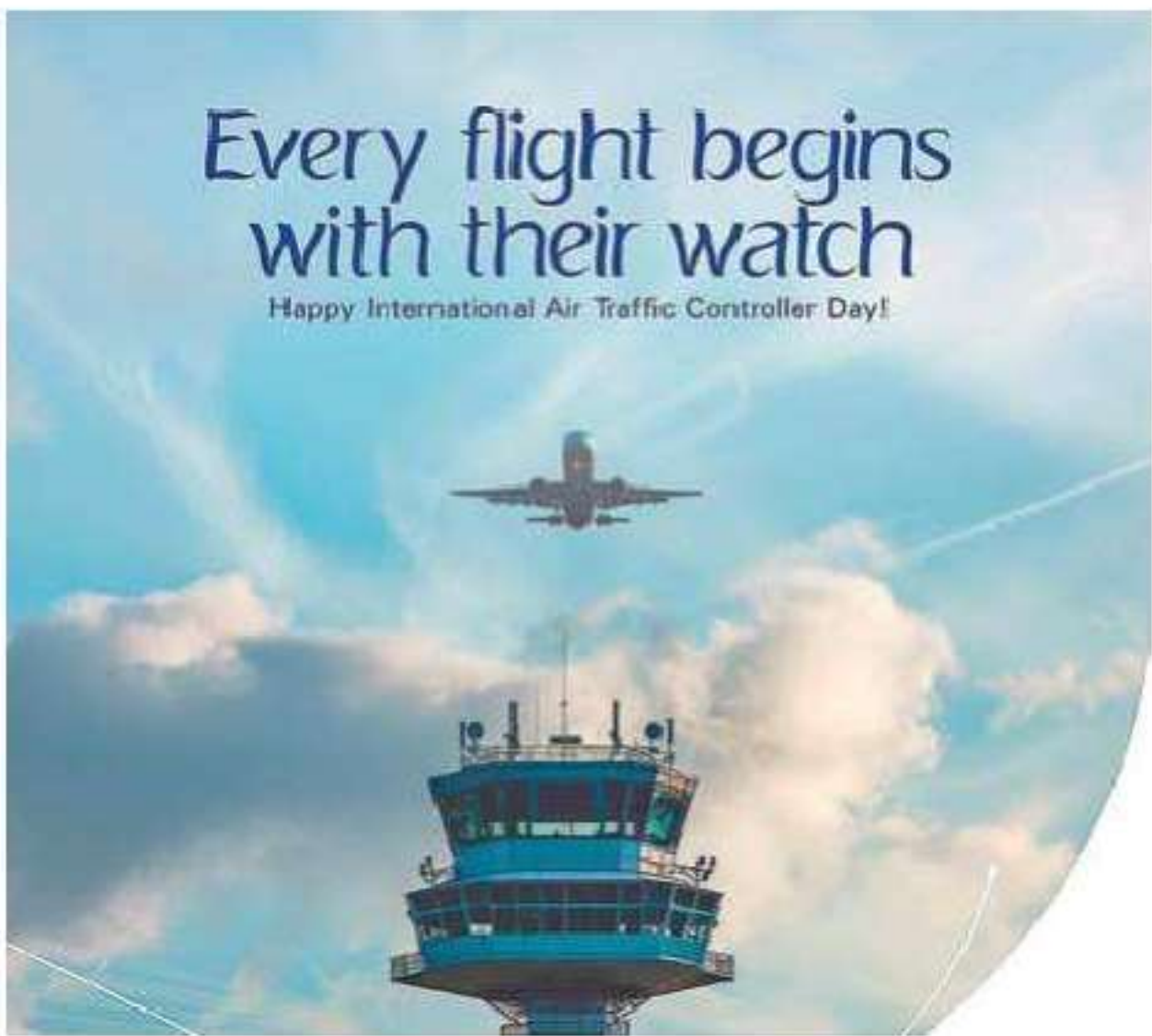
- India is one of the founding members of ICAO and is on its Governing Council
- Air traffic services and air navigation services and related infrastructure are provided by AAI across the country's entire civilian air space

surveillance (CNS) infrastructure. It also specifies international professional standards and competencies that every ATC must possess.

Air traffic management (ATM) system:

The fundamental objective of ATM is to ensure utmost safety of aircraft at every level. Air traffic controllers integrate the ever-growing traffic with scarce air space - safely, economically and efficiently — through the provision of air traffic control and flight information service infrastructure, with the help of various navigational aids, and established navigational procedures.

Components of ATM System and its structure-A: Air Traffic Services (ATS): These are provided by air traffic controllers to prevent collisions by applying air-



craft separation standards and issue timely clearances and instructions that create an orderly flow of air traffic. ATS relies on tactical interventions by the controllers and direct communication with pilots during the entire flight.

ATS service consists of three sub-services:

1. Area control service: Area control centres established at various strategic points provide area control service to enroute flights while they are cruising at set altitudes ensuring safe separation between flights.

2. Approach control service: It is a vital link between an area control centre and the aerodrome control tower. This service is provided for aircraft approaching a particular airport, for arriving, departing or flying near it. It ensures safe and efficient transition between enroute airspace and the airport's airspace with proper separation of aircraft during descent, climb, and holding for landing or take-off.

3. Aerodrome control service: This is provided by an ATC tower at the airport to manage aircraft on the ground and in the

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) mandates a structured, operationally effective, globally standardised and harmonised air traffic management framework, supported by cost-effective and sustainable communications, navigation and surveillance (CNS) infrastructure. It also specifies international professional standards and competencies that every ATC must possess

immediate vicinity of an airport. Its function is to ensure safe, orderly, and efficient flow of traffic at that airport by preventing collisions between aircraft, ground vehicles, and obstructions, by controlling all movements on the runways and taxiways, clearances for taxiing, take offs and landings.

A. Air traffic flow management (ATFM): The objective of ATFM is to efficiently regulate the flow of aircraft in order to avoid congestion at busy sectors, and airports, by staggering the demand of airlines over time and space and by ensuring better planning of the air traffic control capacities at those sectors/airports. The demand can be managed by imposing COTs [Calculated take Off Time], requiring certain classes of flights to use certain specific routes. Similarly, supply can

also be augmented by appropriate sector management, like increasing the number of ATCs working simultaneously. **B. Airspace management (ASM):** The purpose of ASM is to manage scarce airspace as efficiently as possible to satisfy its civilian and military users. Air space is managed by proper structuring and allocation.

Conclusion:

Thus, the job of air traffic controllers is to ensure safe, secure, efficient, cost-effective, environment-friendly flight, under the robust Air Traffic Management system with their training, experience and capabilities. Remember to thank an air traffic controller the next time you fly.

The writer is a retired Joint General Manager, Airports Authority of India)

DECCAN
Chronicle

22 OCTOBER 2025

NDA’s advantage as INDIA bloc gets into Bihar mess?

The picture is clearer now that the race to the Bihar Assembly has entered its final lap: While the ruling NDA has been successful in putting forward an image of cohesion to the masses having overcome inherent contradictions by working out an agenda based on common points of agreement, the Opposition Mahagathbandhan is fraying, its fault lines deepened by greed and ego battles that have obfuscated its very political goal.

The uneasy relationship among the main partners of the NDA, the Janata Dal (United) and the BJP, did have multiple gripes. Whether it was the choice of the chief ministerial candidate or the commitment to secular principles, the difference between them involved big questions. And yet the quest for power sublimated these and saw them coming together, smoothing over all wrinkles in their relationship.

For instance, the JD(U) leadership had expressed its reservations over conceding seats to the BJP in a way that meant it was no longer the leading player in the alliance. On the other hand, there were allegations of betrayal against it as well. However, the partners did not lose sight of the importance of the Bihar battle. Chirag Paswan’s Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) also fell in line in due course, helping the NDA project a unified picture.

Inside the Mahagathbandhan, meanwhile, is a different story. Shamefully for its supporters, it is openly displaying disarray and discord that have stopped it from announcing a seat sharing-formula for this all-important election. Worse, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, a key ally of the INDIA bloc and the ruling party of Jharkhand, has announced its decision to leave the alliance and withdraw from the election, protesting against the allegedly raw deal it has been dealt. As it stands now, alliance leader RJD is contesting in 163 seats and the Congress in 61. The self-defeating positions the partners have taken will result in “friendly fights” in 12 constituencies. The RJD and the Congress will take on each other in six seats while the Congress and alliance partner CPI are locked in a fight in four constituencies. The Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP) and the RJD will clash in two seats, too.

The blame for the mess in the Mahagathbandhan belongs to all but the share of the Congress would be more than all others. The party with a pathetic strike rate of 19 out of 70 seats in the 2020 election has refused to be realistic about its strength and possible electoral impact. The Congress had only itself to blame for the electoral defeat in states such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana and Chhattisgarh, too, where it chose to play Big Brother and slighted its partners that made a critical difference. And in this all-important state where the Opposition today has a brighter chance, it is still determined to play spoilsport. Instead of helping the RJD, the real player in Opposition politics in Bihar, the Congress is busy organising mega-shows for its national leadership in the state, not realising that it is not at all impressing the electorate. After all, *vote chori* is not an art that the Congress’ opponents have specialised in alone.

Well, politics is the art of the possible. So the two Bihar battlefronts are once again in a race to prove it afresh.

Diwali worsens NCR’s toxic air

Diwali fireworks and firecrackers choked Delhi and the NCR with air quality monitoring stations seeing the index hit the red zone. This blows away all arguments over standard causes of Delhi-NCR pollution like traffic, power plants, heavy industries, construction-demolition dust and the seasonal stubble-burning in Punjab contributing most to making the air barely breathable for all citizens.

The average AQI readings for Delhi on October 17, 206, October 18, 214, October 19 236 and October 21 345 clearly tell the tale of firecrackers being principally responsible for the sudden spike. Firecrackers are the biggest polluters, and a way must be found to reduce them as the major medium of celebrating the national festival of Diwali, which is a festival of lights rather than sound.

The Supreme Court order allowing the sale of green firecrackers, which are thought to be 30 per cent less polluting, in avowedly restricted hours after a ban had been in place for five years opened a Pandora’s Box. The regulation was not only unenforceable, but it also unbolted the door for the non-green varieties to slip in with fake labels.

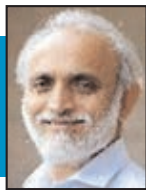
Everyone should be able to enjoy the festivities that are also marked by so many other ways of celebrating — conducting pujas, lighting diyas or lamps, partaking of sweets and savouries, and wearing new clothes — besides setting off fireworks. Bans are not a panacea because they are never easily enforceable, but the ban on firecrackers around Delhi may have helped somewhat, at least in teaching a lesson to those celebrating colourfully and loudly with fireworks that the whole NCR population does not have to face a seasonal pollution rise though some of it is inevitable in winter.

It may take years for emerging generations to be taught how air pollution shortens lifespans or even kills vulnerable people. Situated in landlocked plains, the NCR does not have the privilege of the sea breeze dispersing the polluted air like metropolises on the coast. The toxic air of winter over the national capital New Delhi, laced with the smoke of fireworks, only gets worse around Diwali. Light less firecrackers and learn to enjoy the festival in less harmful ways is the lesson.

Subhani



India needs reality check: Double-digit growth vital



Parsa Venkateshwar Rao Jr

There is legitimate concern that India’s economic growth rate of around seven per cent, which has been the fastest among the big economies of the world in the past decade, is not sufficient. The necessity of a double-digit growth rate to push India into the next stage of economic vibrancy is now quite evident. Speaking at the Kautilya Economic Conclave in New Delhi earlier this month, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has struck a surprisingly cautionary note. She said: “Just as eternal vigilance is the price of liberty, eternal performance is the price of strategic independence. There is no room for complacency or self-congratulation beyond a quiet confidence in our abilities to take the right decisions and execute them.” This is the first time that someone high in the governmental hierarchy expressed the view that the current rate of economic growth, which is high and good enough in the global economic context — should not lead us to complacency and self-congratulation. It is a self-critical assessment of the government’s own attitude.

The minister was quite emphatic in saying that there would be no escape from engaging with changes like the emergence of stablecoins — crypto currency — and this did not depend on our likes and dislikes. In the same speech, she said: “Such developments underscore the scale of the transformation underway. They also remind us that no nation can insulate itself from systemic change. Whether we welcome these shifts or not, we must prepare to engage with them.” This is candid talk indeed.

There is a divide between the economic experts in the political establishment in the government and the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The financial institutions are sure to be cautious, and in the eyes of those who want to go forward, even timid. The tussle between the financial institutions and their cautious approach and the political establishment’s desire that it has to take bold and risky decisions to survive politically, is a much needed one. Unbridled adventurism is needless.

Is there also a contradiction between the political messaging of Prime Minister Narendra Modi with its emphasis on “*Atma Nirbhar*” and “*Suadeshi*” and what Ms Sitharaman had to say. Both Mr Modi and Ms Sitharaman would deny there is any conflict between the two viewpoints. However much they may reject the apparent differences in their pronouncements, the public perception will detect the difference.

For the people at large, “*Atma Nirbhar*” and “*Suadeshi*” mean that there should not be any dependency or attraction for foreign goods, and that India should make at home all that it needs, and that the people should take pride in the fact that they use home-made stuff. The assumption underlying the “*Atma Nirbhar*” and “*Suadeshi*” argument is that India’s billion-plus population provides a large enough domestic market for Indian manufacturers and services. This, however, leads to some kind of isolation. There is the internal problem of whether the Indian domestic market can consume all that it produces because the purchasing power and the economic profile of the India consumer is not the same

The debate has to rise above the criticism hurled by the Opposition at the government of the day that there has been little or no economic progress. There has been, with all caveats thrown in.

sumer is not the same across the social and economic spectrum.

Prime Minister Modi is also keen that India should be the hub of exports in as many fields as possible, and that the world should be knocking at India’s doors for its products and services. He is also of the view that India should extend technological and economic help to less developed countries, and free them from the discriminatory trade regime of Western economies. The Prime Minister wants India to be the leader of the “Global South”. There are enough hurdles on the way towards that goal because China is in that race too, and the less developed countries may not like to accept the leadership of either India or China.

There have been two important indications of the linkages of the domestic economy with the external. First, Ms Sitharaman’s own view that the shift to stablecoin or crypto currency is needed because of the changing “landscape of money and capital flows”. She was emphatic that “binary choices” have to be made, and failure to adapt would lead to exclusion. The reference to capital flows is an indirect acknowledgement that India would need to absorb foreign capital, either because India needs foreign direct investment or India becomes an attractive investment destination for global fund managers. The other indication was that of the Reserve Bank of India raising the limit of external commercial borrowing (ECB) from \$750 million to \$1 billion. The

RBI’s decision is a sign that the domestic financial markets cannot meet the needs of manufacturers and traders fully. Raising the limit of borrowing would ease the burden on the Indian money market.

The dilemmas faced at the governmental level are expressed in the views of Mr Modi and Ms Sitharaman. They may or may not spell differences as much as reflecting the difficult policy choices facing the country. The finance minister has done well in breaking the spell of self-satisfaction that India is doing well and better than many large economies. It is unclear as to what is left to be done. The lack of clarity is no shortcoming. There is need for deliberation, and more people from all sides should contribute to the much-needed debate on the economic future.

The debate has to rise above the criticism hurled by the political Opposition at the government of the day that there has been little or no economic progress. There has been change and progress with all the caveats thrown in. Ms Sitharaman has articulated the view that the government cannot remain in the self-congratulatory mode. Mr Modi’s emphasis on “*Atma Nirbhar*” and “*Suadeshi*” is an attempt to chart the onward path. It may not be the best way forward. Now is the time to get as many views as possible on how to move forward. The imperatives of increasing exports and India’s share of global trade, and as it cannot be a one-way street, the need to absorb a fair amount of imports cannot be overlooked. The tariff tussles across countries and economic geographies will not go away.

Compromises must be made, gains and losses will have to be worked out. Ms Sitharaman’s candour at the Kautilya Conclave has to become the norm of public discourse.

The writer is a Delhi-based commentator and analyst

LETTERS

TN ALLIANCES

That deputy leader of the AIADMK parliamentary party and former minister R.B. Udhayakumar has hinted that the party is willing to form a coalition government with TVK in the state and its general secretary Edappadi K Palaniswami is the chief ministerial candidate is no doubt a welcome move. But one gets the feeling that the AIADMK is overconfident of winning the assembly elections 2026. One does not understand why the AMMK chief T.T.V. Dhinakaran says that the TVK will not have an alliance with the AIADMK. Has he been authorised to speak for the TVK? All said and done, elections to the Tamil Nadu Assembly next year will be one of the toughest ever for all the parties and contestants in the fray.

S.Ramakrishnasayee
Chennai

SYSTEMIC CHANGE NEEDED

Every monsoon, southern states anticipate the familiar devastation of floods and the resulting despair. With the onset of the northeast monsoon one fears the cycle is regrettably poised to repeat. The initial, predictable reaction of the officials will be to blame the rain gods. Soon after, the chronic administrative failures — poor stormwater drainage, inadequate desilting of canals, and the absence of effective flood management — will invariably surface. Rather than proactive, long-term planning, the default response remains reactive: urgent pleas to the Centre for funds of thousands of crores for flood relief, symbolic helicopter surveys, and the dispatch of teams to assess the losses. Moving beyond stopgap measures, a systemic change is called for.

V. Nagarajan
Chennai

POOR STROKES

This refers to the report that Smriti takes blame for her poor shot selection. It is laudable that she has come forward to own her mistake for the collapse and choking of our team to surpass the target England set. Though she has owned for the defeat, the rest of the players cannot take shelter. It was a combined team failure. Hope they will have learnt from their mistakes.

Kavitha Mahadevan
Chennai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

Aakar Patel



What will we do with our veto if got a permanent seat at UNSC?

When was the last time you read or saw something about India and the Group of 20? And what do you recall from that memory? Like me, for many readers, the answers are most likely to be: when India was in the G-20 presidency a couple of years ago, and the posters and hoardings about India’s presidency.

If asked what outcomes were achieved in that presidency or what plans exist to follow up with what we initiated, I do not have an answer because, like you, I do not know. The G-20 thing was an opportunity for an event, and that event is over.

A few days ago, again, India went to the United Nations and asked that the institution reform itself. Formed in 1945 just after the Second World War ended and two years before Indian Independence, the UN Security Council retains the same five permanent members. When India uses the words UN reform, what we mean is that we also want a permanent seat in the Security Council, with a veto.

In the words of our external affairs minister: “The historical injustice done to Africa should be redressed. Both permanent and non-permanent membership of the Security Council must be expanded. A reformed council must be truly representative. And India stands ready to assume greater responsibilities.”

These greater responsibilities that we are

ready to assume is the subject of this piece. It is fine to have ambition, but the question is — what we want to do with it.

The BJP’s 2024 manifesto, like the one in 2019, has a line about this. It reads: “We are committed to seeking permanent membership in the UN Security Council to elevate Bharat’s position in global decision-making.”

How would this be secured? This was not elaborated on. What would India say to convince all five permanent members and two-thirds of the General Assembly that it should be given more power? What was the pathway to becoming more popular with the world? No mention of that.

Other than the idea that India was entitled to more than it had and should be given it by the world, there appears to be no direct and specific aim of this aspect of foreign policy.

Let us suppose we got this seat. What would we do with it that we cannot do today? No clarity on that either. On Gaza and Ukraine, the two most pressing global issues of our time, India’s contribution has been to abstain from crucial votes in the United Nations. Having or not having the veto would have made no difference when there is nothing one has to say to the world.

China’s rise since 1990 to superpower status has come on the back of industrial policy and economic growth, not on the basis

of its UNSC seat.

In the 2014 manifesto, the BJP said that in the foreign policy of its predecessor, the UPA, “instead of clarity, we have seen confusion” and because of an “absence of statecraft”, India “is seen to be floundering, whereas it should have been engaging with the world with confidence”.

Under Dr Manmohan Singh, the BJP said, India had “failed to establish enduring friendly and cooperative relations with India’s neighbours” and that “India and its neighbours have drifted apart”. The party would correct this and “strengthen Saarc”. The fact is that Saarc has not met since November 2014, because we do not have any interest in it. The leaders of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka have all changed since that summit meeting. India has the same person at the helm.

We cannot even bring our neighbourhood together but believe that if given more power at the UN, we can reform the world. The BJP’s manifestos tell us the party will do more to link with Asean, but we chose in 2019 not to join the free trade agreement spearheaded by Asean, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The words “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” appear in the BJP’s manifestos, but try telling the Rohingya fleeing genocide that India sees

humanity as a joint family. Try telling the Bangladeshi refugee that, or those who have been excluded from the Citizenship Amendment Act. There is no value residing in those two words and they offer nothing other than platitudes.

The question that we must then come to is this: If we do not have a pathway of getting there and if we do not know what we will do with our veto, why are we clamouring for a bigger role? The answer takes us back to where we started in this column. It gives us a forum to strut about and pretend we are the leader of the world and the leading light of the global community.

It is another place where we can pretend that we are relevant, and can display our personalised and very physical diplomacy.

The world knows this. It has observed us and has heard our words and our silences and abstentions. It does not for a moment buy the idea that any one nation “deserves” a thing more than the rest of them.

It is for this reason that it is a good thing that the government has not laid out a pathway to getting to a UN Security Council permanent seat. If it did, there would be questions for which it has no answers.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakar_patel