

INDIAN PROSPERITY

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

“What the nation needs and what can be made in India should be made within India itself...India's prosperity will draw strength from self-reliance

REDEFINING SOVEREIGNTY

IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH, LIBERTY CANNOT SURVIVE IF SPEECH IS LEFT HOSTAGE TO DIGITAL MONOPOLIES

Who owns digital speech?

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THE ALGORITHMIC INTERNET functions as a new form of structural power, one that refuses the neutrality of silence. In the absence of institutional frameworks of data sovereignty, informational vacuums are not left empty but are algorithmically populated with affect like rage, conspiracy, and despair. Such emotions generate the highest returns in the attention economy. This dynamic fundamentally alters the conditions of the public sphere. For Nepal's Gen Z, whose political awakening is mediated almost entirely through digital platforms, the question is no longer simply about the right to speak but about the architecture within which speech circulates.

When platforms that monopolise discourse are governed extra-territorially, democracy cedes control over its communicative infrastructure to actors indifferent to its stability. Free speech, in such a context, risks becoming a simulacrum—formally preserved, yet substantively distorted. The preservation of liberty in the digital age thus demands that sovereignty be re-conceptualised to include jurisdiction over data and platforms.

There are four key impacts of the monopolisation of any platforms under a country. The first impact is the destabilisation of the public sphere itself. In classical democratic theory, the public sphere is sustained by institutions that guarantee both access to information and the conditions for rational-critical debate. When those functions are ceded to transnational platforms, discourse is no longer governed by norms of truth-seeking or accountability but by metrics of engagement. This creates what Hannah Arendt warned of—the substitution of opinion for truth—where factual authority collapses and politics becomes a contest of narratives untethered from reality. In many fragile democracies, such dynamics accelerate polarisation, transforming civic dissent into spectacle rather than deliberation.

Second, the absence of data sovereignty displaces the locus of power. The state, nominally sovereign, finds itself subordinated to what Foucault might call a new dispositif of control, an assemblage of platforms, codes, and protocols that define the parameters of discourse. Here, sovereignty is exercised not through laws and constitutions, but through content moderation algorithms, opaque community guidelines, and extraterritorial corporate policies. Gen Z activists may believe themselves to be asserting agency, but their very visibility is contingent upon algorithmic amplification, one that they neither design nor govern.

Third, free speech itself risks becoming a simulacrum. Formally, individuals remain free to speak; materially, their utterances are subsumed within algorithmic hierarchies that determine what is heard and what is buried. This condition recalls Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation, where appearances of freedom conceal deeper structures of control. In many cases, viral slogans and memes circulate widely, yet their circulation often reflects platform incentives rather than democratic intentionality. What masquerades as unmediated expression is in fact deeply mediated, raising the question of whether liberty without sovereignty is liberty at all.

Finally, there are profound generational consequences. For Gen Z, political consciousness is being forged in an environment where the boundaries between

speech, surveillance, and manipulation are blurred. Their mobilisation reveals both resilience and fragility—resilience in their ability to deploy digital tools for dissent and fragility in their dependency on infrastructures that remain foreign and unaccountable. If the state fails to reclaim authority over its digital commons, it risks producing a generation of citizens whose very modes of thought and action are pre-scripted by global corporations rather than democratic institutions.

When platforms that monopolise discourse are governed extra-territorially, democracy cedes control over its communicative infrastructure

For smaller states, the assertion of digital sovereignty is constrained by structural dependencies on foreign-owned infrastructures—hyperscale cloud providers (AWS, Azure, Google Cloud), dominant social media platforms (Meta, X, TikTok), and proprietary mobile ecosystems (Apple iOS, Android). These dependencies translate into asymmetries of jurisdiction, since the data of Global South citizens is routinely processed under US or Chinese legal regimes rather than domestic law. The consequence is a form of extraterritorial governance by code—algorithmic curation, content moderation, and data monetisation practices are determined abroad, with limited recourse for affected states.

Therefore, the Global South must serve as a normative pedestal to articulate the principle that data sovereignty is integral to democratic self-determination. In multilateral forums such as the United Nation's Global Digital Compact, the World Trade Organization's Joint

Statement Initiative on E-commerce, and regional blocs like the African Union or Association of South East Asian Nations, southern states can collectively insist that informational flows be recognised as falling within the ambit of sovereignty under international law. This collective voice is vital for countering the structural power of US-based technology monopolies and for ensuring that emerging global norms do not remain the preserve of Euro-Atlantic regulators.

Yet, global advocacy alone is insufficient. Without strong national legislation, sovereignty remains rhetorical. It is at the level of domestic law that states must transform principles into enforceable rights. Countries must draft statutes that not only assert jurisdiction but also create supervisory authorities with real powers of audit, sanction, and adjudication.

Six elements are central for this exercise. First, comprehensive data protection laws that guarantee rights of access, portability, and erasure, with constitutional status must be enacted. Second, legislations must be formed for algorithmic transparency and independent audits of recommendation systems. Third, data localisation with safeguards should be mandated, ensuring critical data sets are processed domestically and subject to national jurisdiction. Fourth, due-process rights for users should be embedded, including judicially reviewable takedown and de-platforming procedures. Fifth, independent regulatory commissions empowered to levy penalties, order disclosures, and enforce compliance need to be established. Sixth, cross-border transfer rules allowing data to flow only to jurisdictions offering reciprocity and equivalent legal protections must be incorporated.

In the Global South, liberty cannot survive if speech is left hostage to digital monopolies. Digital sovereignty grounded in strong national law is the only firewall against algorithmic rule.

Views are personal

Chatbots are hurting kids. Here's what we can do

THE TRAGIC DEATH of California teenager Adam Raine, alongside stories of other children whose parents believe were harmed or died by suicide following interactions with AI chatbots, has shaken us all awake to the latest potential dangers awaiting teens online. We need concrete action to address the most problematic features of AI companions — the ones that may drive a child to self-harm, of course, but also the subtler ways these tools could profoundly affect their development.

Early data suggests that while many of us were still worrying about Snapchat and screen time, kids had already expanded their digital repertoire. In July, a survey by the nonprofit Common Sense Media found that three out of four teens had used an AI companion at least once, and half of those aged 13 to 17 were regularly turning to chatbots.

Even younger children, who under the law aren't supposed to be able to access these platforms, are managing to do so. Unpublished data presented at the Senate on Reine's passing hearing by Mitchell Prinstein, chief of psychology for the American Psychological Association, showed that one in five teens and nearly one in 10 eight- and nine-year-olds had used the technology. Those numbers are part of a broader analysis led by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill psychologist Anne Maheux, who collaborated with the parental monitoring app company Aura to explore de-identified user data from nearly 6,500 children, with consent of their parents or guardians.

Shortly before the Senate hearing began, OpenAI announced it would roll out a new teen version of ChatGPT featuring what it described as "age-appropriate policies," noting these would include "blocking graphic sexual content and, in rare cases of acute distress, potentially involving law enforcement to ensure safety."

But those restrictions are unlikely to mitigate the other potential harms of chatbots that experts on children and technology worry about — harms that might not become obvious until years later. One of the key developmental tasks for adolescents is learning social skills, and by nature, this process is awkward and challenging. Surely all of us can conjure a cringe-inducing memory from our middle school years. Yet we all need to learn fundamental skills like how to resolve a conflict with a friend or navigate complicated social situations.

Child development experts worry that AI companions could disrupt that process by offering an illusion of breezy relationships to a uniquely vulnerable group. Chatbots are designed to simulate empathy, be overly agreeable, and function as sycophants (OpenAI said last spring that it was working to address ChatGPT's tendency to "love bomb" users.) In other words, they make the perfect friend in adolescence, when children are hungry for validation and connection.

To reduce risks, companies should be required to put guardrails on the features that are most enticing to developing brains. That means eliminating the most emotionally manipulative tactics like "love bombing" or speech affectations (such as "ums" or "likes") that make them seem more "real" to kids. As Prinstein told lawmakers, kids need periodic reminders during the interactions that, "you're not talking to someone that can feel, that can have tears — this is not even a human."

Still, any guardrails may already come too late, leaving parents as the main line of defence against potential harm. Parents' first step should be to talk to their teens about whether they are using these companions and, with younger children, consider testing them out together. The goal is to show kids how different responses to the same prompt might lead them down different conversational paths — and how chatbots always mirror what the user puts in, according to University of Washington psychologist Lucia Magis-Weinberg.

Parents — and society at large — should also reflect deeply on why AI companions are so appealing to young people. Teens often say they turn to chatbots because they're afraid of being judged. Clearly, we all need to do a better job of offering a space where they feel free to share and connect in the real world.



LISA JARVIS

Bloomberg



RAHUL RENAVIKAR

Managing director, Acuris Advisors Pvt. Ltd

THE GOODS AND services tax (GST) 2.0 roll-out is scheduled for September 22. One of the most contentious issues has been the proposal to discontinue the compensation cess, especially for the automobile sector. Before we dwell into the issue, let us step back as to how this compensation cess was arrived upon.

During the initial days of discussion in the GST Council, owing to larger public spends by the states and municipal corporations, the states were demanding a larger share in the GST proceeds. This was finally settled with equal distribution among the Centre and the states. Then finance minister Arun Jaitley proposed to compensate the states for the revenue losses for the first five years post-implementation, assuming the revenue growth rate to be 14%. This rate was fixed irrespective of the performance of the economy and hence was regressive in nature, ab initio. None of the states' tax revenue was growing at that rate and hence, none of them objected to this arrangement, abandoning their demand for a higher share in the GST revenue. The compensation cess thus turned out to be an olive branch for the states to come on board to implement the GST. The initial period for levying the compensation cess was five years,

or till 2022. It was exclusively levied to generate funds for compensating the states. However, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, state finances took a big hit and loans were arranged to make up for the lost revenue. As a special case, the levy of compensation cess was extended by three years, till 2025, to help the states repay loans.

In hindsight, had the GST Council agreed to share the GST revenue in a ratio of, say, 60:40 in favour of the states, the issue of compensation cess wouldn't have arisen at all. States would have got a steady source of higher income that they deserved. With GST being a destination-based consumption tax, and no independent source of income for the goods and services consumed available for the municipal corporations (with the abolition of octroi/local body tax), a larger share for states in the GST revenue ought to have been the design in the first place. Also, it was well-known that this cess was temporary. It could have been levied at the last point of sale, that is when the vehicles are sold to the final customers by the dealerships. That

way, there would have been no accumulation of compensation cess credit, as is the case today. Levying it at every stage of value addition by following the value added tax principles was the natural way of dealing with it then. However, the inconvenience it has caused has clearly outweighed the benefits. This and many such decisions taken earlier made Indian GST flawed.

Be that as it may, the compensation cess was levied on certain goods (thankfully, services were left out!) which were termed sin or demerit goods, and also including luxury goods such as large cars and sports utility vehicles. One man's necessity could be other man's luxury and vice-versa. According to estimates, around six lakh vehicles which have been subjected to the levy of compensation cess are in dealers' stocks. These involve the compensation cess already paid and lying on the dealers' credit, to the tune of ₹2,500 crore. Assuming an average of ₹15,000 as dealer commission on the vehicles in stock, the potential revenue for the dealers works out to ₹900 crore. How could they incur the

expense of ₹2,500 crore on a commission of ₹900 crore? Also, the GST rate has been increased from 28% to 40% on such vehicles starting September 22. Hence, the differential GST of 12% needs to be paid on every vehicle sold on or after this date. If the credit balance in the compensation cess ledger is not available for the dealers to adjust this incremental GST levy, then it will be a double whammy for them—they will have to arrange for GST payment in their electronic cash ledger maintained by the GST Network to comply with the provisions. GST 2.0 might turn out to be a nightmare for the auto industry rather than being a bonanza.

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On the face of it, the compensation cess does appear to be different from the GST. However, it follows the same principles and is levied on the same taxable value. It had been separately carved out for a purpose, which it has served. Clearly, the compensation cess on the vehicles in stock needs to be subsumed into the integrated GST, or into the central GST if the refund route is unviable for the government. This will provide much-required relief and will turn out to be a win-win situation for the auto industry and the government. This will also lead to an amicable settlement.

Views are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Collaborative progress

Apropos of "Time to give back" (FE, September 20), despite the volatility prevailing in the global trade scenario and hectic tariffs, the Centre took the bold initiative of rationalising the goods and services tax rates domestically to spur consumer demand. The considerable rise in capex allocation for the past three years proves the government's heavy lifting towards ensuring the pace of

expenditure in various key sectors of the economy. Data tell us that capex spending by the private sector is neither progressive nor consistent with liberal rate cuts and sops offered to them by the Centre. To keep the wheels of the economy turning, a constant flow of investment towards capital expenditure is essential, which the Centre alone cannot do. It is time for the private sector to pay back and chip in towards revitalising growth. —Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

H-1B shock: Whose loss is it?

The US decision to impose a \$100,000 fee on new H-1B visa applications, predominantly affecting Indian professionals who constitute around 70–75% of holders, has triggered significant disruption. This has not only escalated costs for Indian information technology firms and stranded many skilled workers but also exposed India's heavy reliance on

US visa channels as a key talent pipeline. At the same time, this challenge is sparking what experts call a "reverse innovation wave", where India's tech hubs are poised to absorb the redirected talent and accelerate innovation, R&D, and start-ups. This shift could mark a pivotal moment in the tech landscape, recalibrating the balance of innovation leadership. —Amarjeet Kumar, Hazaribagh

●Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com







# AI, branding will need a human connection

CHAITANYA K. PRASAD

As we approach the last quarter of 2025, there is a need felt to map some of the transformative touch points that have influenced the journey of change and transformation in the last three quarters. This year has not just been about the rapid rise of new technologies, but also about how these technologies are reshaping social, cultural, and economic ecosystems.

The branding industry, in particular, stands at the crossroads of disruption and reinvention. 2025 has witnessed the impact of the “Disruptive Change” across Critical Institutions, Stakeholders, Policies, Processes and Outreach. In reality today, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become the “Cutting Edge for Transformation, Innovation, Creativity within the global, regional and national architecture”. The impact of AI is deep and diverse. As a phenomenon it has impacted the concept of ideation, management and dissemination, created curiosity for investors and investment and has positioned data management, data analytics the algorithm syndrome and the accompanying blitzkrieg at the nerve center of policy and decision making.

Machine Learning has become the mantra and tool for success. Branding dynamics and experience have undergone 360° changes. A new language of interface, interaction and exchange has developed between personalized driven chat boxes and consumers. Immersive brand experience has become the new tool of the understanding, visualization, knowledge and perception framework. AI as a process and facilitator has

created a niche for consumer understanding and preferences. The response is instant, proactive; we may call it the “AI induced instant noodle phenomenon”. AI has enhanced the scope of decision-making tools by introducing diverse language models. This has led strategists to debate as to whether a new form of “Connect and interconnect” is appearing in the ecosystem of Campaigns, Creativity, Customers and Audiences Segmentation.

In 2025, conversational AI has revolutionized how brands communicate with their audiences. These aren't soulless, pre-programmed interactions; today's AI-powered conversational tools are nuanced and context-aware. They respond to emotional cues, adapting their tone and recommendations in real time. This evolution has transformed what were once transactional interactions into rich, personalised dialogues.

Voice AI takes this a step further, adding a sensory layer to brand interactions. Experts predict that AI-generated voices will soon be able to adjust dynamically, sounding more empathetic during stressful moments or more energizing during morning interactions. These advancements create opportunities for brands to develop consistent yet adaptable voices, capable of fostering deeper emotional connections with consumers.

While no one denies the push factor of AI within the branding arena, the question being raised is whether brand profile, management and imaging have become fragile and over-dependent on tools? Are AI chat bots spoiling human ingenuity,

creativity and thinking? Will over-focused and tech driven branding lead to more revenues, advertising push and genuine thought driven creativity? The challenge in the days to come will be whether we need to redefine the contours wherein we see better AI and human insightful collaboration. Branding as a process still requires a “Sixth Sense” to feel and perceive, which no computational algorithm can replace.

Despite AI's prowess in data processing, there are some things it simply cannot replicate. Emotional nuance and cultural intuition, hallmarks of great storytelling, remain deeply human qualities. Branding thrives on narratives that resonate with audiences on a visceral level, and while AI can assist in generating content, it cannot fully grasp the subtleties of humour, nostalgia, or cultural symbolism. This is where human ingenuity will continue to shine. Brands that succeed in this era of AI-driven efficiency will be those that foster symbiotic partnerships between machine intelligence and human creativity. Think of branding as a layered cake: AI may handle the foundational sponge, data, logistics, and personalization, but it's human creativity that adds the vibrant frosting and carefully places the cherry on top. The challenge will be in deciding whether to prioritise the cherry or the cream, or balance both elements harmoniously.

According to the EY Reimagine and Reinvent Report, AI is driving significant transformation in industries like media and entertainment (M&E), reshaping content creation, distribution, and audience engagement. Companies are using AI to forecast consumption



trends, optimize production, and deliver personalized experiences across platforms, embedding branding into every step of the customer journey. The report stresses that while AI offers vast opportunities, success will depend on balancing innovation with ethical practices addressing data privacy, algorithmic bias, and transparency to maintain consumer trust. True leaders will strategically leverage AI to enhance their core values, ensuring branding remains both innovative and emotionally compelling.

Ultimately, the future of branding isn't about dazzling consumers with flashy tech. It's about using technology to enhance what truly matters: human connection. AI offers unparalleled opportunities for personalization and efficiency, but it's up to businesses to wield these tools with integrity and purpose. Brands that rise to this challenge will be those that stay curious, creative, and, above all, authentic.

In a world saturated with noise, the brands that stand out will be the ones telling stories worth remembering, stories that reflect not only technological innovation but also the timeless art of human connection.

And if the last year is any indicator, the strongest brands will not simply embrace AI as a tool, but use it as a bridge to amplify empathy, deepen trust, and bring humanity back into focus, even amidst rapid technological disruption. The lesson for leaders is clear: machines may set the rhythm, but it is human imagination that writes the melody. Only when the two perform in harmony will branding achieve its highest purpose, building communities, shaping cultures, and leaving behind stories that endure long after the algorithms change.

(The writer is a former civil servant who writes on cinema and strategic communication. Inputs were provided by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavie Srinivasan. Views are personal.)

## 100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman on 22 September, 1925

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

The scope given to the inquiry into the mines at Home promises an investigation of real value, but one that can scarcely be adequately made in the time at disposal. It ranges from the nationalisation of mines to such matters as diseases and housing. At a first glance indeed it would seem to cover most of the social problems that affect industry in its every branch. There is little hope, considering the temper of the miners, that the Committee will be able to produce either an unanimous report or one that will be generally accepted. The most promising field of investigation is probably that of the utilization of coal in some form other than the crude burning of the mined product. Yet it is in regard to the value of such a change that the miners will be most difficult to convince for them the economical use of coal has always appeared as the prelude to wide unemployment in the industry.

## News Items

### AUSTRALIA'S TEST ELECTION Mr. Bruce On Choice Of Government

Melbourne, Sept.

The Australian Premier, Mr. S. M. Bruce in the course of a statement on the present elections, declares that they will rank high in the history of Australia, as they involve the most far-reaching issues ever submitted to the country. Australia will be called upon to decide whether it should be governed by parliament or by irresponsible extremists. The Commonwealth electoral Officer predicts that 90 per cent of the people will go to the poll in consequence of the enactment on compulsory voting, and says that every effort is being made to confine the strike to the narrow limits in view of the elections, in order to allow the Unions to concentrate on the political fight. Meanwhile, though shipowners have announced their readiness to confer with the seamen's representatives, as suggested by Mr. Charlton, the Labour leader, the Executive of the striking seamen has rejected Mr. Charlton's proposal, and refuses to negotiate until all the imprisoned men are released.—Reuter.

### COMMUNIST OFFENSIVE Object of the Seamen's Strike

London, Sept.

Mr. F. C. Allen, Chairman of the Shipping Federation, in a long statement declares that the “so-called seamen's strike is really a reconnaissance in force in connexion with the general Communist offensive by direct action against the existing order of society.” He emphasizes that no protest against the agreement for the wages reduction of July 3, was made until August 12, and asserts that the leaders of agitation are nearly all avowed Communists, very few being seamen. Their principal weapon is terrorism, and he exhorts the Government of Britain and the Dominions to take measures to enable men to carry out their lawful avocations under agreed conditions.—Reuter.

### SIR RONALD MACLEAY Minister to China leaves London

London, Sept.

Sir Ronald Macleay, British Minister to China, with Lady Macleay, the Hon. Sydney Peel and Mr. B. C. Newton, British delegation to China and Mr. H. Morris, the owner of the Derby winner Manna left Southampton on board the Canadian Pacific liner “Empress of Scotland,” which arrived from Hamburg last night. The steamer was in no way delayed by the seamen's strike, and sailed to schedule time.—Reuter.

### MR. SAKLATVALA Protest Against U. S. Ban

London, Sept.

Addressing a crowded meeting at Battersea Town Hall, Mr. Saklatvala protested against the United States ban on his visit, and declared that he adhered to every word that he had spoken. —Reuter.

## IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

# Devilish dilemma, deific delivery



It takes genius,” said GK Chesterton, an author I greatly admire and ferociously disagree with, “to see the obvious.” If the truth of that is not obvious to you, try listening in utter silence to your most unpleasant colleague or least reasonable neighbour for fifteen minutes. It will do as well if you listen for double the period to your most intemperate daughter.

I am trying to see what obvious truths I have missed now that I am in the unprecedented situation of being in the advanced stage of an unrelenting affliction, cancer. Anybody grunting through an implacable disease will sometimes find, thanks to modern medicine, a sudden oasis of relief, a day or two when one is in relative peace or comfort. That oasis, I am beginning to find as I cope with carcinoma, represents a devilish dilemma. That day or two of relief is often so unexpected and feels so wonderful that I feel I can write again, edit again, and finally get to read the pile of books I have gathered on my desk.

At the same time, that day or two of remission feels so rare and precious a gift, I feel like doing nothing, just sitting in the morning sun, sipping a cup of tea and breathing the fresh air wafting across the porch. The time seems so placid, so esoteric that it feels

like I waste my time if I do anything other than breathe peacefully and look joyfully at the quiet, bright, beautiful world around me.

That is the devilish dilemma of an earnest person who wants to do and deliver and also to live and be joyous: a man who wants both to achieve or to enjoy.

My life is full of surprises. The first session of chemotherapy – practically the first step in my steady submergence in an oceanic treatment field – began peacefully but tail-ended in an aftermath of abstinence: I didn't feel like eating or drinking anything, but simply slept fitfully. If that was a surprise, Jane, my wife, sprang a larger one.

She suggested that, at the conclusion of my second session of chemotherapy, I should move to her home where she could keep an eye on me. Jane lives in a large, magnificent house on Daniel Island, a charming part of Charleston. The last time we lived in the same home was more than twenty years ago.

I like quiet and I love the quiet charm of the room she has chosen for me. It spills into the living room with a sprawling sofa and walks into a bright porch with a view of the lawn and several palms. I read the news there and wait for Jane to bring eggs-and-toast

with a large mug of Indian style sweet tea. She is the perfect hostess and most gracious spouse.

Jane lets me keep my own hours. When I wake, I amble to the porch, invariably to find Jane already there, sipping her coffee and working on her laptop. She gets me tea and some fruits as I start scanning the headlines on my iPhone. I love the large screened porch, the cool morning breeze coming through the screen and touching my sheared head as I ponder the latest horrors in Gaza and Kyiv. Jane wonders if I need another cup of tea: as I nod, she gets up to provide and a sudden but gentle brush of morning rain brushes my head.

I am comfortable, very comfortable on Daniel Island, in a cozy room with two large windows and a sizable bed, at a reasonable distance from the road where I can barely hear passing cars. Jane checks on me, has a cup of brew ready before I can ask for it, makes sure the temperature is one that agrees with me.

These are the three to five good days that intervene between the relatively dark days of the chemotherapy and its stark aftermath and the onset of the next session. This is the phase of the devilish dilemma when I am tossed between the resolution to



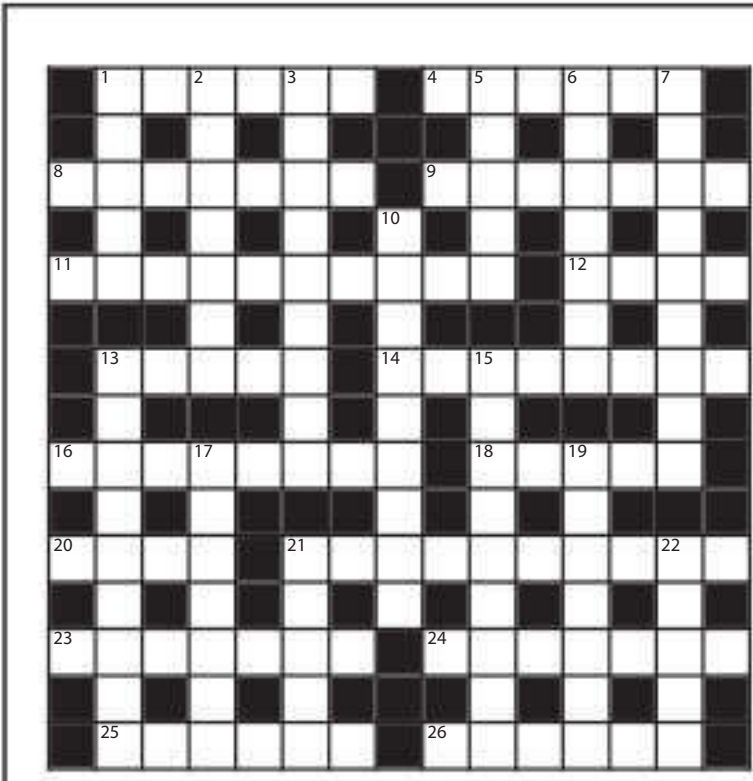
do something worthwhile, to study, to make notes or answer calls, to write – or to just rest and relax and savour the beauty of the day.

This afternoon I submit without a thought to the gentle persuasion of my ravaged body and drift into a quiet siesta. Then there is a quiet, gentle hand on my brow. I try to sit up. “No, Daddy, you rest,” says Lina, “I just came from the airport. I'll be here for a week, working online. I wanted to spend some time with you.”

My heart pounds. There is no dilemma. I don't have to choose between work and rest, writing and sleeping. My beloved daughter has crossed the country to be near me. The dusk is expending its last light through the shaded window, but the light is bright in my heart. My lovely, loving daughter is with me. It is a deific delivery.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mnandy@gmail.com)

## Crossword | No. 293242



### Last Saturday's Solution



#### ACROSS

- 1 Government-funded body gives Dame Mary reduced work (6)
- 4 Centrally heated room mostly being used for procreation (2,4)
- 8 The bloke's right-wing past (7)
- 9 Killer stalks Frenchman in Spanish location (7)
- 11 Yankee separates two poets with identical cuts in brawl (10)

#### DOWN

- 12 Top bishop has defrocked (4)
- 13 Stroke stomach before beginning on legs (5)
- 14 One of Elgar's variations incorporated into finale and added to (8)
- 16 Holy man bores posh couples on the next floor (8)
- 18 Bread making instruments (5)
- 20 Type of music club (4)
- 21 Dotty made love in Doha ending early phase of chastity (10)

#### DOWN

- 23 Lively old air, inspiring finale of Beethoven's ninth? (7)
- 24 Ruddy German after making U-turn tailgates German car, I hear (7)
- 25 Government, say, obstructs the return of Arab ruler (6)
- 26 Revolutionary part of Ptolemaic astronomy (6)
- 1 Split leftover capital (5)

#### ACROSS

- 2 Anoint a Byzantine lady (7)
- 3 Serviceman captures a foul-mouthed nationalist (9)
- 5 Slender king's figure (5)
- 6 Old stager is a cavalryman? Sounds like it (7)
- 7 Dicky perished after overwhelming century breaks (9)
- 10 Wife's so nimble during dance movement (6,3)

#### DOWN

- 13 A saucer, perhaps from Ganymede? (9)
- 15 America supports strike on Prince Edward Island (9)
- 17 Giving a name to bird and fish (7)
- 19 One lacking belief is given dabs of accessories to armed robbery (7)
- 21 Singular lame gags after raising a stink (5)
- 22 Architectural feature in Kosovo location (5)

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







Editor's  
TAKE

## US visa blow to Indian IT

The steep hike in H-1B visa fees by the US has come as a jolt for Indian techies. It is time to look beyond the US and strengthen ourselves through self-reliance

After the tariff shock comes the visa jolt. As Trump tariffs disrupted Indian industry, the Trump visa fee hike will have a negative impact on India's thriving IT industry, which relies heavily on servicing US firms. The message is clear – though Trump has good friendly relations with Prime Minister Modi, he is no friend of India. He is deliberately trying to destabilise the Indian economy, one step at a time, to push India into a subservient position where it would be able to dictate terms.

President Donald Trump's decision to hike H-1B visa fees to an unprecedented \$100,000 has sent shockwaves through India's technology sector. For decades, the H-1B programme has been a lifeline for Indian IT professionals, enabling them to work in the United States, contribute to global innovation, and remit hard earned dollars back home. But with this steep barrier, the very foundation of India's IT services model – built on skilled manpower exports – faces a direct blow. The impact is not limited to individuals. Companies like Infosys, TCS, Wipro, and HCL, which rely heavily on sending Indian engineers to service global clients, will find it unsustainable. Many young professionals harbouring American dream will see doors closing abruptly. For the US, the move may serve political rhetoric around protecting domestic jobs, but the reality is that American tech giants themselves depend on Indian talent.

This moment of disruption coincides with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's renewed pitch for 'Atmanirbharta' (self-reliance). Speaking in Gujarat, Modi declared that India's biggest enemy is its dependence on other nations. His words – "whether it's chips or ships, we must make them in India" – carry deeper meaning in light of Trump's decision. The H-1B visa hike has exposed India's vulnerability. When the policies of another country can alter the life trajectories of lakhs of Indians and the fortunes of billion-dollar firms overnight, it is a signal that course correction is overdue.

A way forward lies in bold, multi-pronged action. First, India must strengthen its domestic technology ecosystem so that world-class jobs are created within its borders, reducing the lure of foreign postings. Indian IT firms must shift their business model from labour export to intellectual property creation – building products, platforms, and services that the world consumes. Deeper ties with alternative markets – Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa – can diversify risks and reduce over-dependence on the US. For Indian professionals, this setback should also be reframed as an opportunity. Instead of chasing distant dreams, the next frontier of innovation may be built in Bengaluru, Hyderabad, or Pune. If India invests in infrastructure, education, and entrepreneurship, it can become not just the world's back office, but its innovation hub. The challenge now is to transform this adversity into a springboard for India's next growth chapter.

## GST 2.0: Strengthening India's economy

The most significant impact of this reform will be an increase in consumer demand. With lower GST rates, prices of essential and everyday consumer goods will fall, thereby enhancing purchasing power and accelerating real domestic demand



TRIVENDRA  
SINGH RAWAT

On the occasion of Independence Day, 15 August 2025, the Prime Minister, while addressing the nation from the ramparts of the historic Red Fort, announced the proposed economic reforms under GST 2.0.

This proclamation made by the Prime Minister was well received by the GST Council, which, in its 56th meeting held on 3 September, approved the GST Reforms Bill (GST 2.0). It includes a reduction in GST tax slabs from 5, 12, 18, and 28 per cent to 5 per cent and 18 per cent, thereby reducing the existing four slabs to two, which will be effective from September 22.

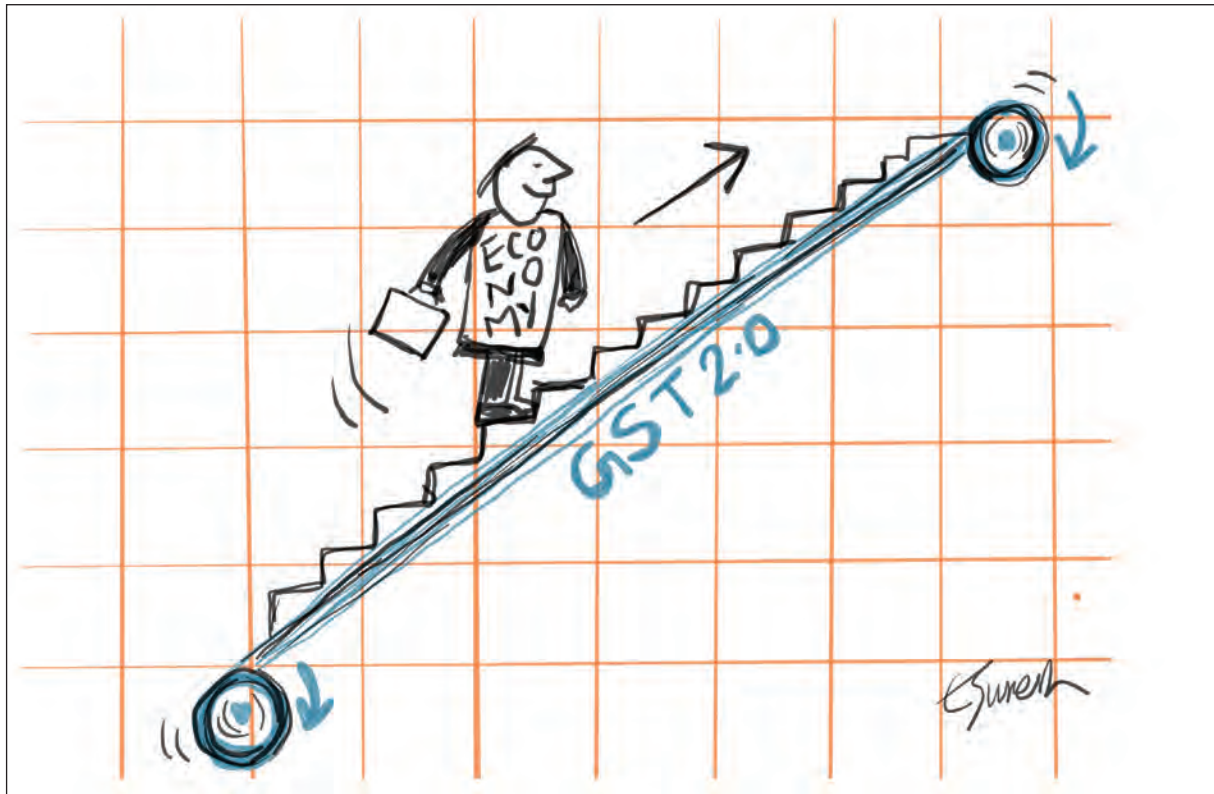
It also includes numerous simplifications of the tax structure. In this regard, the Ministry of Finance has introduced a two-slab structure (standard and merged) in place of the current five-slab system of 0 per cent, 5 per cent, 12 per cent, 18 per cent, and 28 per cent, with only a few selected goods being kept under special rates. It is estimated that about 20 per cent of items currently under the 12 per cent slab, such as packaged food, beverages, textiles, hotel services, and others, have been shifted to either the 5 per cent or 18 per cent slabs.

This could result in a short-term revenue loss, but it is expected to stimulate domestic industries and potentially boost the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country by 0.6-0.7 per cent. The new GST slabs can stimulate consumption, investment, employment, and provide a much-needed push towards faster economic growth. This will also help to balance affordability, growth, and revenue, and will prove to be a pro-growth tax structure for the nation in the long run.

The most significant impact of this reform will be an increase in consumer demand. With lower GST rates, prices of essential and everyday consumer goods will fall, thereby enhancing purchasing power and accelerating real domestic demand.

The special tax cuts will particularly affect kitchen and non-durable goods, which will provide a boost to the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) sector. The two-slab model, revised input tax credit, and a less-disputed framework will likely improve ease of doing business and cash flow for MSMEs and other enterprises.

These comprehensive reforms will reduce business costs and enhance the global competitiveness of Indian goods, thus benefiting the export sector in particular. Simplification of the tax structure, exceptional technologi-



### The Pioneer SINCE 1865

THE SPECIAL TAX CUTS WILL PARTICULARLY AFFECT KITCHEN AND NON-DURABLE GOODS, WHICH WILL PROVIDE A BOOST TO THE MICRO, SMALL, AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (MSME) SECTOR

The author is a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Haridwar and former chief minister of Uttarakhand

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cal automatic refunds, and stability will create increased investment opportunities. These reforms will aid India's progress towards becoming a global manufacturing hub.

The Indian economy has been moving forward strongly due to continuous economic reforms undertaken by the Narendra Modi government. Recently released data from the National Statistics Office show that the Consumer Price Index-based retail inflation rate is at its lowest level in the past eight years, mainly due to declining food prices. Additionally, favourable monsoon conditions and good sowing of the Kharif crop signal further stability.

On 14 August, S&P (Standard and Poor's) Global Ratings upgraded India to the BBB investment-grade category after 18 years – the last upgrade was in 2007.

This clearly indicates that investing in India's economy is currently safe, as monetary policy is investment-friendly and attracting investors.

The BBB rating means India is capable of meeting its debt and financial obligations, but financial pressures and policy challenges remain. BBB indicates economic and political stability, though external shocks such as global recession, volatile oil prices, or current account deficit could have an impact. Higher ratings such as A or AA are

considered more reliable. International investors and fund managers interpret the BBB rating as a signal that India is investable but with somewhat higher risks.

A higher rating improves prospects for foreign investment and cheaper credit, while a downgrade to the "junk" category weakens investor confidence. For comparison, China holds an A+ rating, which falls into the upper tier of the A-grade and reflects a more reliable and stable economy compared to India. The United States is rated AA+, representing one of the most stable and trust-worthy economies globally. Pakistan, on the other hand, has a B- rating, which is considered "speculative grade" or "junk," indicating potential repayment difficulties and high risk for investors.

The lowest rating, "D," signifies that a country has defaulted on its financial obligations and has stopped servicing most of its debt. The decision of the GST Council to discontinue the 12 per cent and 28 per cent rates and reduce the tax rate of more than 500 goods, following the Prime Minister's call from the Red Fort to reduce GST rates, will boost demand for consumer goods in the domestic market, thereby accelerating industrial growth. In particular, this will aid the expansion of micro, small, and medium enterprises and also serve as an important factor in employment generation.

### PIC TALK



An elderly man and his grandson pick lotus flowers, used during the Durga Puja, ahead of the festival, in West Bengal.

PHOTO: PTI

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## Chalk, dedication, and the weight of favouritism



SAKSHI  
SETHI

### THE PIONEER 2ND OPINION

In the corridors of education, where chalk dust mingles with dreams and every lesson carries the potential to shape a future, one expects merit, dedication, and integrity to reign supreme. Yet behind the closed doors of staffrooms, another force quietly thrives – school politics. Subtle but corrosive, it undermines the careers of even the most hardworking teachers and chips away at the dignity of the profession.

For many educators, the classroom is sacred ground. They pour countless hours into preparing lessons, designing assignments, and nurturing children to discover their potential. The joy of watching a hesitant learner grow into a confident achiever is what fuels their perseverance. But too often, their devotion remains unnoticed when promotions, recognition, or responsibilities are dictated not

by merit but by alliances, favouritism, and shifting networks. In such an environment, hard work becomes a silent struggle rather than a celebrated virtue. The damage caused by politics in schools is rarely explosive, but its effects are relentless. A teacher who dares to innovate may find her methods dismissed – not because they fail students, but because they disrupt the comfort of those unwilling to change.

A colleague who labours tirelessly for student competitions may see someone better connected walk away with the credit. Gossip and whispered rivalries seep through staffrooms like ink on blotting paper, corroding reputations that took years to build. These battles are not fought openly but through quiet exclusions and subtle manoeuvres that slowly wear teachers down.

The tragedy deepens when we realise that the consequences extend far beyond individuals. Every time a dedicated teacher is sidelined, demoralised, or forced to leave, students lose a mentor who might have transformed their lives. A classroom suffers when the teacher standing at the front carries not only lesson plans but also the weight of political manoeuvrings.

Innovation is stifled, mediocrity takes root, and schools – meant to symbolise fairness and learning – turn into arenas of petty power struggles. Many stories circulate of educators who entered teaching brimming with zeal and vision, eager to introduce creative practices, only to dis-

cover that their enthusiasm unsettled the system. Some dim their brilliance just to "fit in," while others grow weary and walk away. Both outcomes represent a profound loss – not just for the teachers themselves but for generations of students who could have thrived under their guidance.

Favouritism is often at the heart of this culture, where personal loyalty outweighs qualifications and competence. Senior roles are handed to those who curry favour, not those who earn respect.

The result is resentment, division, and suspicion. Instead of being united by the mission of education, teachers find themselves split into camps, focused more on survival than on teaching.

The noble purpose of education is eclipsed by small rivalries, and the cost of this dysfunction is immense. If schools are to reclaim the dignity of teaching, they must embrace fairness and transparency.

Merit must matter more than connections; collaboration must replace cliques. Such reforms demand courage, but the alternative is grim – a system where those entrusted with shaping young minds are themselves stifled. At its core lies a simple truth: when politics thrives in schools, it is not only teachers' careers that are damaged but the very future of education that is put at risk.

The writer is an educator and a councillor

## ELECTION COMMISSION MUST UPHOLD NEUTRALITY

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has, regrettably, been in the news for all the wrong reasons. It now has no alternative but to acknowledge its failures, correct its course, and restore public confidence in its ability to manage the electoral process with unimpeachable integrity.

The ECI cannot avoid answering why it refused to share crucial information relating to the attempted fraud in Karnataka's Aland constituency – particularly details concerning "destination IP and destination port" – when such data were essential to facilitate the CID probe.

If the Commission was genuinely disinterested, it should have had no hesitation in parting with these details. To appear to side with or aid any political formation in undermining the

electoral process is the worst blow an institution of its stature could deliver.

The Commission must maintain constant vigilance against tampering of electoral rolls through fraudulent additions or deletions. It must remain above the competitive politics played by parties and leave no room for doubts about its neutrality.

Equally, personal attacks on Rahul Gandhi – or indeed any leader – cannot invalidate the substantive issues raised to safeguard democratic rights.

The ECI must ensure that democracy does not become the casualty of power struggles. It is time for the people to remind the ECI of its constitutional duty to preserve a fair and just electoral system.

G DAVID MILTON | MARUTHANCODE

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

### America risks innovation decline

The Trump administration's decision to impose a staggering annual fee of \$100,000 per H-1B petition has caused deep concern in the global technology and services sector. Although promoted as a way to "protect American jobs" and generate revenue, the measure disproportionately affects Indian professionals, who constitute more than seventy per cent of H-1B beneficiaries. In the short term, both Indian IT firms and US technology giants will face difficulties, with many likely to freeze recruitment, relocate jobs overseas, or transfer costs to consumers. Thousands of Indian engineers working in Silicon Valley could see their career opportunities suddenly curtailed.

Over the long run, however, this move could prove damaging to the US itself. High-skilled immigrants have historically formed the backbone of America's innovation. Studies show nearly half of US unicorn start-ups have at least one immigrant founder. By pricing out foreign talent, Washington risks weakening its own technological leadership and inadvertently bolstering innovation ecosystems in India, Canada, and Europe. The United States was built by immigrants. Curbing talent inflows through punitive fees may undermine the very edge that has kept America globally competitive.

GOPALASWAMY J | CHENNAI

### Lessons from Gen-Z protests

The editorial "Gen Z Revolutions: Outburst or Change?" (The Pioneer, September 20, 2025) fairly analysed the psychology behind youth protests in South Asia. It rightly observed that India's socio-political conditions are different from those of neighbouring countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan, barring a few similarities. Our democracy, though tested during the Internal Emergency, has remained resilient. I recall Indira Gandhi often warning of a "foreign hand." Though dismissed at the time as a political cliché, her concerns now appear less baseless when seen in retrospect. She may indeed have had intelligence inputs about extra-constitutional attempts to destabilise the republic.

In India, however, a pan-national youth uprising remains improbable due to our cultural diversity, linguistic multiplicity, vast geography, robust economy, reliable Defence Forces, and effective law and order machinery.

As the editorial pointed out, India sustains a resilient democracy, regular elections, and strong Constitutional institutions. These inspire confidence across society, including among the youth. Some demagogues attempt to sow distrust for political gain, but Indian youth remain politically wise.

BICHU MUTTATHARA | PUNE

### Power shifts in technology

Two decades ago, in 2005, Intel, then the titan of chips in Silicon Valley, had contemplated acquiring a fledgling startup—NVIDIA. That deal never materialised, but history's irony is striking: the once-toddler company NVIDIA now possesses the financial and technological strength to overshadow Intel, which had once been its predator.

The scope of technology to transcend imagination is evident in today's news that NVIDIA is taking a \$5 billion stake in a troubled Intel. This transaction is more than a market move; it is a parable demonstrating that power and status are ephemeral.

This inversion is not unique to semiconductors. In aviation, Boeing once dwarfed Airbus, only to face fierce competition and some dependence on the European consortium. In finance, banks that had previously bailed out struggling hedge funds later needed capital from those very funds to survive. In geopolitics, empires that had commanded colonies now rely on them for markets, manpower, or innovation.

No dominance is permanent in domains where innovation, capital, and timing intersect. Disruption spares no hierarchy, and hubris is often destined to be humbled over time.

R NARAYANAN | MUMBAI



# The fetish of growth and the mirage of development

What we parade as growth is, in truth, liquidation. Like a company selling its last assets to dress up quarterly profits, we are liquidating the only deep asset we possess: the planet. Forests, aquifers, soil, and biodiversity: all depleted, none accounted for. Balance sheets never record what is lost; they only record the illusion of gain



ACHARYA PRASHANT

Each time GDP numbers are announced, the country is asked to cheer. News anchors beam, markets rise, and the political class proclaims that the nation is advancing. Growth has been turned into a secular god: the symbol of collective hope, the proof that tomorrow will be better than today.

Yet beyond the statistics lies a harsher truth. The air has grown poisonous, rivers undrinkable, and inequality unbearable. The pyramid of wealth has not only risen but sharpened, its peak gleaming while its base sinks deeper into deprivation. Since liberalisation, India's GDP has expanded, but so has inequality, to the point that the country is now more unequal than in the early decades after Independence. Growth has become something of a pyramid scheme: dazzling for a few, hollow for the many.

**The idol of GDP**

GDP alone cannot be a measure of development. It is an aggregate of 150 crore lives, and as an aggregate, it disguises more than it discloses. At subsistence levels, income growth does improve welfare: food, medicine, and education matter. But beyond a modest threshold, the curve flattens. A tenth car or third villa adds little to well-being. What it does add is an enormous ecological burden that the poor, not the rich, are forced to bear.

The disparity is global. The top 1 per cent emit nearly a quarter of all greenhouse gases. The top 10 per cent contribute more than half. The bottom 50 per cent, billions of people, contribute barely 6-7 per cent. Yet it is this half that suffers the most: from failed monsoons, withering crops, and heatwaves that kill in the fields. When we clap for GDP gains, we are often applauding the consumption of the few and the suffering of the many.

**Borrowed images of prosperity**


Say the word "development," and an image flashes instantly: the American lifestyle. Endless highways, soaring skyscrapers, over-flowing malls, multiplying cars. But this dream is sustained not by imagination but by arithmetic, and the arithmetic is ruthless.

The Earth can allow no more than eight to ten tonnes of material use per person per



GDP ALONE CANNOT BE A MEASURE OF DEVELOPMENT. IT IS AN AGGREGATE OF 150 CRORE LIVES, AND AS AN AGGREGATE, IT DISGUISES MORE THAN IT DISCLOSES

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year. The average American consumes three to four times that. To remain within 1.5°C of warming, annual per-capita carbon emissions must stay below 2.1 tonnes. The United States emits nearly 14. Now multiply that excess by India's 1.4 billion. What appears as ambition is actually delusion. To aspire to copy America is to condemn both India and the planet. Yet this mirage continues to shape our aspirations, drilled into us by advertising, policy, and culture alike.

**The price of copying**

This is why trade quarrels over tariffs, particularly cars, are not mere commercial disputes. Each automobile imported carries more than steel and rubber. It imports a philosophy: that a person is incomplete without purchase, that life acquires meaning through horsepower, that consumption alone can fill the void within. The sale is not just of a machine, but of a mythology.

And so the cycle repeats. Phones are designed to feel obsolete within three years, cars within five. Waste is marketed as progress, obsolescence as innovation. GDP swells; the biosphere shrinks. It

is the economics of addiction.

What we parade as growth is, in truth, liquidation. Like a company selling its last assets to dress up quarterly profits, we are liquidating the only deep asset we possess: the planet. Forests, aquifers, soil, and biodiversity: all depleted, none accounted for. Balance sheets never record what is lost; they only record the illusion of gain.

**The burden on the many**

What does the ordinary citizen receive in return for this miracle of growth? Air so toxic that WHO's safe standard of 5 micrograms per cubic metre is outstripped twentyfold on a routine day. Rivers that no longer quench but sicken. Heatwaves that strike the marginalised first, floods that drown the poor first. Meanwhile, the true perpetrators, the wealthiest whose consumption drives the emissions, will be the last to suffer, and the least.

Is this development? Or simply exploitation sold as progress?

**Climate and GDP: not two variables**

Even those who argue for sacrificing the climate to protect growth will soon dis-

cover that the trade-off is imaginary. Climate and GDP are not separate columns. Sacrifice the first, and the second collapses. Crops fail, cities flood, infrastructure buckles, and the very basis of economic activity disintegrates. GDP too comes from human bodies living on a stable Earth. When the planet burns, so does the economy.

**The crisis beneath the crisis**

Why then does the myth endure? Because the problem is not only material but mental. We have confused consumption with meaning. The "good life," in our imagination, is simply the American consumer's life. We may reject Western culture as decadent, but we embrace its consumption with zeal. That image has sunk into us not just as a concept but as a philosophy.

Here is where education has failed us too. We train our brightest in management, finance, and technology, but never ask the most fundamental question: what is life for? In the absence of that inquiry, ambition defaults to consumption. "Earn more to burn more" becomes the hidden motto of civilisation. All our knowledge

and skill end up fuelling a bonfire of desires.

The climate crisis, then, is ultimately a crisis of education: indeed, a spiritual crisis. We do not know who we are, so we try to become someone else. We do not know what life is for, so we imagine it must be for consumption. And thus we consume not only goods, but the Earth itself.

**Towards clarity, not compromise**

The question before us is not of a "middle path" between reducing consumption and becoming developed. There is no middle path. There is only clarity.

Clarity about what development actually means: breathable cities, clean water, public transport that works, schools a girl can safely reach, villages with healthcare and dignity. Clarity about ceilings: on inequality, on per-capita emissions, on lifestyles that trespass planetary limits. Clarity that skyscrapers and bullet trains are embellishments at best, not development itself.

And clarity, too, that degrowth is not a curse but a necessity. A modest shrinking of wealthy economies is not a calamity but a reprieve. A declining population in Japan or Europe is not despair but relief. Growth numbers that once reassured now serve as warnings.

**The image we must retire**

All of this is plain enough. What blocks us is not ignorance but image. We are haunted by a postcard of the "good life," drilled into us by advertising and aspiration. We have mistaken the picture for destiny.

But forests do not regrow because GDP rises. Ice does not remain solid at fifty degrees because we believe it should. The Earth does not bend to our desires. Reality is not bound by our illusions.

The choice before us is stark but liberating. We can continue worshipping growth, mistaking depletion for prosperity, until both climate and economy collapse together. Or we can redefine development in saner terms: human dignity, equality, liveable environments, and restraint.

Growth as a measure once had its uses. Growth as a compulsion is fatal. The future will not be secured by those who consume the most, but by those who have the clarity to live with less, and the wisdom to see that life's worth is not measured in things.

It is time to retire the idol of endless growth, before it retires us.

## Beyond transportation: Unlocking opportunities in gensets and static engines



SANJAY GANJOO

India's Ethanol Blended Petrol (EBP) programme is widely regarded as one of the country's most successful energy transition initiatives. What began as a strategy to blend ethanol with petrol for mobility has now reached a milestone — India has already met its 20 per cent blending target (E20), well ahead of schedule. This accomplishment not only strengthens India's energy security but also sets the stage for ethanol to play a much broader role in the economy.

The next frontier lies beyond the transport sector, with ethanol emerging as a viable fuel for gensets, static engines, and captive power applications. For an industry audience, the question is not whether ethanol works — it is how quickly and efficiently it can be integrated into new domains, supported by policy, technology, and market economics.

**From Policy Vision to Ground Reality**

India's ethanol blending journey has been a text-book case of co-ordinated execution:

a) Ambitious targets with policy clarity - Government set aggressive blending milestones, creating demand certainty for producers.

b) Feedstock flexibility - Ethanol is now produced from multiple sources including various streams of sugar mill viz C and B molasses, sugarcane juice, surplus rice, damaged food grains, and maize.

c) Capacity expansion - Distillery infrastructure was scaled up with interest subvention schemes and long-term procurement commitments by Oil Marketing Companies (OMCs).

d) Market acceptance - Automobile OEMs developed and tested E20-compatible engines, ensuring a smoother rollout.

The result: India achieved 20 per cent blending in petrol in 2025, making it the third-largest ethanol producer and consumer globally.

**Why Look Beyond Transportation?**

While the mobility sector remains a major consumer, non-transport applications are equally important:

**Energy security:** Diesel gensets consume millions of litres of fuel annually. Ethanol can offset part of this demand.

**Carbon reduction:** Ethanol's biogenic origin reduces lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions.

**Industrial resilience:** For sectors dependent on continuous power — such as telecom, healthcare, and data centres — ethanol-based gensets provide a low-carbon backup alternative.

**Rural linkages:** Using ethanol in agricultural pumps or small engines directly connects local energy needs with local agricultural output.

**Technical Feasibility:** What Studies Show

Research and pilot trials over the past decade demonstrate ethanol's compatibility with stationary engines:

**Gasoline gensets:** E100 (100 per cent Ethanol) in spark ignition gensets have shown better efficiency and lower emissions under controlled testing.

**Diesel gensets:** Direct use is more complex due to ethanol's low cetane rating. However, ethanol-diesel emulsions with additives have shown promising results. In addition, co-firing ethanol with diesel in stationary engines and boilers has demonstrated potential to lower overall emissions.

**Captive industrial use:** Distilleries already leverage ethanol by-products (spent wash, biogas) for captive power, proving the circularity potential of this sector.

**The bottom line:** ethanol is technically feasible for gensets and static engines, but commercial scale-up requires systematic interventions.

**Key Challenges for Adoption**

**1. Engine Compatibility**

a) Most gensets in India are diesel-based. Running them on ethanol requires either conversion to spark ignition, dual-fuel technology, or stable emulsions.

b) Material compatibility is critical, as rubber and other non-metal components must be suitable for the ethanol blends being used.

**2. Fuel Logistics & Storage**

a) Ethanol's classification in the Class A category means dedicated storage and handling systems are needed.

b) Supply chain reliability outside transport blending must be assured.

**3. Economics**

a) Delivered cost of ethanol vs diesel is a deciding factor. Incentives, carbon credits, or lower GST may be required to make ethanol competitive.

**Lessons from EBP**

The success of EBP highlights replicable elements:

**Demand signals:** Just as OMC procurement anchored blending, institutional buyers (e.g., telecom operators, large hospitals, data centres) can anchor ethanol demand for gensets.

**Standards & testing:** BIS standards for ethanol fuels and certification of ethanol-ready gensets will boost market confidence.

**Feedstock diversification:** Ensures stable supply and protects against raw material price volatility.

**Policy incentives:** Similar to OMC assured pricing, industrial users need predictable economics to switch.

To unlock ethanol's potential in gensets and static engines, the following steps are crucial:

- 1. Pilot Projects**
- a) Roll out ethanol-based gensets in telecom towers, hospitals, cold chain facilities, and data centres where power reliability is critical.
- b) Demonstration at scale will address perception barriers.
- 2. Flex-Fuel Engine Development**
- a) Collaborate with genset OEMs to launch E100-ready spark ignition gensets and dual-fuel diesel-ethanol models.
- b) Standardise retrofit kits for small engines in agriculture.
- 3. Additive Innovation**
- a) Support R&D for ethanol-diesel blends with cetane improvers, stabilisers, and cold-start enhancers.
- b) This could enable wider use in compression ignition engines.
- 4. Cluster-Based Deployment**
- a) Prioritise industrial hubs near ethanol production zones for captive ethanol-powered energy solutions, lowering logistics costs.
- 5. Policy & Incentives**
- a) Reduced GST on ethanol gensets, accelerated depreciation benefits, and priority lending will accelerate adoption.
- b) Public procurement mandates (e.g., government hospitals, rural electrification projects) can provide the initial demand pull.
- In the 3-7 year horizon, ethanol can realistically power:
- a) Backup gensets in commercial and institutional facilities.
- b) Agricultural pumps in rural areas, linking farmers directly to local ethanol supply.
- a) Captive industrial energy in sectors such as sugar, food processing, and chemicals, where ethanol production and use can be integrated.
- The EBP programme has demonstrated that ethanol adoption is possible at national scale with the right ecosystem. The next phase requires collaboration between distilleries, engine manufacturers, additive companies, and industrial buyers to create a parallel success story in gensets and static engines.
- India has proven with EBP that ethanol can be mainstreamed into national energy strategy. The immediate opportunity now lies in extending ethanol's role beyond transportation. With targeted pilots, supportive policies, and industry collaboration, ethanol can become a competitive alternative to diesel in gensets and static engines.
- For stakeholders, the message is clear: the ethanol economy is not just about mobility anymore - it is about building an integrated, multi-sector energy ecosystem. Those who move early will capture value in this emerging space.

The writer is Director General, Indian Federation of Green Energy

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## One Nation One Election: A pathway to Viksit Bharat



VIKAS YADAV

India, the world's largest democracy, treats elections as more than a mechanism for transferring power — they are celebrated as a festival of democracy. Millions of citizens exercise their right to vote, shaping the trajectory of governance and asserting their collective voice. Yet, beneath this celebratory veneer lies a pressing challenge: the growing frequency of elections. Holding elections at short intervals raises a critical question — are frequent elections truly strengthening democracy, or are they slowing down the nation's progress?

India's elections are among the most expensive in the world. The recent Lok Sabha polls alone cost nearly ₹1.35 trillion, covering only the expenditure of the Election Commission. Once the spending of political parties, advertisements, rallies, and campaigns is included, the total rises to an estimated ₹5-7 trillion over five years. For a developing nation, such expenditure represents a severe financial strain. One cannot help but imagine the transformative potential if even a fraction of these funds were directed towards education, healthcare, rural infrastructure, or agricultural reforms.

Equally disruptive is the repeated enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct, which halts developmental activities during election periods. Infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges, power plants, and water supply schemes are often left incomplete or delayed for months. Politicians frequently announce new initiatives near elections to woo voters, but many lose momentum once the electoral fervour subsides. These disruptions show that frequent elections can act as a brake on India's developmental pace.

Conducting elections in a country as vast and diverse as India is an immense logistical challenge. A single Lok Sabha election requires over ten lakh polling stations and more than one crore officials, including teachers, anganwadi workers, health staff, and government employees. This diversion of human resources impacts essential services — schools lose teaching days, healthcare workers are pulled from critical maternal and child welfare duties, and government offices experience operational disruptions. Over a five-year cycle, nearly 200 working days are estimated to be lost due to election-related responsibilities.

Campaigns generate mountains of posters, banners, flex boards, and pamphlets. Massive

rallies rely on fleets of vehicles, helicopters, and planes, emitting substantial carbon into the atmosphere. At a time when the world grapples with climate change, such pollution exacerbates the crisis. Additionally, the non-biodegradable waste from campaign materials clogs urban and rural spaces alike, reminding us that the festival of democracy comes with a hidden ecological toll.

Frequent elections can also fuel social fragmentation. Instead of being contests of policies and governance, elections often descend into battles of caste, religion, and language. Repeated electoral cycles intensify such polarisation, undermining national unity and weakening democracy's ideal as a unifying force. Rather than fostering a shared vision, elections sometimes deepen social divides.

Addressing these challenges requires more than policy reform; it calls for social awareness, particularly among India's youth. Through debates, seminars, street plays, human chains, and youth parliaments, young citizens can highlight the drawbacks of frequent elections and advocate constructive reforms. Youth parliaments, for instance, demonstrate how students can engage seriously with governance issues, reinforcing the idea that democracy is a shared responsibility, not the sole burden of politicians.

A promising solution gaining traction is the concept of "One Nation, One Election." By synchronising Lok Sabha and state assembly elections, India could substantially reduce costs, minimise disruptions caused by the Model Code of Conduct, and ensure governance continues uninterrupted.

While implementing this reform requires constitutional and legal amendments, the long-term benefits in efficiency, savings, and continuity make it a solution worth pursuing.

Frequent elections, while a testament to democratic vibrancy, impose undeniable costs on the economy, governance, environment, and society.

Democracy must be preserved, but not at the expense of development or public resources. Simultaneous elections offer a path forward — saving money, reducing institutional strain, and strengthening democratic functioning. The success of India's democracy will be measured not just by the act of voting but by how effectively the nation deploys its resources to improve lives. By embracing electoral reforms in time, India can ensure its democracy remains vibrant, sustainable, and future-ready.

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## H-1B, maybe

India's tech workers must reduce their reliance on U.S. jobs

President Donald Trump's decision to charge new applicants for the H-1B highly skilled non-immigrant visa \$100,000, nearly six times the current fee, has caused widespread consternation that not only might the lives of tens of thousands of potential visa applicants in the tech space be impacted, leading to “humanitarian consequences” for families, as mentioned by India’s Ministry of External Affairs, but there will also be widespread disruption among major tech companies in the U.S. that rely on hiring skilled workers under this visa. While the number of visas issued in this category has been capped at 85,000 per year since 2004, and allocations are decided through a lottery, reports based on U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services data suggest that applications for the upcoming fiscal year have dropped to a four-year low of nearly 3,59,000. Indian nationals typically account for 71% of these visas, yet data also suggest that close to 60% of these visa recipients earn less than \$100,000, which, over the longer term, implies that their employers may find it harder to justify hiring such specialised workers from abroad. The External Affairs Ministry’s response to the White House action included a reiteration of the fact that “Skilled talent mobility and exchanges have contributed enormously to technology development, innovation, economic growth, competitiveness and wealth creation in the U.S. and India”, yet there is limited scope for South Block to apply pressure, diplomatic or political, to get the policy reversed.

However, the fallout for Indian citizens can be contained if there is a proactive approach by the Government to bolster India’s infrastructure and undertake necessary reforms to improve the prospects for the Indian tech industry to make even greater strides than it has done so far. This might be achieved by capitalising on opportunities to develop new capabilities in the Artificial Intelligence space and exploring new markets across Asia, including China and Russia, and in parts of Europe, where the transatlantic contagion of nativist protectionism has not yet found willing takers. While the Trump order is set to expire within a year, there is no guarantee that it would not be extended, making it all the more pertinent for policymakers in India to evolve a long-term plan to reduce reliance of Indian tech workers on the shrinking pool of job opportunities in the U.S. economy. As India and other countries adjust to this new reality of the hostility of the Trump White House to welcoming future innovators, job-creators, and tax-payers to their shores, it is the U.S. rather than other nations that will suffer a shortage of scientific and engineering prowess to fuel economic progress.

## Uranium unrest

Resource extraction projects should have the people's consent

The Centre's decision to mine uranium at any cost from Meghalaya, after deliberations with local leaders proved futile, is a troubling benchmark in India's history of resource extraction. Khasi groups have opposed the exploration and extraction of large deposits in Domiasiat and Wakhaji since the 1980s. Recently, the Union Environment Ministry issued an office memorandum (OM) exempting the extraction of atomic, critical, and strategic minerals from public consultation. Local groups have already condemned the OM-based route; one associated with the ruling party has called on the Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council to use its Sixth Schedule powers to protect tribal rights. OMs are executive instruments that erode procedural safeguards and are issued without independent scrutiny. In this case, the OM reduces stewarding communities to bystanders in decisions with profound consequences for them. This is not the first time that the government has moved with force on the matter of uranium. The Uranium Corporation of India Limited has conducted operations in Jharkhand's Singhbhum district for decades. While hearings for expansion or new mines were met with protests over radiation exposure and loss of livelihoods, villagers have also alleged that the Corporation issued notices in unfamiliar languages and disregarded objections. For tribal communities, the experience has reinforced the perception that their land remains a 'resource frontier' for the 'Rest of India'.

In its conversations with the local leaders, the state should have respected their refusal, but has instead signalled that 'no' is no longer an acceptable answer. Uranium mining is highly polluting and can irreversibly alter the landscape. This is why free, prior, and informed consent, as under global norms, is essential. If such consent is unavailable, it behoves the same state that instituted the democratic protections to stop treating uranium as the only route to national security or development and to weigh other deposits, substitutes or even power-generating strategies. Now, the communities might consider challenging the OM's validity in courts, banking on precedents such as *Niyamgiri* (2013), and invoking protections under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. Second, the Ministry must withdraw its OM: by exempting the mining of several minerals from public consultation, it sets a precedent that can reshape mining governance across India. Finally, if local protests intensify, the Centre should once more respond with dialogue: coercion, while achieving its goal in the short-term, will only breed resentment later. It is obligated not only to maintain order but also to ensure that constitutional protections are realised in practice.

In September 2023, soon after the G77+China Summit concluded in Havana, Cuba, Sri Lanka's then-President Ranil Wickremesinghe chose to make a stopover in the United Kingdom while returning to Colombo. He had decided to take part in a university event, one in which his wife, Professor Maithree Wickremesinghe, was being honoured. In this connection, he is alleged to have used public funds – which he was not entitled to – to the tune of Sri Lankan rupees 16.2 million, or roughly \$50,000. Mr. Wickremesinghe was arrested, in August 2025, for the misuse of public funds, remanded for four days in custody, and later released on bail by a Sri Lankan court.

**The readings of the arrest**  
There have been attempts to cast Mr. Wickremesinghe's arrest as political revenge-taking. Mr. Wickremesinghe is Sri Lanka's immediate past-President, having run against incumbent President Anura Kumara Dissanayake in the elections in September 2024. At home, Mr. Wickremesinghe's supporters were vociferous, having even gathered to demand his release on the date of his court hearing on August 26, 2025. Internationally, allies have publicly supported him, with politicians from even India and the Maldives, expressing their consternation at his arrest.

The supporters of Mr. Wickremesinghe focus on the triviality of the charge against him. Surely a head of state is entitled to presidential perks even on personal excursions, they claim. Not even Mr. Wickremesinghe's legal team disputes that the money he spent on this trip was from the taxpayer; they only argue that he was allowed to spend it.

Perhaps those claims will stand up in court and Mr. Wickremesinghe will be exonerated. But merely having stated that a President is entitled to spend Sri Lankan rupees 16.2 million on a personal trip is, in the context of the island-nation's current political landscape, embarrassing. The alleged amount could buy a home for a number of people, fund an education for many, start neighbourhood hardware stores, pay off mortgages and debts, or buy boats for



**Andrew Fidel Fernando**  
is an award-winning author and journalist based in Sri Lanka

The common man in Sri Lanka will be watching whether probity in public life, a highlight of the mass protests of 2022, has been accepted across the political spectrum

fishing. According to data, it would take the median Sri Lankan household roughly 18 years to earn the sum Mr. Wickremesinghe has been accused of misusing. It is on their own terms that Sri Lanka's public now perceive these expenditures. Fewer concessions are made to the elites.

**The demand for accountability**  
These are political values that had found expression during the mass protests of July 2022 in Sri Lanka. Mr. Wickremesinghe was the Prime Minister then when protesters swarmed his office in the centre of Colombo on July 13. Though there were raucous celebrations minutes after the building was taken over, there were also loud calls made to respect public property. “If we break anything here, we are the ones who will have to pay for it,” protest leaders were heard saying repeatedly. That week, Mr. Wickremesinghe would call these protesters “fascists”.

Mr. Wickremesinghe will have known that the Sri Lankan public harboured deep resentment against the excesses of politicians. In 2015, he had pulled together an unlikely coalition to ride a wave of anti-corruption sentiment, to be sworn-in as Prime Minister. Though that *Yahapalana* (‘good governance’) government failed, calls for greater accountability persisted. In 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa was voted in as the President of Sri Lanka, partially because he was expected to eliminate corruption within the government, even though his central plank was national security. When Gotabaya Rajapaksa's failures compounded into an economic crisis, the public evicted him in an emphatic manner.

For at least 10 years before Mr. Wickremesinghe's arrest, Sri Lanka's public has signalled that the expenditures incurred by politicians must have the spotlight on them. Perhaps the controversy around Mr. Wickremesinghe was just a careless error on the part of Mr. Wickremesinghe, whose house in the centre of Colombo is worth much more than the Sri Lankan rupees 16.6 million he is accused of unlawfully spending. But the public is no longer inclined to tolerate such an act of ‘carelessness’.

# A leader who has connected power to the people

Narendra Modi's rise in Indian politics cannot be understood through the traditional lens of privilege. Unlike many leaders nurtured in political dynasties, Mr. Modi and his leadership style emerged from the soil, shaped by his struggle, years of grass-root level work, and field experience across different levels of government. His career represents not just the ascent of one man but also a challenge to the very foundation of elite-driven politics in India.

**Early signs of leadership**  
Born in a modest household in Vadnagar, Mr. Modi's childhood was marked by responsibility and simplicity. From setting up charity stalls in aid of flood victims to writing a play on caste discrimination as a schoolboy, he displayed an exceptional mix of organisational acumen and social concern at a young age. He also ran campaigns to collect used books and uniforms for underprivileged classmates – an early sign that he was already thinking about leadership in terms of service, and not as a privilege. These small efforts foreshadowed the approach he would carry into public life.

His grassroots instincts were sharpened in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), where ordinary workers were instructed to interact with villagers, live as they lived, and earn trust through their conduct. As a young *pracharak*, Mr. Modi did exactly that. Often travelling across Gujarat by bus or scooter, and depending on villagers for food and shelter, he built trust across the board through shared hardship and struggle. This discipline kept him rooted in the everyday concerns of the people he was looking to serve, and it prepared him to lead effectively when crises demanded organised, large-scale responses.

One such crisis was when the Machhu Dam collapsed in 1979, killing thousands. A 29-year-old



**Shivraj Singh Chouhan**  
is the Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, and also Rural Development, Government of India

The Prime Minister has reshaped Indian politics, rooting it in the struggles and the spirit of the common man

Mr. Modi immediately mobilised volunteers in shifts, organised relief materials, retrieved bodies, and consoled families. A few years later, during a drought in Gujarat, he spearheaded the *Sukhdi Abhiyan*, which expanded across the State, distributing food worth nearly ₹25 crore. In both disasters, he built large-scale relief efforts from scratch, demonstrating his clarity of purpose, his military-style organisation, and his insistence that leadership meant service, not just symbolism.

While these earlier episodes tested his ability to mobilise people, the Emergency tested his courage under repression. At just 25, disguised as a Sikh, he maintained communication between activists and leaders seeking to evade police surveillance. This grassroots network kept resistance to the draconian regime alive, earning him a reputation as a master organiser.

**Applications in electoral politics**  
The same skills were soon channelled into electoral politics. As the Bharatiya Janata Party's Gujarat's *sangathan mantri* (organising secretary), he expanded the party across new communities, including those who were marginalised in political discourse. He nurtured leaders from diverse backgrounds, consolidated ground-level support, and helped in planning major events such as the L.K. Advani's Somnath-Ayodhya Rath Yatra across Gujarat. Later, as *prabhari* (in-charge) in different States, he built strong party machines rooted at the booth level.

When he became Gujarat's Chief Minister in 2001, Mr. Modi applied these lessons to governance. Hours after taking office, for instance, he had convened a meeting on bringing Narmada water to Sabarmati, indicating how decisive action would come to define his administration.

His approach was to make governance into a

The arrest of Mr. Wickremesinghe gives little political ground for the incumbent National People's Power (NPP) government beyond its showing a willingness to hold even the powerful to account. Mr. Wickremesinghe stood a distant third in the 2024 Sri Lankan presidential election. His party and its allies command just six seats in Sri Lanka's 225-member Parliament. He was, strictly speaking, largely irrelevant to Sri Lanka's politics at the time of his arrest, despite his having outspoken backers.

And yet, there is also truth to the claim that the charges against Mr. Wickremesinghe are trivial. There are more serious allegations in the courts of Sri Lanka, such as one that a former Health Minister was the beneficiary of a medicine scam that cost the government Sri Lankan rupees 144 million. Through the course of the mass protests in 2022, claims that plane-loads of foreign currency were flown overseas by politicians had also gained traction.

**Apply the same yardstick**  
The NPP government is taking a huge risk in the arrest of Mr. Wickremesinghe. First, it is in danger of further antagonising what remains of the old political establishment, former Presidents, members of the Rajapaksa family, and Opposition members all having flocked to Mr. Wickremesinghe following his arrest. More importantly, the NPP is also turning the spotlight on itself. If the state charges so eminent a figure over a sum of Sri Lankan rupees 16.6 million, first-time Members of Parliament – the NPP has over 150 members – must be made accountable for every expenditure or risk being accused of hypocrisy. If this is a new line in the sand for Sri Lanka's politicians, it applies to the NPP the most. The NPP, despite its numbers, is still a political experiment, as far as most voters are concerned. The government has already had to begin investigating two of its own Ministers, over fraud and corruption allegations.

Developing nations are frequently accused of being 'less-mature' democracies. In Sri Lanka, the public has radically reshaped its relationship to political power. With luck, it will continue to keep its public servants on a short leash.

people's movement, where the *Praveshotsav* encouraged school enrolment, *Kanya Kelavani* supported girls' education, *Garib Kalyan Melas* took welfare to citizens, and *Krishi Rath* brought agricultural support to farmers' fields. Bureaucrats were pushed out of offices into towns and villages. He remains of the view that governance must reach people where they live, and not stay confined to conference rooms.

**Policy as partnership**  
These experiments in Gujarat became national templates once he became Prime Minister. His experience with cleanliness campaigns evolved into the Swachh Bharat Mission, where he picked up the broom himself to turn symbolism into mass action.

Digital India, Jan-Dhan Yojana, and other initiatives were not top-down programmes but people's movements rooted in the learnings from his years spent at the grassroots. They embodied his philosophy of *jan bhagidari*, where governance works only when citizens become participants rather than passive recipients. This trust between a leader such as Mr. Modi and the people, cultivated over decades, is what has turned policy into partnership in today's India.

Over the decades, Mr. Modi has shown a rare instinct for knowing what people need and how to deliver it, not from drawing-room debates, but from lived connection with the ground. That instinct, combined with hard administrative experience, has come to define his politics.

Ultimately, his life and leadership rewrite the idea that Indian politics belongs only to elites. He has become a symbol of merit and hard work, and brought governance closer to ordinary people. His political strength lies in connecting power to the people. In doing so, he has reshaped Indian politics, rooted in the struggles and the spirit of the common citizen.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### An escalation by America

The Trump administration's abrupt announcement to impose a staggering \$100,000 fee on new H-1B visa applications marks an unprecedented escalation in the U.S.'s immigration policy. This hasty measure, cloaked as a curb on programme “abuse”, threatens to upend the livelihoods of thousands of skilled Indian professionals and cripple India's IT sector. There is no denying the policy's chilling effect. This is not mere reform but economic warfare disguised as protectionism. Such duplicity undermines the U.S.-India strategic partnership. India's government bears equal blame for this vulnerability. Despite years of warnings, New Delhi failed to secure a bilateral mobility pact or long-term H-1B framework.

Proactive diplomacy, perhaps tying visa reforms to defence deals or trade concessions, could have mitigated this blow. This policy risks broader fallout — stifling U.S. tech talent pipelines, inflating costs for American consumers, and straining bilateral ties at a geopolitically tense juncture.

**K.J. Haroon Basha,**  
Vaniyambadi, Tamil Nadu

India must not be cowed down by such blackmailing and leverage this as an opportunity to harness the skills of the tech savvy. At the same time, the ongoing trade negotiations could turn out to be meaningless if the U.S. continues to target India with such venom.

**Balakrishnan M.K.,**  
New Delhi

After the tariff weapon, it is the ‘visa missile’ that the U.S. President Donald Trump has planned to use against India. Indian software employees are noted for their calibre and are less expensive to hire. In the end, it is economic advantages and profit that matter to any entrepreneur or giant. Mr. Trump seems to be going against the dynamics of the market economy and could face defeat.

At the same time, this is a lesson for India and it should view Mr. Trump's policies as the catalyst that reshapes India's policies and programmes. There needs to be steady progress now to make India self-reliant.

**A.G. Rajmohan,**  
Anantapur, Andhra Pradesh

India loses thousands of

skilled workers each year. Bright minds in engineering and tech fields pack up and leave for better jobs abroad. Multinational companies lure them with fat pay cheques. Domestic firms just cannot match those offers. These talented Indians fuel growth in their new workplaces. They also help build stronger economies elsewhere. Back home, the country misses out on their skills. The Indian government must step up and offer tax breaks or grants to keep talent here. A visa fee issue is not a setback. It is a golden chance to let India grow.

**Chandran Chaithram,**  
Cherukunnu, Kannur, Kerala

**Award for actor**  
The decision to confer the Dadasaheb Phalke Award on actor Mohanlal is

well-thought-out. For decades, Laletan's remarkable versatility has transcended linguistic boundaries, making him a beacon of excellence in Indian cinema. In his transformative performances, from intense drama such as *Thanmathra* to a gripping thriller such as *Drishyam*, he has shown a great depth that few actors possess.

**Veda Chidanand,**  
Bengaluru

**Exam and evaluation**  
I am writing on behalf of the NEET PG 2025 aspirant community to highlight concerns regarding the recent NEET PG examination evaluation process. The key issues are as follows: Numerous candidates have reported significant discrepancies in their NEET PG 2025 results,

with high differences, despite high numbers of attempted questions and correct answers. The NBEMS has not released individual response sheets or an official answer key, making it impossible for aspirants to verify their scores or understand how marks were awarded. Many candidates with identical numbers of attempted questions and similar answer patterns have received widely varying scores, raising concerns about the accuracy of evaluation. Repeated requests for clarification, re-evaluation, or release of response sheets have not yielded a constructive response.

**Dr. Jay K. Sen,**  
Visnagar, Gujarat

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



# Breaking the academic paywall

India has the fourth highest number of PhD graduates globally, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. A number of these students come from regions where universities do not have the resources to subscribe to journals. A PhD student has to read hundreds of papers and books to complete research. How can students, who already suffer resource constraints, and get a stipend of ₹20,000-35,000, be asked to spend \$20-3,000 (₹17,000-2.64 lakh) to access a paper online? This cannot be the norm.

**Blocking access to knowledge**  
In August, the Delhi High Court ordered the blocking of free access sites – SciHub and Libgen. This triggered a debate over the rights of students and the scientific community, particularly in the Global South, in accessing knowledge. The sites were blocked on grounds of copyright infringement, based on a plea filed by three of the biggest academic publishers in the world, which corner 40% of the market. Academic publishing is a business where publishers do not create content or review its quality. Instead, they benefit from the free labour of the research community, which is paid for by taxpayers or student fees. In short, multi-billion dollar companies are able to block access to scientific knowledge to the vast majority of the world. So, who is committing the real theft? A 2021 study published by the *Journal of Scientometric Research* found that India accounted for 8.7% of the total download requests on SciHub, amounting to over 13 million, in 2017. Of these, 19% were related to the medical and health sciences. Access to such information allows students and professionals to build on existing knowledge and customise it to their local needs in regions plagued by inaccessibility and deficit in resources. MSF (Doctors Without Borders)



**Parthesarathy Rajendran**  
Executive Director, MSF South Asia



**Devi Vijay**  
Professor, IIM Calcutta

Science is already produced as a collective exercise; it must be recognised as such

has witnessed the painful health realities of countries in the Global South. Overburdened systems are unable to meet the growing needs of communities that are often underserved in the face of systemic gaps, climate disasters, and violence. Medicine is not absolute; it evolves with the world around us. As our environment changes, our bodies adapt, and organisms evolve, the healthcare sector demands constant innovation, research, and deeper understanding of ground realities to deliver the best practices and treatment plans. MSF teams, especially those treating patients with drug-resistant TB and antimicrobial-resistant HIV, have seen how disease patterns can evolve and shatter remote communities. For best results, health experts must work on complex treatment plans, customised to the patient's needs, which differ depending on cost, severity of infection, geography, malnourishment, age, and co-morbidities. The fact that two-thirds of TB cases are reported from eight countries, all in the Global South, where patients are struggling to access effective treatments that are at least a few decades old, means fighting these diseases is a matter of equity and justice. Like medicine, knowledge should never be a luxury commodity. Currently, corporate forces overwhelmingly gatekeep scientific knowledge – whether it is in increasingly corporatised universities, or through corporate-funded research and journals. The primary motive is profits, and the resultant practices are ownership of human knowledge within patents and intellectual property rights. This exclusionary system has a narrow understanding of what knowledge is. Universities have started seeking out researchers who have already published papers in well-known journals instead of seeking research that benefits the most underserved.

In addition to advocating for open access, it is also important to recognise the knowledge gathered by grassroots communities. The Global South is otherwise often treated as an exotic field site for researchers from the Global North. There is gross under-representation of researchers from the Global South in authorship; they are typically reduced to field assistants, while the so called 'cerebral' work is relegated to those from the Global North. This is particularly concerning as issues in the Global South are conceptualised under Global North-centric language. **Collective efforts** The Global South is disproportionately impacted by increased protectionism, violence, climate disasters, displacement, inaccessibility, drug resistance, and more. These challenges demand collective efforts from governments, innovators, and health experts. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, 193 member countries of UNESCO, including India, adopted the first international framework on open science, to make science transparent and accessible and enhance international scientific cooperation. However, just a few years later, multi-billion dollar publishers continue to hold knowledge at ransom. We are producing an artificial scarcity of knowledge, which is otherwise an infinite resource, a commons. Science is already produced as a collective exercise; it must be recognised as such. Even research conducted in the Global South is inaccessible to the people who participate in these studies. As a society, we need to exert pressure on publishers and governments to open channels for easy access to scientific information. If we are to have a fighting chance at facing the health implications of war, climate crisis, drug resistance, and systemic inequities, we must dismantle paywalls and stake claims on knowledge as commons.

# Caste survey redux

Karnataka's second socio-economic survey gets underway amid objections

## STATE OF PLAY

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Karnataka will hold its second socio-economic survey from today. The Congress government set aside the report of the first survey, conducted in 2015, as well as the recommendations based on it and submitted in 2024. The second survey, to be conducted over a fortnight by the Karnataka State Commission for Backward Classes, is being held amid a sea of objections raised by the BJP as well as some land-owning, politically dominant, and numerically strong communities. The Commission has compiled a tentative list of 1,400 castes. This has opened a Pandora's Box. The BJP has attacked the Siddaramaiah government for attempting to "divide Hindus". The BJP and some caste groups have opposed the inclusion of Christian sub-castes (identified for the first time during the earlier survey based on how people named themselves) that included nomenclatures such as Vokkaliga-Christian, Brahmana-Christian, and Lingayat Christian. To the embarrassment of the State government, these nomenclatures have been opposed by Cabinet Ministers representing the dominant communities as well. Leaders of castes cutting across party lines fear that these "new castes" will bring down their population figures. During the last Cabinet meeting, the Chief Minister came under intense pressure to scrap the survey or postpone it until the "anomalies" were set right. Deputy Chief Minister D.K. Shivakumar, a Vokkaliga strongman, and se-

nior Ministers M.B. Patil and Eshwar Khandre, representing the Veerashaiva-Lingayat community, opposed the "new castes". The Chief Minister then asked the Commission, an independent body, to address the confusion by masking some of these "new castes" in the list so that they can be allowed to enumerate themselves in the 'Others' category. While the Opposition blames the government for the confusion, the Commission has made it clear that during the last enumeration, members of these "new Christian sub castes" had approached it, requesting it for a separate grouping. It said that the government did not have any role in the inclusion or deletion of any castes/sub castes. The RSS and BJP are also anxious about developments in the Veerashaiva-Lingayat community. The Akhila Bharatha Veerashaiva Mahasabha and the Jagathika Lingayata Mahasabha, two big caste organisations, have appealed to the community to say that they belong to the 'Veerashaiva-Lingayat' and 'Lingayat' religions, respectively, in the 'Others' column. Both organisations are working for a separate religion status for the community, though they have differences of opinion on nomenclature. The BJP is upset that the sabhas have appealed to the com-

munities to not categorise themselves as 'Hindu'. Leaders including former Chief Ministers Basavaraj Bommai and Jagadish Shettar have accused the Congress of using caste organisations to "divide the Hindu community". Incidentally, Cabinet Minister Eshwar Khandre is the general secretary of the Veerashaiva Mahasabha, while Congress leader Shamanur Shivashankarappa is its president. The dominant narrative so far has been about the way that community members would enumerate themselves, with major communities such as the Veerashaiva-Lingayats, Vokkaligas, Brahmins, Muslims, and Kurubas trying to consolidate themselves. The findings of the 2015 survey and the recommendations based on it were set aside citing the reason that they were a decade old and "brought down" the numbers of dominant communities. It should be noted that these communities, for decades, bargained for political clout using their estimated population data. The Commission's report based on the survey and its recommendations are crucial for backward classes' reservation, with 32% in the overall 56% reservation matrix in the State. Though determining "backwardness" of various caste groups is the key objective of the survey, the focus of the dominant communities has been primarily on numerical consolidation. Nomadic, semi-nomadic and microscopic communities within the Other Backward Classes grouping, who were given the 'Most Backward' status in the old report, are hoping that the survey will benefit them. However, the voices of these communities remain drowned in the clamour of dominant communities.

# The age of India's leaders has steadily risen

The age profile of the Lok Sabha has shifted markedly over the decades, with the 18th Lok Sabha being the "oldest" yet

## DATA POINT

Sarthak Bagchi  
Arja Kakkad

When Jagdeep Thakkar stepped down as Vice-President, citing age-related health issues, discussions on ageing in politics sharpened in India. The suggestion of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat two months ago that leaders should step aside at the age of 75 had also triggered a debate. Narendra Modi continues as Prime Minister despite crossing the age of 75 and so do several other leaders, underscoring the lack of a clear retirement norm. The BJP's unofficial age limit of 75 years – symbolised by the creation of the Margadarshak Mandal, often seen as a euphemism for the party's retirement cell – has kept the spotlight on the question of when politicians should call it a day. At the State level too, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's age and health have emerged as key talking points ahead of the Bihar elections. Several instances of incoherence at public events have raised doubts about his ability to take crucial policy decisions and effectively discharge his duties. This is in sharp contrast to the image of 'sushasan babu' (boss of good governance) that he cultivated during his early years. In fact, gerontocracy – commonly defined as rule by a group of old men or a council of elders – has become an important theme in the global discourse on democracy. In the 2024 U.S. presidential elections, age dominated the campaign conversation: Joseph Biden, the oldest President in American history, left office at 82, while his successor Donald J. Trump took office at 78 years and 220 days, setting a record as the oldest to be inaugurated. That year, celebrated worldwide as the 'year of democracy' for its many pivotal elections, saw the rise of several geriatric

leaders to power, including Brazil's President Lula da Silva, 79; Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, 75; and Narendra Modi, 74. The persistence of gerontocracy is evident even among unelected leaders and dictators. From long-ruling strongmen in parts of Africa to supreme leaders in oil-rich Asian republics, many continue to hold on to office well into old age. Authoritarian leaders such as Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 72, and Russia's Vladimir Putin, also 72, have extended their grip on power for decades, underscoring how age is rarely a barrier to political dominance outside democratic systems. This trend of elderly leaders dominating politics, whether through democratic elections or authoritarian rule, is hardly new. Gerontocracy was a defining feature of governance in the Greek city-states and the Roman Senate, where advancing age was closely associated with wisdom and experience, creating a form of traditional authority that legitimised the rule of the old. An analysis of the ages of India's Prime Ministers shows a steady upward trend. At independence in 1947, Jawaharlal Nehru became the first Prime Minister at 58, serving with a median age of 66 during his tenure. By 2014, Narendra Modi entered office at 63, and the median age of Prime Ministers had climbed to 76. The range has been wide: Rajiv Gandhi was the youngest to assume office at 40, while Morarji Desai was the oldest, taking charge at 81. Tellingly, Nehru demitted office at 74 in 1966, whereas Manmohan Singh, the last Prime Minister before Modi, stepped down in 2014 at 81. Across India's history, the median age of Prime Ministers has hovered around 67. In comparison, the median age of Chief Ministers increased only modestly, from 57 in the 1950s to 59.5 in the 2020s, with the peak decade being 2010-2020 when it touched 62.25. A breakdown by

party – regional versus national, and within national parties between the Congress and the BJP – shows negligible variation, with the average age of Chief Ministers across the board hovering around 58 years. The presence of younger leaders such as Nayab Singh Saini, Mohan Yadav, and Yogi Adityanath might suggest that the BJP promotes younger talent, especially when contrasted with the Congress's image as India's 'Grand Old Party'. However, our analysis shows minimal difference in average age between the two. In general, the younger appointments across parties are balanced out by veterans such as the late Prakash Singh Badal in Punjab, the late V.S. Achuthanandan in Kerala, and the late M. Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu, all of whom served well into their late 80s and 90s. The age profile of the Lok Sabha has shifted markedly over the decades (**Chart 1**), with the 18th Lok Sabha, which began its term last year, being the "oldest" yet. The average age of parliamentarians rose from 46.5 years in 1952 to 56 years by 2014. Meanwhile, the share of younger members (25-40 years) declined sharply from about 25-30% in the early years to under 10%. In contrast, the share of members aged 56-70 grew from less than 25% to nearly 40% by 2019. The data makes clear that India's Parliament is ageing, with fewer young politicians making it into the House over time. If we were to pick out a random Indian, there is a 50% probability that they are less than 30 years old. However, this probability is 0.007% if we were to do the same for a member of the Lok Sabha. **Chart 2** shows the number of MPs in Lok Sabha under the age of 35, over the years. **Chart 3** shows the age-profile of MPs in the Lok Sabha over the years.

Sarthak Bagchi teaches at Ahmedabad University and Arja Kakkad, studies in Ashoka University

## Old guard

The data for the charts were sourced from a book titled "House of the People: Parliament and the Making of Indian Democracy," by Ronojoy Sen



Chart 1: Average age of members of the Lok Sabha

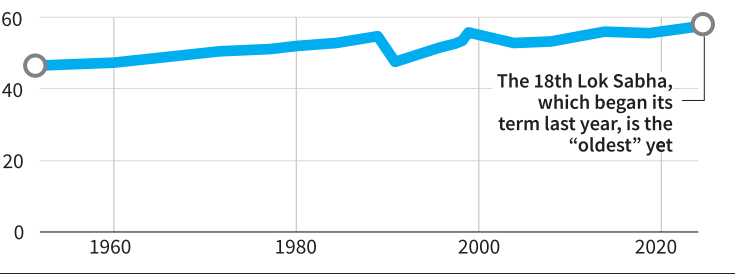


Chart 2: Number of MPs in the Lok Sabha under the age of 35, over the year

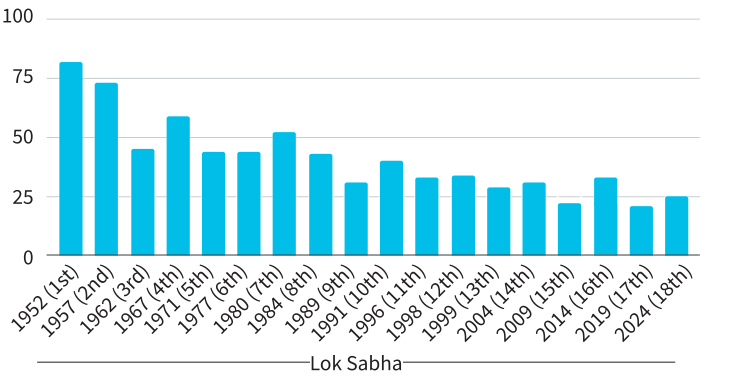
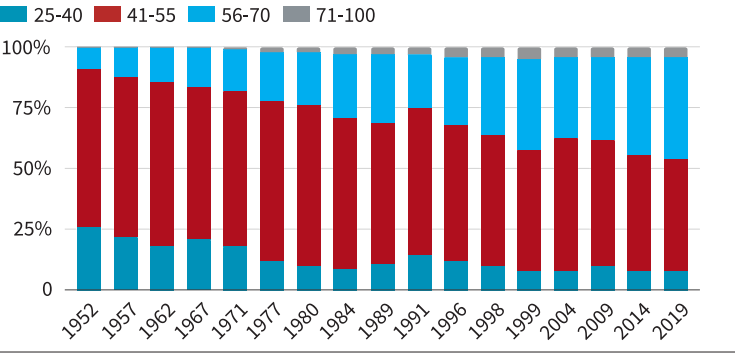


Chart 3: Age-profile of MPs in the Lok Sabha over the years



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

### The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 22, 1975

## 100 nations support steps against torture

New Delhi, Sept. 21: A hundred countries, including India, which attended the fifth United Nations Congress on prevention of crime and treatment of offenders, have approved a declaration stating that each State shall take effective measures to prevent torture from being practised within its jurisdiction. The 12-point declaration on torture and other cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment has been submitted to the U.N. General Assembly for further consideration. It also said that any act of torture shall be condemned as a denial of the principles of the U.N. Charter and as a violation of human rights. The Congress, which concluded in Geneva recently, was attended by criminologists, penologists and experts in criminal law and public administration. Other experts in the field of police, prisons, courts, prosecution and social welfare and planning agencies also participated. The declaration said that all acts of torture were offences under criminal law and criminal proceedings shall be instituted against the person if investigation established that he committed an act of torture. It also said that any statement which was established as having been made as a result of torture might not be used as evidence against the person concerned or against any other person. On the role of police and other law enforcement agencies the Congress concluded that police training should include the subjects of ethics. Women should be employed as police officers on equal terms with men and the police should participate in the legislative process. **A HUNDRED YEARS AGO** SEPTEMBER 22, 1925

## Bombay cotton crisis

Bombay. Sept. 21: More textile mills were closed to-day. Of the 92 textile mills in the town and suburbs of Bombay, about 65 are idle. The operatives on strike now number close upon 125,000. No one anticipated an early termination of the strike. A general exodus of the operatives and their families has begun and steamers bound for the southern districts and Railway trains are crowded. No serious breach of the peace is reported.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

## NEWS IN NUMBERS

**Number of children adopted in India in 2024-25**

**4,515** This is the highest number of adoptions since 2015-16. According to the Women and Child Development Ministry's latest report, 2,177 children were available for placement through the Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA). PTI

**HSN codes given to ministries to promote ease of doing business**

**12,167** In trade parlance, every product is categorised under an HSN (Harmonised System of Nomenclature) Code. The government has prepared a guidebook mapping more than 12,000 HSN codes to 31 ministries for ease of doing business. PTI

**Number of dengue cases in Bangladesh so far this year**

**42** In thousand. Dengue infections are climbing rapidly across Bangladesh, with health officials reporting the biggest single-day rise in both deaths and hospital admissions this year. Twelve people have died in the past 24 hours and 740 new patients have been hospitalised. REUTERS

**Number of persons killed in Gaza ahead of UN meeting**

**34** Israeli strikes killed more than 30 people in Gaza City overnight, including children, said health officials on Sunday, as several countries prepare to recognise a Palestinian state. Health officials at Shifa Hospital said the dead included 14 people killed in a late-night strike on Saturday. AP

**Number of people taking part in the protests in Peru**

**500** Hundreds of anti-government protesters clashed with police in the Peruvian capital Lima on Saturday, throwing stones and sticks as officers fired tear gas on the demonstrators. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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# Can timelines be fixed for Governors?

Can the Governor withhold assent to a Bill passed by the State legislature based on his own discretion? Why has the Centre said that courts cannot prescribe a timeline for Governors/President to decide on a Bill? What have Opposition-rule States said on the matter?

## EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

### The story so far:

The Supreme Court is currently hearing a Presidential reference made in May 2025 that has sought the opinion of the Court on 14 questions, primarily surrounding the interpretation of Articles 200 and 201 of the Constitution.

### What is the current reference?

The current reference is a result of a Supreme Court judgment in April 2025 (*The State of Tamil Nadu versus the Governor of Tamil Nadu & Anr*) that had specified timelines for Governors and the President to act on Bills passed by State legislatures. It had held that if the Governor was to withhold assent or reserve the Bill for consideration of the President, contrary to the advice of the State Council of Ministers, he/she should do so within a period of three months. It further held that if a Bill for which assent has been withheld is again passed by the State legislature, the Governor shall assent to such Bill. It had prescribed a timeline of three months for the President to decide on State Bills reserved for his/her consideration. The court had also held that decisions by Governors and the President on such Bills, including delays beyond the prescribed timelines, will be subject to judicial review.

The government has raised questions regarding the authority of the Court to prescribe timelines when they are not specified in the Constitution.

### What does the Constitution say?

Article 200 of the Constitution lays down that when a Bill, passed by a State Legislature, is presented to the Governor for his/her assent, he/she has four alternatives: (a) may give assent to the Bill (b) may withhold assent to the Bill, that is, reject the Bill in which case the Bill fails to become law; (c) may return the Bill for reconsideration of the State Legislature; or (d) may reserve the Bill for the consideration of the President.

As held by the Supreme Court in various cases including the *Shamsher Singh* case (1974), the Governor does not exercise his/her discretionary powers while withholding assent for a Bill. He/she is required to act as per the advice of the Council of Ministers. The return of any Bill to the State Legislature for reconsideration is also to be done based on ministerial advice. As explained in the Constituent Assembly by T.T. Krishnamachari, this may be done if the Government feels that the Bill needs modifications. The Governor shall assent to such a Bill if it is passed again by the State Legislature.

As far as reserving any Bill for consideration of the President, the Governor must reserve certain Bills like those which reduce the powers of the High Court. He/she may reserve certain Bills based on the advice of the Council of Ministers like those that relate to a subject enumerated in the Concurrent List, to ensure operation of its provisions despite repugnancy to a Union Law. It is only under rare circumstances that the Governor may exercise his/her discretion and reserve a Bill where he/she feels that the provisions of the Bill contravene any of the provisions of the Constitution and therefore, reserve it for the consideration of the President.

The Constitution does not lay down any time limit within which the Governor is required to make a decision with



New rules: Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi welcomed by Chief Minister M.K. Stalin during the Republic Day celebrations in Chennai, on January 26. PTI

respect to any Bill presented for his/her assent. The main part of Article 200 states that once a Bill is presented to the Governor, he/she 'shall' declare that he/she assents to the Bill or withholds assent or reserves the Bill for consideration of the President. The proviso to the article adds that the Governor may 'as soon as possible' return the Bill for reconsideration of the State legislature.

### What are the recommendations?

The Sarkaria Commission (1987) had stated that only the reservation of Bills for consideration of the President, that too under rare cases of patent unconstitutionality, can be implied as a discretionary power of the Governor. Apart from such exceptional cases, the Governor must discharge his functions under Article 200 as per the advice of Ministers. It further recommended that the President (Central Government) should dispose of such Bills within a maximum period of six months. The Punchhi Commission (2010) had recommended that the Governor should take a decision with respect to a Bill presented for his/her assent within a period of six months.

### What are the arguments?

Article 163(1) of the Constitution requires the Governor to act as per the advice of the Council of Ministers except in so far as he/she is required by or under the Constitution to act as per his/her discretion. Article 163(2) further provides that if any question arises on whether the matter is a matter which the Governor is required to act as per his/her discretion,

the decision of the Governor in such cases shall be final and shall not be called into question.

The Centre has argued that the Governor enjoys discretion as per the above Article which cannot be inquired into by the courts and consequently no timelines can be fixed. It also raised objections to the three-month timeframe that has been stipulated for the President to decide on Bills which have been reserved. Article 201 that deals with this matter does not stipulate any timeline. The Centre has maintained that any issues between the elected government in a State, the Governor and the President need to be resolved politically within the framework of the Constitution and that the courts cannot be an adjudicator for every such impasse.

However, Opposition-ruled States have argued that the Governors in such States have been selectively delaying assent or reserving Bills, against the advice of the Council of Ministers, for the consideration of the President. They have argued that such deliberate delays cannot be termed as discretion and that it disrespects the popular mandate of the people of the State.

### What should be the way forward?

All the issues stated above are in the nature of symptoms. The underlying disease that has plagued our federal set up has been the politicisation of the gubernatorial post. Many political leaders starting from C.N. Annadurai to Nitish Kumar have called for the abolition of the Governor's post in the past. However, as per our Constitutional scheme, there is a need for a nominal head of the State

executive just like the President for the Union executive.

Nevertheless, federalism is also a basic feature of our Constitution and the Governor's office should not undermine the powers of popularly elected governments at the States.

The Court usually exercises restraint while stipulating timelines for action by constitutional authorities where none is provided in the Constitution. However, when there are unreasonable delays, the Court has stipulated timelines in the past like in *K. M. Singh* case (2020) where it laid down a three-month timeframe for Speakers to decide on the Tenth Schedule disqualification.

The Supreme Court has purposively interpreted the words in Article 200 in its judgment in April 2025. It has interpreted that the main part of Article 200 uses the words 'Governor shall' and hence it is not a discretionary power. It relied on its own past judgments including the *Nabam* case (2006), the recommendations of various commissions as well as the Office Memorandum of the Home Ministry in 2016 to prescribe the timeline of three months for actions by Governors and the President.

The Centre and the Governors should follow the timeline prescribed by the April 2025 judgment to uphold democratic and federal principles. Hopefully, the opinion of the Supreme Court in the Presidential reference would also reiterate this position.

Rangarajan R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified.' He currently trains at Officers IAS academy. Views expressed are personal.

## THE GIST

Article 200 of the Constitution lays down that when a Bill, passed by a State Legislature, is presented to the Governor for his/her assent, he/she has four alternatives: (a) may give assent to the Bill (b) may withhold assent to the Bill, that is, reject the Bill in which case the Bill fails to become law; (c) may return the Bill for reconsideration of the State Legislature; or (d) may reserve the Bill for the consideration of the President.

Article 163(1) of the Constitution requires the Governor to act as per the advice of the Council of Ministers except in so far as he/she is required by or under the Constitution to act as per his/her discretion.

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Visa whiplash

H-1B fee hike is a wake up call

The signals emanating from Washington under President Donald Trump are unambiguous. After imposing a 50 per cent tariff wall and withdrawing the sanctions waiver on Iran’s Chabahar port, the White House has now announced a ten-fold increase in H-1B visa fees to an eye-watering \$100,000. This is not just another policy tweak; it is a declaration. America is no longer rolling out the red carpet for immigrant professionals, particularly engineers and technology workers who have powered its innovation economy for decades.

The immediate fallout will be felt by Indian students enrolled in US universities. Thousands take on heavy education loans in the hope of securing a job at one of America’s big technology firms after graduation. A six-figure visa cost would make it nearly impossible for employers to hire fresh graduates from abroad. For decades, the US was the dream destination for Indian techies because of access to American capital, deep innovation ecosystems and a culture of risk-taking that few countries could match. Returning to India is not an attractive option for many. Weak infrastructure, a shallow pipeline of cutting-edge research and a dearth of exciting, well-paid roles in frontier technologies combine to dim the prospects of repatriated talent. Even large MNCs running R&D centres in India often assign work that is incremental rather than path-breaking.

Yet the new reality must be faced. India’s gross expenditure on R&D remains at just 0.64 per cent of GDP — far below most global peers. In many developed and emerging economies, business enterprises contribute over half of total R&D spending; China, Japan, South Korea and the US all cross the 70 per cent mark. By contrast, top-tier Indian IT services firms spend only 0.4–1.3 per cent of revenue on R&D, a ratio that has barely moved since FY19. This is unsustainable. Industry and government must build a pipeline of risk capital for frontier technology, making it worthwhile for the best minds to stay back. The H-1B fee hike also strikes at the core of the Indian IT services playbook built around rotating engineers into client sites in the US and scaling delivery from offshore centres. Each visa has now become a six-figure liability that few clients will underwrite. Many Tier-1 firms have started to adapt, setting up near-shore hubs in Canada and Eastern Europe, hiring locally in the US, and deploying automation to increase throughput. But the industry still relies on the visa pipeline. Trump’s move is the loudest signal yet that the transition to a distributed, automation-rich delivery model must be completed without delay.

US immigration rules have been gradually tightened over nearly a decade, but India has been very slow to adapt. If India truly wishes to become a digital powerhouse, it must reduce dependence on external job markets. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence offer enormous potential, but only if the country invests boldly in its own ecosystem rather than hope for an open door abroad.

FROM THE VIEWSROOM.

Splintered Opposition in TN

B Baskar

Though the Tamil Nadu Assembly elections are still a few months away, the political battle lines are already being drawn. The ruling DMK, having got into poll mode a few months ago, seemed to have grabbed the first mover advantage for now. Its alliance with Congress, VCK and the Left parties also seems to be holding strong despite the occasional sniping.

It is the principal opposition party — the AIADMK — that seems to be in a bind. After biting the dust in the 2024 general elections, where it shunned an alliance with the BJP, it is now forced to join hands with it. Adding the vote shares of both parties the alliance look formidable. But electoral alliances are not only about arithmetic. Even in these ideologically fluid times there is this nebulous factor called ‘chemistry’. And this seems to be sorely lacking between the two parties.

Veteran AIADMK leader KA Sengottaiyan a few days ago gave a

10-day deadline for all the AIADMK factions to merge (primarily the O Panneerselvam faction and TTV Dhinakaran’s AMMK) with AIADMK to put a strong fight against the ruling DMK alliance. This seems to have miffed party supremo and former CM Edappadi Palaniswami (EPS), who promptly removed Sengottaiyan from all party posts.

After that Sengottaiyan and EPS made trips to New Delhi to meet Home Minister Amit Shah.

Though what transpired in these meetings remains unknown, Shah must have surely advised both of them to bury the hatchet.

Also erstwhile NDA allies the DMDK and AMMK seem to be hedging their bets though the BJP is keen to have them back in the NDA. The father-son fight in the PMK has further splintered the Opposition. Then of course there is the Vijay factor, whose Tamizhaga Vettri Kazhagam, making its electoral debut, is fishing for allies.

Though the polls are still a few months away, the Opposition in Tamil Nadu needs to get its act together quickly.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has completed 75 years of age, and 11-plus years in office. So it is worth asking, once again, what will be his legacy?

On the political side it’s clear: making the BJP the preeminent party of governance. Its vote share has been over 36 per cent since 2014.

But what about his economic legacy? The answer, sadly, is that we don’t know. Not yet anyway.

In that respect he is perhaps a bit like Jawaharlal Nehru whose economic legacy is also totally unclear. Like Modi, Nehru also wanted India to be a great country. But he simply didn’t understand the behaviour of capital and labour in such a highly interventionist state.

Modi, in contrast, understands it but is unable to set aside political considerations in his larger economic decisions. So the state under him continues to be highly interventionist.

In that respect he is like Indira Gandhi. Everything she did was political. But her legacy is clear: nationalised banks and therefore an inefficient financial sector. That legacy, unlike her father’s, has proved to be a lasting one. A significant part of the public sector banking system is nothing more than an arm of welfarism.

Her successor was Morarji Desai whose lasting economic legacy is the appalling constitutional amendment that said the right to property is not a fundamental one. What’s amazing is that he himself wasn’t a socialist of even the mildest hue.

Rajiv Gandhi’s legacy is absolutely the best of the lot: computers. It may sound trivial now but it is he who transformed India and made it possible for it to become what it has become in technology.

A few years later PV Narasimha Rao’s legacy was to break India away from the industrial and financial policies of the past. He did what Morarji wanted to do but wasn’t able to.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s economic legacy, like Nehru’s, is also very unclear. He was Prime Minister for six years but seemed disinterested in economic policy. Can you think of anything that could be called his legacy?

How can Modi carve out an economic legacy?

The PM must scrap Article 311 that gives immunity to bureaucrats. This might spur private investments



Likewise Manmohan Singh. It’s hard to say this is his legacy. The one huge thing he pulled off, the Indo-US nuclear deal, led nowhere. MNREGA isn’t his legacy. He had been unhappy with the scheme but could not overrule Sonia Gandhi’s band of do-gooders.

**MODI’S MOUNTAIN**  
Which brings us to Narendra Modi. He has a massive non-economic legacy, most of which is political. But on the economic side it’s hard to say this is it, his legacy. Even GST wasn’t his idea — it had been in the works since 2003 — and, as Chief Minister of Gujarat, he had opposed it.

So far he has done nothing that’s comparable to the bank nationalisation of Indira Gandhi and the liberalisation of

**Direct Benefit Transfer can doubtless be seen as Modi’s legacy.** But like bank nationalisation and MNREGA, it has a strong political aspect

Narasimha Rao. That doesn’t look good after 11 years in power.

What does stand out, however, is his commitment to welfarism. Some of that, like DBT, can doubtless be seen as a legacy. But like bank nationalisation and MNREGA, it has a strong political aspect. UPI is also a major achievement. And it is apolitical.

Actually, when you examine it closely, there have been only two legacies that were completely apolitical. One was Rajiv Gandhi’s push to take India into a higher technological orbit. The other was Narasimha Rao’s abolition of resource allocation by industrial licensing.

So far Modi has been focusing on improving distribution of various things in the consumption baskets of the poor. But he has done nothing to improve their productivity.

The improvements in distributive efficiency are one time gains in the productivity of government expenditure but not of the consumer.

This is the mountain that Modi has to climb now. He has to come up with an idea that creates more losers than winners in order to improve the efficiency of all economic activity in the

country. This means he ignores the political fallout of the change he is proposing. Nothing else will place him on par with Rajiv Gandhi and Narasimha Rao.

**MY ADVICE**  
If he were to ask me, I’d repeat my old advice: delete Article 311 of the Constitution. It’s not in the domain of economic policy but will have massive economic benefits. It’s the one thing that might kickstart private investment in India which is mercilessly bullied and exploited by government employees.

Running businesses in India is one of the most courageous things humans can do. Bureaucrats in India spare no one, not even their political masters.

Why? How? Because Article 311 almost completely protects civil servants from being dismissed. The only grounds for dismissal is criminal conduct. Corruption and incompetence aren’t grounds for dismissal under this Article.

This is an unheard of immunity. It must go. Does Modi have the political courage to do it? Its deletion, after all, will be on par with the deletion of Article 370.

AI’s role in enhancing transparency in procurement

AI engines can read, extract, and compare information at scale and flag anomalies for human review

Nav Goel

In India’s trillion-rupee procurement ecosystem — where transparency, value-for-money, and speed are paramount — tenders are the heartbeat. The scale is staggering: government procurement across Union, State, and PSU purchases accounts for nearly 20-22 per cent of GDP.

From defence to healthcare, rural electrification to high-speed rail, procurement shapes the country’s development story.

Yet behind this machinery lies an often-overlooked aspect: the demanding nature of evaluation. Officers tasked with scrutinising tenders wade through thousands of pages — checking eligibility, verifying certificates, and comparing bids — under pressing deadlines. While platforms like GeM have digitised the front-end, the back-end is still dependent on extensive documentation.

**EVALUATION CHALLENGE**  
Consider this: in FY24 alone, GeM processed over ₹3 lakh crore worth of goods and services, with more than one crore product listings and 65,000 registered government buyers. Each tender receives anywhere between 5 and 25 bids, depending on its scope, with vendors uploading statutory, technical, and financial documents, often running into 2,000 pages or more.

While digital platforms have transformed access, the next step is enabling intelligent interpretation of data. Bidders upload; officers download. But evaluation is still dependent on

extensive documentation often resulting in cognitive overload sometimes leading to longer timelines and inadvertent errors.

This is where GenAI — offers a breakthrough. In the present-day system, by combining Optical Character Recognition (OCR) with semantic parsing, AI engines can read, extract, and compare information at scale. What takes days for humans can be reduced to hours, with fewer mistakes and more transparency. Imagine an AI agent that ingests bids directly from GeM or CPP or IREPS, identifies whether eligibility criteria like turnover or certifications are met, and produces a compliance matrix — flagging anomalies for human review. A dashboard highlights each vendor’s status in red or green, leaving officers free to focus on exceptions rather than routine checks.

**SUGGESTED EVALUATION STEPS**  
**Machine-Readable Bid Annexures (MRBA):** Alongside the regular PDF, bidders can submit a signed JSON/XML sheet with key eligibility data — turnover, net worth, OEM certificates, BIS/ISO numbers, PAN/GST, labour registrations. This reduces parsing errors and allows deterministic, rule-based checks.

**Trusted data cross-checks:** AI can link directly (read-only) to government systems like MCA-21 (company basics), GSTN (registration validity), EPFO/ESIC (statutory codes), BIS (licences), UDYAM (MSME status), and UDIN (turnover certificates).

MRBA fields can be instantly verified, producing a log of matches, mismatches, or exceptions — while the committee



PROCUREMENT. Tech solutions

retains the final say.

**Clause-to-evidence mapping (CEM):** Tender clauses are uploaded in a structured format (e.g., “minimum average annual turnover ₹X; required document: audited financials Y/N”).

AI highlights the exact page or snippet in each bid that meets — or fails — the requirement, and generates a comparative statement with links to source documents. This creates a transparent, audit-ready trail.

**Risk and exceptions register (RER):** Instead of opaque AI scoring, the system can maintain a visible register of issues — missing pages, expired certificates, arithmetic errors, or unusually low bids. Each flagged item requires a human decision (accept, seek clarification, or reject), embedding accountability while cutting routine workload.

**AI-led rate reasonability:** Determining fair price is often the most complex task. AI can scan procurement archives across GeM, CPP, IREPS, and state systems to surface the Last Accepted Rate (LAR) for comparable works. Factoring in geography, inflation,

scope, and scale, it provides committees with a benchmark range.

For instance, a bridge tender in Bareilly can be compared against similar works across Indian Railways, CPWD, and PWDs in the past three years — adjusted for region and escalation.

**National procurement database:** On the lines of PM Gati Shakti, which integrates 1,614 data layers across 44 ministries and 36 States/UTs, a centralised procurement database of LARs can be developed. This broadens AI’s learning base and ensures benchmarking is both accurate and nationally representative.

Concerns about AI replacing human judgment are misplaced. AI will not decide who wins a contract — it will simply remove the drudgery. Accountability will always rest with evaluation committees. AI outputs should be treated like preliminary screening reports: useful for flagging non-compliance but always subject to human verification. The government, too, can issue clear guidelines to define responsibilities and ensure audit trails.

AI can also support pre-tender stages — drafting RFPs, removing contradictory clauses, and standardising evaluation formats. This is particularly valuable in departments with high officer turnover and weak institutional memory.

A phased approach to AI-assisted evaluation, beginning with pilot projects and training, integrating platforms like GeM, CPP, IREPS with AI modules could complement existing policy efforts.

The writer is with Indian Railway Accounts Service. Views expressed are personal

● BELOW THE LINE



RBI. Appointment time REUTERS

**DG race heats up in RBI**  
RBI Executive Directors SC Murmu, Vivek Deep, Rohit Jain and RS Ratho are believed to be in the race to get elevated as a Deputy Governor. Their candidature is being considered by the Government as Deputy Governor M. Rajeshwar Rao’s

one-year extension will end on October 8, 2025.

Rao has been a Deputy Governor since October 9, 2020. Murmu is the senior-most ED in RBI, having been elevated to the position in November 2019. While Deep became ED in September 2020, Jain and Ratho became EDs in December 2020.

**Look before you leap**  
The banking regulator RBI has burnt its fingers in sovereign gold bonds. After the sharp rally in yellow metal prices, it rightly suspended fresh SGB issuances in February.

Taking a swipe at RBI, a mutual fund distributor suggested that the regulator, like investors, should have

consulted an ‘advisor’ before launching SGB.

It underestimated the consumer appetite for gold and its pricing dynamics. Meanwhile, investors are rejoicing and believe “SGB bhi sahi hai”.

**Chickpeas woes**  
With the prices of pulses crashing in the global market, a section of the trade is pointing fingers at something that is happening in the Gulf region.

Companies in the region, which are at the centre of an investigation, had shipped Kabuli chana (chickpeas) to India by misrepresenting the country of origin to avoid the 44 per cent customs duty.

The chana had reportedly originated from Russia and Turkey. Traders say shipping and customs documents were misdeclared to claim the consignments are from nations with which India has preferential trade agreements. These imports are distorting the domestic market, and traders regret that, despite these shady deals, some among them are seeking the government’s support for the trouble they are facing.

**Grandson rise?**  
We are familiar with son rise in politics, but Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah seems to be grooming grandson Dhawan to take over his political legacy if recent developments are any indication.

Dhawan son of Siddaramaiah’s first-born Rakesh — who passed away at a young age of 39 in 2016 — has started putting in appearances at Kuruba (shepherd) community events which they belong to. Rakesh who used to look after his father’s constituency was expected to be his father’s political heir but had an untimely demise.

While the CMs second son Yathindra is an MLC, Congress insiders say Siddaramaiah seems to favour Dhawan. For now the grandson is appearing at more events with the CM to learn the political ropes. It remains to be seen whether Dhawan or Yathindra will eventually inherit his political legacy. **Our Bureaus**





OPINION

The  
Hindustan Times  
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

Moment of reckoning

The fatal blow to the H-IB visa programme has ramifications for India-US ties

If Deng Xiaoping’s reforms made China the factory of the world, the 1991 reforms propelled India as a services superpower. At least three generations of Indians, both companies and people, have used migration to unleash value creation for the world and unlock upward mobility for themselves and their country. As the global economic leader, the US naturally emerged as the largest destination of this migration. The H-IB visa programme that was started at almost the same time as the reforms in India was the principal vehicle of this mutually beneficial migration. India’s dominance in the H-IB visa programme is even greater than Chinese dominance in merchandise exports.

Barring the proverbial TACO — Trump always chickens out — the US has virtually killed the H-IB visa programme. This is because the new application fees of \$100,000 for the visa is more than the median wage for employees working in the US under this programme. It is extremely unlikely that employers — companies, universities, hospitals — will pay a year’s worth or more of salary in visa fees to get foreign (overwhelmingly Indian) employees.

With Trump’s fatal blow to the H-IB visa, India is perhaps the worst-off among countries in terms of commercial engagement with the US. It faces a 50% tariff on its merchandise exports. It will now face the prospect of the highly paid, and more importantly growth enhancing migrant worker route being virtually shut for its citizens in the US. Anybody who believes that the Indo-US strategic partnership rhetoric can be carried on ignoring hostility the US has injected in the relationship in the past few months needs a reality check.

The Trump administration and its political outlook is clearly invested in things which are significantly anti-Indian in implications. The government of India ought to work, urgently and with a cool head on how many of these onslaughts by the Trump administration can be reversed. There should be a willingness for pragmatic trade-offs to get the best possible deal. Even the Indian companies who have benefitted the most from the H-IB visa programme should honestly introspect and engage whether their over-use of this visa programme have added to the hostility against it.

The many lives of Mohanlal, the artiste

The 1980s were an interesting time in Kerala — and in Malayalam cinema. The ideological certitudes that dominated politics in the previous decades were making way for transactional coalitions that emphasised negotiation and compromise. Malayali youth migrated to West Asia rather than to the Indian metros. Cinema had gone colour and was in search of new stars — it no longer pivoted around the trio of Sathyan, Prem Nazir, and Madhu, who dominated the industry until the 1970s. The idea of the hero itself was changing. A new cast of directors and writers preferred a light-hearted take on the daily life of Malayalis and sought actors who could portray the average Joe, with a penchant for mischief and comedy, on the screen. In exceptional circumstances, this new hero would also achieve exceptional feats such as pulping a dozen villains twice his size. But pastiche and satire had become par for the box office as much as films that centred on larger-than-life characters and chocolate heroes.

Mohanlal, who debuted in Malayalam cinema in 1980 as a villain, was a product of this time, and his popularity was built on his ability to represent the young men of that time. In close to 50 years in the film industry, he has played the anti-hero, action man, romantic hero, comic actor par excellence, loving son, father, brother, husband, friend, and family man on screen. He has been convincing as a classical musician and gangster, auto driver and business tycoon, Gulf migrant and returnee, conman and cop, as top directors — Aravindan, IV Sasi, Bharatan, Padmarajan, Sathyan Anthikad, Sibi Malayil, Mani Ratnam, Ram Gopal Varma, among others — cast him in their films. Like clay in the hands of the potter or wood/stone for a sculptor, he was malleable, willing, and committed to becoming the character. That explains the many accolades, including two national awards, and legions of admirers, across age and gender. The Dadasaheb Phalke Award, the highest honour for a film personality in India, acknowledges a great acting talent and the huge corpus of an immensely liked artiste, Lalettan, as he is known to Malayalis.

Defence and offence on West Asia chessboard

The Saudi-Pak defence pact reflects broader geopolitical shifts rather than a fundamental anti-Indian alignment. India should adopt strategic patience, enhanced defensive preparedness and a proactive diplomatic agenda

The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan on September 17, 2025, marks a significant turning point in West Asian geopolitics, formalising a decades-long strategic alignment and creating new ripples that could alter regional security architectures and challenge India’s strategic positioning. This unprecedented pact establishes a Nato-style mutual defence commitment, declaring that “any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both”. While building upon nearly eight decades of deep-seated bilateral cooperation, this provision legally obligates mutual support in the event of an attack, encompassing joint military responses, enhanced intelligence sharing, and coordinated deterrence strategies, buttressed by Saudi investments of up to \$15 billion in Pakistan’s defence-industrial complex.

While not explicitly stated, the ambiguous “comprehensive defensive” scope of the agreement has fuelled interpretations of an implicit

nuclear dimension. The theory posits that Pakistan’s arsenal, estimated at 170 warheads, could indirectly extend a nuclear deterrent to Saudi interests without physical transfers. This arrangement would navigate non-proliferation norms and avoid direct violations of US non-proliferation laws, leveraging Pakistan’s status as a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its rejection of a no-first-use policy. However, this nuclear umbrella theory is contested. Sceptics argue the pact is more a political signal of solidarity than an unconditional war guarantee, noting that Pakistan’s nuclear doctrine remains overwhelmingly India-centric and its command-and-control structures are unlikely to be subordinated to foreign interests.

The agreement’s timing reflects a calculated Saudi response to the perceived breakdown of the US-led security order in the region. Israel’s unprecedented trans-border air strikes on Doha, a GCC member and close US ally, crossed a significant red line, exposing fundamental vulnerabilities in the American security umbrella. This has prompted Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, to adopt a hedging strategy aimed at diversifying security partnerships in an increasingly multipolar world. The subsequent calls for an Arab-Islamic Nato, a concept building on the existing 43-member Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), have gained traction, with Pakistani officials confirming that the “doors are not closed” for other nations to join the pact.

For India, this defence pact presents multifaceted challenges. First, it deep-

ens the China-Pakistan strategic nexus, potentially creating a coordinated axis that could challenge Indian interests. Chinese diplomatic and intelligence support could enhance Pakistan’s regional influence, while economic partnerships with Gulf States might provide alternative financing for Pakistani military capabilities, complicating India’s strategic balancing act. Initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which passes through Saudi Arabia, now face an additional layer of political uncertainty. While the project already confronts significant financing and logistical hurdles, Riyadh’s binding defence commitments to Islamabad could complicate future cooperation on such a vital geo-economic initiative.

Second, the agreement may dilute international pressure on Pakistan through forums like the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). Although Pakistan was removed from the FATF’s grey list in 2022, its elevated role as a key security provider in West Asia could grant it greater diplomatic leverage. While Saudi Arabia’s influence within the consensus-based FATF is not absolute, it could make it more challenging to build a coalition to hold Pakistan accountable for terror financing in the future. This, in turn, may embolden Pakistan-based non-State actors like Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, potentially lowering the threshold for cross-border provocations and complicating India’s response calculus.

However, several moderating factors temper the most alarmist scenarios. India’s carefully cultivated strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, a



Ausaf Sayeed



India’s carefully cultivated strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, a leading energy supplier and significant investor, is unlikely to be discarded. PIB

leading energy supplier and significant investor, is unlikely to be discarded. Riyadh has been quick to reassure New Delhi of its commitment to bilateral ties in counterterrorism, maritime security, and energy. More importantly, the Kingdom’s overriding priority is the success of its Vision 2030, an ambitious plan for economic diversification and social reform that requires regional stability and a secure investment climate. Becoming a co-belligerent in an India-Pakistan conflict would directly threaten these core objectives, making Riyadh more likely to act as a crisis manager or mediator than an active participant.

Confronted with these new realities, India’s response must be multifaceted, combining diplomatic, economic, and security efforts under the umbrella of strategic autonomy. India should intensify its engagement with Gulf partners by expanding cooperation in defence, counterterrorism, and maritime security, while simultaneously bolstering economic ties. India’s strengths in digital public infrastructure, AI, and green energy solutions align perfectly with Gulf diversification goals, offering a superior value proposition. India can enhance cooperation through forums like I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, US) to foster regional integration projects. Critically, India must actively pursue alternative connectivity routes, such as the

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port, which bypass Pakistan, to mitigate potential disruptions to IMEC and enhance its regional influence, while acknowledging the geopolitical challenges these projects face.

Ultimately, while the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Agreement reflects broader geopolitical shifts rather than a fundamental anti-Indian alignment, the optimal path forward for India is not one of confrontation or alarmism. India should adopt an approach of strategic patience, complemented by enhanced defensive preparedness and a proactive diplomatic and economic agenda. The most effective response is asymmetrical: To leverage India’s unique and formidable strengths in technology, trade, and human capital, thereby becoming an indispensable partner in the Gulf’s journey of economic transformation. By demonstrating a superior and more comprehensive value proposition, India can ensure that its partnerships in the region are not only resilient but continue to thrive.

In navigating the complexities of a multipolar West Asia, India’s greatest asset will be its ability to prove that it is the region’s most valuable partner for the future.

Ausaf Sayeed is a former ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The views expressed are personal

{ STRAIGHTFORWARD }

Shashi Shekhar



A world of chaos, with peace in short supply

Years ago, we accidentally bumped into each other in Anantnag. He started narrating his tragic story, saying he was being harassed due to political reasons. He contacted the deputy commissioner with his complaint, but neither the DC nor anyone else was ready to listen to him. Sheer helplessness drove him to tears. Terrorists in military outfits, military men with long beards, would keep knocking at his doors at will. He said they barged into the house without permission and lamented the misfortune that befell him. That encounter kept popping up in my mind yesterday (September 21), which is marked as World Peace Day.

The United Nations designated World Peace Day in 1981, hoping that at least on this day, the world would observe a ceasefire and there would be no terrorist activity. It didn’t turn out that way. Without dwelling too much on history, if we focus on the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas conflicts, we would find that the former is into its fourth year, while the latter is poised to enter its third year. Both nations are members of the UN: Russia has veto power in the permanent Security Council. Still, both Vladimir Putin and Benjamin Netanyahu, leaders of Russia and Israel, respectively, have ignored the pleas of the UN.

We can’t expect anything from terrorists, but how should one react when nations bound by UN conventions start promoting terrorism?

The Pahalgam terror attack is a prime example. We are all witnesses to the kind of despicable act perpetrated by terror outfits sponsored by Pakistan. In retaliation, India destroyed many terror camps in Pakistan by launching Operation Sindoor. The director general of military operations told Pakistani counterparts the very night that their operation was over. We can stop here itself. But Pakistan retaliated. The world watched with bated breath for three days as two nuclear powers engaged in an aerial duel, hoping it wouldn’t spiral into a full-blown nuclear war.

The news of the ceasefire was received with great relief worldwide. But the question remains: What happens if Pakistan doesn’t mend its ways? People were grappling with the possibilities when Thailand and Cambodia clashed on their border. The way the two countries used air power and heavy artillery to wrest control of a monastery shocked the world. The global political atmosphere has turned incendiary, clearly. The Cold War developing between China and the US will make it even more precarious.

The current crisis began on February 24, 2022, when Russia attacked Ukraine. The conflict has affected close to 10 million people, yet there’s no end in sight to this bloody confrontation. Ukraine’s effective counter has taken the sheen off Russian strategic invincibility, but it does little to assuage the common person who has lost everything in

the war.

The situation in Gaza is worse. The Israeli army is hell bent on exiling two million Palestinian residents. Where will they go? The neighbouring Muslim nations have shut their doors on them. The Muslim Brotherhood’s threats have long been discredited as mere sloganeering.

The rich Arab States started speaking up only after Israeli jets attacked Qatar. The nation is home to the biggest US military base in West Asia. A question arises: Did Netanyahu conduct the raids without a US nod? The Arab nations rattled by Israeli *chutzpah* are closing ranks after decades. A surprising fact came to light during the India-Pak conflict. A Turkish naval ship and officers were present in Pakistan during the operation. Turkey, like China, provided drones and diplomatic support to Pakistan. Even Azerbaijan, driven by Muslim fealty, supported Pakistan.

Last week, news of a military alliance between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan dominated the headlines. It’s clear that nuclear-armed Pakistan is flexing its muscles and wants to assume a lead role in the Muslim world, and is finding support.

These are worrying signs and do not augur well for India. The reason is that between the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the spread of Covid-19 in 2019, at least a billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty. The pandemic delivered a huge blow to these efforts. It obstructed the growing feeling of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family). During the pandemic, many social scientists aired their concerns that the selfishness emerging from such a situation would intensify in the coming years. They weren’t wrong. In his second stint in the Oval Office, US president Donald Trump has resorted to tariff terror that has furthered alienation and forging of new groupings; it’s inspiring a European bloc, a former Communist bloc, Asean, and African identities. The question is how many blocs does the world intend to divide itself into? Who benefits?

The disaffection and confusion at the top are percolating to the last person in the queue, as many nations are descending into internal chaos and conflict. The inferno of dissatisfaction among the masses is threatening almost every society. What happened in neighbouring Nepal is a cause for worry. Earlier, we witnessed similar storms in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In the last three months, England, Australia and many parts of Europe saw demonstrations that challenged the West’s secular democratic credentials.

We are heading towards unknown and unfair times. There can be no bigger threat to world peace. Similar situations emerging during the 1930s ended up in World War II. Why do we never learn from the past?

Shashi Shekhar is editor-in-chief, Hindustan. The views expressed are personal

{ EMMANUEL MACRON } PRESIDENT, FRANCE



This is the best evidence ... that this is a political project whose objective is not to dismantle Hamas but to kill the possibility of two States

Israel’s settlement expansion plans in the occupied West Bank



Women central to India’s Stem-led development

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi, at the launch of the Swasth Nari Shakti Parivar Abhiyaan on his 75th birthday, said, “If the mother stays healthy, then the whole house stays well. If a mother falls ill, the entire family’s system crumbles”. This recognition — that women’s well-being is the foundation of our national progress — is at the heart of India’s development journey.

Women are not just participants in this journey, they are its drivers. Across labs, clinical wards, farms, and biotech startups, silent yet powerful achievements are shaping our future. Consider the 10 lakh Asha workers who form the backbone of India’s primary health care system, often the first responders during outbreaks. Or the women scientists at the Indian Council of Medical Research, National Institute of Virology, and All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) who, in 2020, helped isolate SARS-CoV2, the Covid-19 virus — paving the way for India’s indigenous vaccines that led to over two billion vaccinations undertaken through the world’s largest immunisation drive.

Over 60% of female workers in India work in agriculture, many now trained in deploying biotech-based solutions for drought resilience and crop protection. In biotech entrepreneurship, women are leading startups in affordable diagnostics, genomics, and vaccine innovation. They are the living proof of India’s Nari Shakti.

Government initiatives have been pivotal in unlocking this potential. From Beti Bachao Beti Padhao to Mission Shakti, from the historic Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam ensuring women’s representation in Parliament, to economic empowerment through Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Stand-Up India, and Jan Dhan Yojana — the architecture for women-driven development is firmly in place. To illustrate, over 56 crore Jan Dhan accounts have been opened, with women holding nearly 56% of them — a scale of financial inclusion rarely seen worldwide. Under the Mudra Yojana, nearly 70% of the 52 crore loans have been disbursed to women entrepreneurs. The Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam will soon ensure that one-third of Parliament seats are reserved for women — guaranteeing their voice helps shape policy.

In science and technology, too, Indian women are literally reaching for the stars. At the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO), women scientists were mission directors for Chandrayaan-2 and the Mars Orbiter Mission,

showcasing India’s rise as a space power.

Crucially, India leads the world in women’s participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (Stem) education — 43% of Stem graduates in India are women, compared with 34% in the United States, 32% in the European Union, and 33% in the OECD average.

Yet, only 19% of scientists, engineers, and technologists are directly engaged in research and development (R&D) in scientific establishments, highlighting the urgent need to convert education gains into workplace representation.

Government programmes like BioCARE and Women in Science and Engineering-KIRAN (WISE-KIRAN) have enabled women scientists returning from career breaks to resume innovation. Recently, the Biotechnology Industry Research Association Council (BIRAC) celebrated

75+ women biotech entrepreneurs, signalling the arrival of a new generation of leaders. Globally, women hold just less than 20% of biotech leadership positions, showing how India’s progress can set benchmarks for inclusivity in science entrepreneurship. The future of science-led development will be shaped by women advancing genomics, molecular diagnostics, biologics, and precision therapies. They will lead biotech supply chains, regulatory ecosystems, and grassroots health delivery networks, ensuring affordable therapies reach even the remotest villages.

My own journey — from a garage lab to building a global biologics enterprise — has taught me that innovation is not born in boardrooms alone. It emerges from the grassroots, powered by perseverance: The technician, the post-doc, the health worker. When given opportunity and recognition, their impact is exponential. The biotech revolution, health security, food resilience, and space and digital technologies will define India’s rise in the decades ahead. The PM’s vision is clear: Women are not to be seen as beneficiaries, but as co-architects of this future. Now is the time for leadership across sectors to ensure that women scientists, nurses, health workers, and entrepreneurs are fully visible, fully resourced, and fully empowered. When that happens, India will not just meet its pledge — it will exceed global expectations. Because a future built by all of us, and led by women, will be unstoppable.

Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw is founder, chairman and managing director of Biocon Limited. The views expressed are personal



OUR VIEW



# H-1B: Gloomy forecasts are highly exaggerated

America's H-1B visa fee hike ticks all the wrong boxes for America and a few right ones for India. Our IT service firms are just as likely to adapt to this payroll cost shift as their rivals

Will the US hike in its fee for prized H-1B visas from a few thousand dollars to \$100,000 spell doom for India's infotech (IT) sector? Hardly. It affects new visas, not the existing ones that usually last for three years and can be renewed for another three. Even if renewals do attract the hiked visa fee, as policy in Trumpland could tighten on a dime, our IT service companies would have time to recalibrate their business strategy. For now, this revised fee will hasten the automation that artificial intelligence (AI) has already set in motion and relocate some work to India and perhaps Mexico and Canada; as US-based personnel help service clients on-site, having them a short flight away could serve that end. American Big Tech companies that have Indian talent on H-1B visas would probably outsource more work to India as well. The US government has many projects being done by entities that employ people on these visas; so, while it tries to shield its citizens from low-cost foreign labour this way, policy-inflated payroll bills will also inflate the tabs it picks up. The biggest blow would be borne by second-tier US universities, which will attract fewer Indian students—who will foresee poor post-college job options since it would cost an employer a whole lot more for the first year, including the minimum salary specified for a recruit on an H-1B visa.

In general, fewer Indians would migrate to the US, increasing the supply of talent for Indian enterprises, the more far-sighted of which would employ it to develop intellectual property of their own. Amid fast-evolving tech challenges, our recruiters should be rubbing palms in anticipation. The readiness of Indian

graduates to start businesses on their own might get a boost too, with an American career less viable as a pursuit. We can also expect new space to open up for devising AI tools that ease the relocation of work from the US back home to India. How can we be confident that the hike's impact on the IT services sector will be minimal? The work for which Indians are sent to the US does not go away once H-1B visas get costlier. Indian firms won IT contracts because they are the best placed to do that work cost-effectively and a visa-free spike is not an automatic trigger for a surge in the supply of trained local talent that could take the place of H-1B workers. Indeed, our companies' competitors, be they Western or other Indian firms, would face the same talent crunch and cost escalation as a result of this protectionist move. There is no reason why these businesses would not be just as nimble as their rivals in adapting to a reset of payroll costs.

American universities, on the other hand, would struggle to replace Indian students, their largest foreign contingent. Bad political vibes have already constricted the supply of Chinese students and now these varsities stand to lose even more fee revenues. This could push up tuition fees for local students, particularly in science, engineering, technology and math streams, depressing enrolment levels that are already low. US universities may have to offer fatter scholarships to attract foreign students for post-graduate programmes that usually enrol a large share of seats from overseas. If they do not, a foreseeable talent shortage would crimp the prospects of America Inc. Big Tech included, more than anybody else's. In short, it marks an inward turn that ticks all the wrong boxes for another 'American century.'

MY VIEW | MODERN TIMES

# Vengeance is far harder to carry out than it may seem

MANU JOSEPH



is a journalist, novelist and screenwriter. His latest book is 'Why the Poor Don't Kill Us.'

In June last year, a man named Renukaswamy, who worked in a medical shop, was found dead miles away from home in a drain in Bangalore. It later emerged that he was a fan of Kannada actor Darshan and had sent an indecent message to another actor, Pavithra Gowda, believed to have been in a relationship with Darshan at the time.

The prosecution's case is that Darshan's henchmen abducted Renukaswamy, beat him up, tortured him, including with electric shocks, and in the process killed him before disposing of the body. It is also alleged that Darshan and Gowda themselves had beaten up the man in their custody, it is alleged. A few weeks ago, Pavithra Gowda's fresh bail plea was rejected. Around the same time, the Supreme Court had cancelled Darshan's bail, placing him back in custody.

The police do accept Renukaswamy had a history of sending lewd messages to women. If what the prosecution maintains is true, then Renukaswamy died from a reaction to his trolling. He would never have

imagined that a message from his phone could result in a violent and painful death.

Most trolls, online or off, do not realize how dangerous their actions are. People who are slighted or infuriated can act in ways that are out of proportion to the offence.

People seem to carry a parallel life in their minds, where they react to injustice against them with imagined acts of violence. These fantasies are rarely proportional to the actual harm suffered. There is an episode of *Black Mirror* where a man designs a complex scheme to lure people into trolling a writer, and then sets out to kill them through robotic insects because he despises trolls. Watching it, I couldn't help but feel the writer was probably living out a fantasy.

Most people do not act on their fantasies of revenge; such visions exist only in their own minds, perhaps to relish in private. However, some people do act them out. And it is in the nature of revenge to be disproportionate to the provocation.

People seek vengeance all the time. Normally, vengeance in everyday life is minor and goes undetected. It may occur in offices, colonies or neighbourhoods—not as criminal acts, but as subtle injuries or professional sabotage that are still out of proportion to their triggers.

Nearly everyone has been harmed by someone at some point. Often, people know the perpetrator and fantasize about spectacular revenge. Both men and women are capable of a lot of mental violence. But it is a reasonable guess that most of them never act on it, because action requires time and effort.

People have complex plots, but execution is another matter. Also, vengeance that is successful and anonymous is almost impossible, even for the powerful.

Like most people, I have never managed respectable revenge, even though I have satisfying ideas. I know exactly what to do, but the execution is too elaborate for me to suffer. A few weeks ago, a guy picked a fight with me in a parking bay because he thought my car had touched his when I was reversing. He was so dramatic that I started laughing. He walked away meekly. I thought that was the end of it. But I realized later that he had returned to the spot and key-scratched my car. He was a man who could act on an impulse of vengeance. He had to wait

patiently to ensure I was a safe distance away, go to my car, hold the key discreetly, and damage my car. But there were at least three security cameras in the area.

But then, have you ever gone in search of camera footage? It looks easy only in films. There was a bank in the vicinity with cameras, the building itself had a camera that would have captured him, and a liquor shop where the man went, had an interior camera. I knew what to do, but it seemed boring. Maybe I should let it go; it is a small act in the immenseness of the universe. Perhaps that restraint was not maturity, perhaps all of maturity itself is laziness. It occurred to me that vengeance is a famous aspect of human nature but most people have never experienced it.

So I thought let me set out to fix him. The building's camera in the common area, I was told, didn't work. The thing about security cameras is that most of them don't work. I went to the bank; they made me wait for 10 minutes because it is a bank and then told

me that for them to show the footage, I would need to file a police complaint. At this point, I was already bored. It was not worth my time. Still, I went to the cops, hoping that they would dissuade me from pursuing the matter, which was what they did.

I have undertaken more complicated investigations in pursuit of stories or in search of authentic Malabar *parottas* on my diet-cheat days; I can even run for no reason for an hour, but to act against a petty man seemed so onerous that I gave up within the first hour of trying. I make characters do such elaborate things as part of my plots in novels and film, but in real life, these actions take too much effort. For instance, it is not easy to enter someone's house and wait on the sofa to ambush him.

Figure that in every aspect of life, there is planning, which is enjoyable, and doing, which only a few can do. I used to know someone who loved making plans to study and spent hours colour-coding days and subjects, but never got down to studying till a day before the exam. And I know people who love making fitness plans but never wake up for them. But they do act on other plans in other facets of life. Some people act out their darkest thoughts; they can even plan and kill. Most of us, though, only fantasize.

MY VIEW | THE INTERSECTION

# Revolutions do not happen just because all of its elements exist

While many factors usually converge to cause unrest, a complex social fabric often acts like a buffer



**NITIN PAI** is co-founder and director of The Takshashila Institution, an independent centre for research and education in public policy.

A revolution is almost always an emergent phenomenon. The ingredients for one might exist for a long time, but they do not always come together in a politically explosive form. This explains why mass protests, let alone revolutions, are relatively rare in history and current affairs. If the existence of poverty, corruption, injustice, misgovernance, young people and smartphones were enough to cause revolutions, many countries around the world would be in constant upheaval. It is important, therefore, to be humble when commenting on what caused a revolution. Any revolution.

Manu Joseph had an insightful commentary on this month's "Gen Z protests" in Nepal in *Mint* last week that argued a lot more went into the unrest than merely outraged young people incensed by the government cutting off access to social media. "At the heart of all revolutions," he reminds us, "is the second rung of power, aristocracy, wealth or clergy, attempting to bring down those above them. For this, they recruit a moral reason and the youth and poor." After the protests, power in Nepal now vests with an upright septuagenarian no-nonsense prime minister, a politically cautious army chief and a number of actors who have entered politics through unconventional routes. There are rap stars, television anchors, humanitarian relief workers and busi-

ness entrepreneurs vying to capture political power. The forms of political negotiation are impressive—Discord servers being used for debate and decision-making is a first—but its substance is the same old, even if Gen Z believes it is a new idea to "throw out the old corrupt establishment." But let us hope that Nepal enters a new phase of political stability, economic growth and social harmony: maybe good governance is also an emergent phenomenon.

Nepal's upheaval follows those in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh in recent years and in Indonesia last month. The nepotism memes that fuelled resentment in Nepal initially crossed over from Indonesia. In 2025, it would be naive to believe that memes and trending topics on social media remain organic for too long. A half-decent political operation anywhere in the world opportunistically exploits otherwise ephemeral trends and uses them to its advantage. This is not to say that all memes and hashtags are manufactured, but that it would be a mistake to underestimate the role of organized efforts to stoke public anger and push things toward the brink. *Cui bono*, after all?

Canada's Cascade Institute, a specialist in complexity science, has a simple framework to analyse how crises take place. It involves two types of causal factors: slow boiling ones called 'stresses' and fast processes called 'triggers.' Sometimes they come together in a hard to predict manner and become crises. Rough calculations show that the probability of protests increases significantly when the proportion of young people in a population exceeds 20% and smartphone penetration and urbanization levels cross 50%. All countries in the subcontinent and Indonesia fall in this spectrum. By these measures, the countries at even higher risk of revolution are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Turkey, all Central Asian republics, Mongolia and the Philippines. It is impossible to predict trigger events, but one lesson they might take from Nepal

is perhaps not to ban social media.

That brings us to the question of the relationship between transnational technology platforms and sovereign states. Much of the media reportage demonizes Nepal's ousted Oli government for banning social media, as if it were a sudden and arbitrary act of censorship. It was not. The ban followed a wilful refusal by foreign social media platforms to comply with a lawful directive that was, in turn, a result of a judicial order requiring them to comply with Nepalese law. You can accuse the Oli government of being ham-handed and lacking political sensitivity, but you cannot blame it for acting illegally. The events in Nepal have emboldened social media platforms, which can now dare democratic governments to try and hold them to account. Again, it is 2025 and no one can claim social media companies are upholding principles such as free speech. They are not neutral actors. They are, at best, acting to promote their commercial interests, and at worst as instruments of information warfare in the hands of their home governments. Social media has empowered platforms more than it has people. All sovereign states, especially democracies, must be concerned about this.

Revolutions are rare because societies—even authoritarian ones—tend to have lower-risk options for people to make their voices heard. They are also rare because people are not monolithic or even stratified into classes, as many believe. A century ago, Communists, inspired by their European experience, thought that peasants and workers in India constituted a class that could be provoked to rise against their alleged oppressors. Their hoped-for revolution didn't happen as the fabric of Indian society was woven differently. Indeed, such complexity in many societies masks their resilience and ability to effect change without violent upheaval. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on who you are. And, in these times, perhaps on how old you are.



JUST A THOUGHT

A skilled worker, regardless of the job description, remains a treasure.

MADELEINE M. KUNIN







THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON POWER OF THE NEW GENERATION

90% of people believe that new generation played a significant role in shaping the country

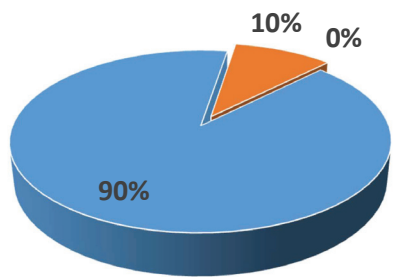
Gen-Z is emerging as a decisive force in shaping India's future, with most youth prioritizing development and a corruption-free society. A growing

section leans towards national politics after the Ayodhya Ram Mandir inauguration. Analysts believe this generation will significantly influ-

ence leadership choices in India and globally in coming years.

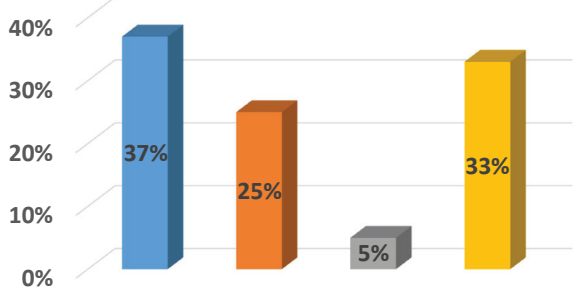
Q1.▶

Has the new generation played a significant role in shaping the country and society's future?



A - Yes  
B - No  
C - Cannot say

Development  
Corruption-free society  
Caste-free government  
All of the above/Other

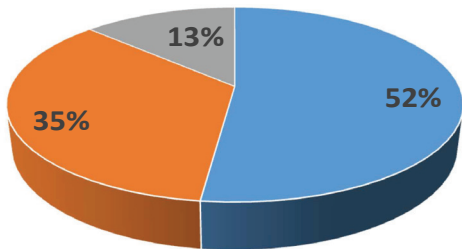
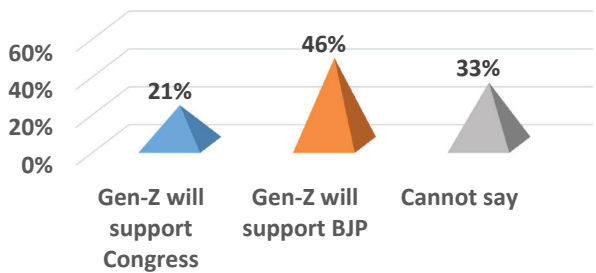


Q2.◀

According to you, what does Gen-Z want for the country?

Q3.▶

Regarding Rahul Gandhi's recent post, what is your opinion on Gen-Z's support?



Yes  
No  
Cannot say

Q4.◀

After the Ayodhya Ram Mandir inauguration, has Gen-Z's inclination towards national politics increased?

THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON BIHAR VOTERS VIEW ON LALU'S FAMILY RIFT

Majority foresee BJP-JD(U) gains from family feud

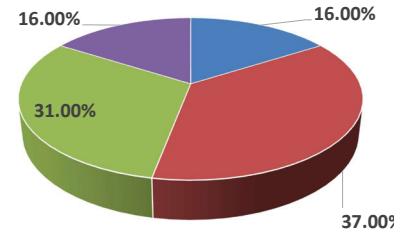
A 104-person The Daily Guardian Survey (20 Sept 2025) finds Bihar's politics shaped by the Lalu family rift: 69% see a legacy battle; effects—

Opposition weakens 37%, no impact 31%. Expected beneficiary: BJP-JD(U) 76%. Blame: Tejashwi 30%, Tej Pratap 29%. Dynastic futures:

very bleak 57%. Overall, respondents anticipate turbulence and ruling-alliance advantage.

Q1.▶

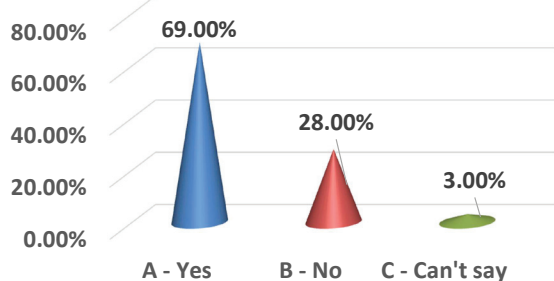
What is your opinion on the ongoing rift in the Lalu family in Bihar?



Signs of a split in the state  
The Opposition will weaken  
It will have no impact  
Can't say

Q2.◀

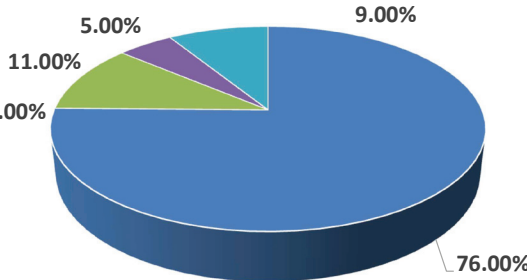
Is there a battle over political legacy within the Lalu family?



A - Yes  
B - No  
C - Can't say

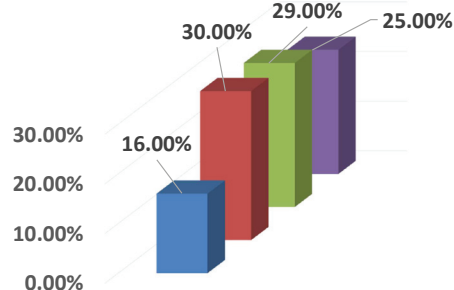
Q3.▶

From a split in RJD, which political party will benefit in the upcoming election?



BJP & JD(U)  
BJP  
JD(U)  
Congress / Others  
Can't say

Lalu Prasad Yadav  
Tejashwi Yadav  
Tej Pratap Yadav  
Can't say



Q4.◀

In your view, who could be responsible for the rift within the Lalu family?

New GST, new prices: Govt eyes festive push

CONTINUED FROM P1

Cement has been reduced to 18 per cent, while construction materials such as granite, marble and bricks will now fall under the 5 per cent rate, aimed at lowering the cost of housing and infrastructure. Agriculture has received a boost with harvesters, threshers and irrigation equipment now taxed at 5 per cent, while over 30 life-saving drugs and diagnostic kits have been exempted from GST and essential medicines including Ayurveda and Unani treatments brought under the 5 per cent bracket. Hotel stays up to Rs 7,500 a night will now attract 5 per cent GST instead of 12 per cent, and services such as salons, gyms and yoga centres will also be taxed at 5 per cent instead of 18 per cent. School essentials including pencils, crayons, erasers and exercise books are now fully exempt, while geometry boxes and other supplies have been reduced to 5 per cent. The textiles and handicrafts industries have benefited from correction of the inverted duty structure, with yarn and fibres now taxed at 5 per cent. The renewable energy sector too has gained, with GST on solar and wind equipment reduced to 5 per cent, a move expected to bring down the capital cost of projects and cut electricity tariffs for households and businesses. Even everyday items such as soaps, shampoos and packaged foods have been reduced to the 5 per cent slab, while Railways has announced that Rail Neer water bottles will now cost Rs 14, down from Rs 15. Framing the reforms as a gift to coincide with the festive season, Modi said every family would feel

the benefit of lower costs and higher savings. "From tomorrow, across the country, a GST Bachat Utsav will begin. Your savings will increase, your happiness will grow, and it will be easier to purchase the things you need. The poor, the middle class, the neo-middle class, youth, farmers, women, shopkeepers, traders and entrepreneurs will all benefit greatly," he said. He described the measures as part of a continuous process of reform, tailored to meet the "current needs and future dreams" of the country, and hailed them as the fulfilment of the long-standing vision of "One Nation, One Tax." Recalling the pre-GST era when goods faced multiple levies such as octroi, entry tax and sales tax, he said businesses and consumers alike had suffered from higher costs. "Reform is a continuous process. These GST reforms reflect our mantra of 'Nagrik Devo Bhava', and are designed to ease the lives of citizens and drive India's prosperity," he added.

The Opposition, however, dismissed the announcement as neither new nor sufficient. Congress leader Jairam Ramesh accused the Prime Minister of claiming sole ownership of changes made by the GST Council, describing GST as a "Growth-Suppressing Tax" plagued by multiple brackets, punitive rates, evasion and high compliance costs. He reiterated the Congress demand for a GST 2.0, promised in its 2024 election manifesto, and warned that key issues such as sector-specific concerns, state compensation and revenue protection remain unaddressed. Party colleague Pawan Khara said Modi's speech had offered

nothing fresh. "Was there anything new in what PM Modi said today? He made the announcement on 15th August. Today, he has made an announcement that we have been demanding since 2017... MSMEs were devastated by their own demonetisation and GST. There is a great need for state-level GST," he remarked.

Delhi Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) president Saurabh Bharadwaj also took a swipe at the timing and substance of the address. "It seemed like Prime Minister Modi would say something about increasing the fees charged by companies sponsoring H-1B applicants to \$100,000 and the tariffs imposed by US President Trump, but the GST news is very old," he told ANI. He suggested that the Prime Minister had chosen to speak at 5 p.m. instead of his customary 8 p.m. slot to avoid clashing with the India-Pakistan cricket match later in the evening. "Perhaps because tonight at 8 p.m. there is the India vs Pakistan match," he quipped.

Uttar Pradesh Congress chief Ajay Rai added that the Prime Minister's address was "unfortunate" for ignoring concerns over alleged voter fraud and democratic integrity.

Despite the criticism, Modi insisted that the reforms would strengthen India's path to self-reliance and inclusive growth. Extending greetings on the occasion of Navratri, he said the timing of the reforms symbolised a new beginning for the nation. "From the first sunrise of Navratri, the country embarks on a new chapter. Through Swadeshi, savings and self-reliance, we will build a developed India together," he concluded.

Assam CM orders CID probe into Zubeen Garg's death

CONTINUED FROM P1

DGP Harmeet Singh to consolidate all FIRs filed across Assam into a single case under CID. The first FIR, lodged at Morigaon police station, accused festival organiser Shyam Kanu Mahanta and Garg's manager Siddhartha Sharma of luring the singer abroad with malicious intent. "Assam Police will investigate Zubeen Garg's death, and those present with him in his final hours will be questioned," Sarma told reporters, adding that Singapore's High Commissioner to India, Simon Wong, had been requested for a detailed probe.

The Chief Minister, who received Garg's mortal remains at Delhi airport in the early hours of Sunday, placed a floral wreath and Assamese gamocha on the coffin, before joining admirers in singing the singer's much-loved track Mayabini. The body, flown in on a special charter, reached Guwahati where it was taken to Garg's residence in Kahilipara.

An unprecedented crowd gathered at Lokapriya Gopinath Bordoloi International Airport and later at the Arjun Bhogeswar Baruah Sports Complex in Sarusajai, where the mortal remains are being kept for public homage. Overwhelmed by the turnout,

Sarma announced the stadium would remain open through the night. "More and more people wish to see our beloved Zubeen one last time, and we deeply understand these sentiments," he posted on X.

Fans in tears offered flowers, calling his demise a "great loss for Assam". One admirer told ANI, "We don't see such a person coming again. He was evergreen." Another added, "He was a legend for all generations. The love he had for people was true."

The Assam government has declared a three-day state mourning from 20 to 22 September. All official celebrations and entertainment programmes stand cancelled, while essential services under 'Seva Saptah' will continue.

Known as the cultural face of Assam, Zubeen Garg was not only a singer but also a composer, music director, actor, and filmmaker. Over a three-decade career, he lent his voice to thousands of songs across Assamese, Hindi, Bengali, and other languages.

The decision on his last rites—whether at Sonapur near Guwahati or in Jorhat, where he grew up—remains pending. But for millions, his voice will endure as the anthem of Assam's cultural spirit.

TDP twisting facts, says YSRCP on Tirumala theft row

CONTINUED FROM P1

usurped by Chandrababu and his coterie. Instead, YSRCP restored the assets to Lord Venkateswara," he said.

Reddy further asserted that it was unprecedented in TTD's history for a fam-

ily to voluntarily return misappropriated property. "The Ravi Kumar family surrendered assets out of devotion. To twist this into a scandal, as B.R. Naidu and Nara Lokesh have done, is absurd," he remarked.

He also urged the gov-

ernment to release CCTV footage of activities inside Tirumala and criticised its handling of recent incidents, including a reported gold biscuit theft.

"Only a CBI probe will ensure transparency and fairness," Reddy reiterated.

BJP will not allow Bihar's defamation: Dy CM Sinha hits out at RJD

CONTINUED FROM P1

reporters. He demanded an apology and removal of those responsible, adding, "The responsibility for this abuse lies with you. Tomorrow, the people of Bihar will abuse you, and you will not be able to speak."

His remarks followed

Union Minister Nityanand Rai's post on X of a video purportedly showing an unidentified man using abusive language against PM Modi in Yadav's presence at an RJD rally. The controversy echoes a similar row weeks earlier, when slurs were allegedly directed at Modi and his late mother during Con-

gress leader Rahul Gandhi's Voter Adhikar Yatra.

Earlier on Sunday, Jan Suraj Party founder Prashant Kishor also criticised Yadav, asserting that the RJD's "character, thinking and way of working remain the same as during the 'jungle raj' era under Lalu Prasad Yadav."

Delhi CM vows monument revival, unveils Rs 57,000-crore drainage plan

CONTINUED FROM P1

by the life and journey of PM Modi. Praising the artists, Gupta said their work reflected India's progress and future under Modi's leadership.

Meanwhile, on Friday, Gupta announced the roll-out of Delhi's long-awaited Drainage Master Plan, with an outlay of Rs 57,000 crore. Taking a dig at the previous

AAP government, she alleged they "never cared" about addressing waterlogging and flood-related deaths.

"After 50 years, since 1974, a government with serious vision and thought made Delhi's Master Drainage Plan," she said. Gupta added that implementation would be carried out in phases, prioritising areas with the most severe drainage problems.

Afghan FM rejects Trump's call to reclaim Bagram Air Base

CONTINUED FROM P1

An official statement issued on Sunday reinforced Afghanistan's stance, stressing that independence and territorial integrity were non-negotiable in dealings with any nation, including the United States. The government reaffirmed its "balanced, economy-oriented foreign policy" grounded in Islamic principles and mutual interests.

Kabul also reminded Washington of its commitments under the 2020 Doha Agreement, which bound the US to respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and refrain from interference. "Rather than repeating past failed approaches, a policy of realism and rationality should be adopted," the statement said.

Trump has repeatedly criticised the 2021 US withdrawal, calling it "the most embarrassing mo-



Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi.

ment" in American history. On Sunday, he warned on Truth Social that "bad things are going to happen" if Afghanistan did not surrender the base.

Bagram, once the largest US military hub in Afghanistan, housed thousands of American troops and a prison notorious for alleged abuses during the "war on terror." The Taliban now controls the site.



# NAV-RATRI KA PARV

## OPINION

PRIYA S. TANDON



The festival season is just round the corner. *Sharadiya Navratri* begins on 22 September, 2025. It commemorates of the victory of Goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura after nine days of gruesome battle. Goddess Durga is worshipped in her nine forms during the Navratri festival as Nav-Durga. Many of us do *Ghatsthapna*, by sowing Khetri of *ĵau* (barley) and keeping a *Kalash* of water with mango leaves and a coconut on top. *Jau* was the first crop that was sown and cultivated by humans. To honour the memory of the beginning of agriculture we sow *Jau* and pray for blessings and prosperity. Coconut and mango

leaves are symbols of auspiciousness. On Ashtami or Naumi day, we worship prepubescent girls as little Goddesses. We wash their feet with water, tie mauli-thread on their wrists, anoint their foreheads with Kumkum and rice, offer them food (usually Halva, Puri and Channa) and give them Dakshina. Whenever I do Kanjak puja, I am overwhelmed by the thought that went behind starting this tradition. How far sighted our ancestors were! They probably knew that the girl child would be the lesser-favoured at some time or the other, so they created this tradition of doing Kanya Poojan to honour the girl child, bi-annually during the Navratri festival. This festival serves as a reminder that the girl child is as precious as the boy. It is also important to remember that while worshipping little girls as Goddess Durga we must also respect the other living goddesses around us. These could be your mother, mother-in-law, sister, daughter,

daughter-in-law, granddaughter, friends, neighbours or just any woman on the street. A society's overall condition and progress can be decoded by examining the rights, opportunities and social standing of women. If there is gender equality, if there is no violence or abuse of women; if women have equal access to education, economic participation and freedom from discrimination, it gives a sneak peek into the core values that form the basis of a society. God made everything in pairs. Man and woman are equally important parts of His creation. In our culture the woman is always accorded the first place. This is evident in how we address our deities. We say Radha-Krishna, Sita-Rama, Lakshmi-Narayana, Gauri-Shankar! How then could we ever think of women as the lesser half? The ills prevalent in the society are of recent origin. Navratri affords a subtle reminder to honour women. Navratri is also a time when many people observe fasts. This too is a well thought out tradition. Navratri happens at the confluence of summer and winter. This is the time when our body needs to be conditioned for the upcoming season. Navratri fasting entails going off wheat, rice and tamasic food like garlic, onion, etc. The diet



consists of *Kutu ka Atta*, *Swank ke chawal*, potatoes, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, dry fruits, fruits, cucumber, tomato etc. Cooking with *sendha namak* is a great detoxifier. If the fast is observed like a fast and not converted into a feast, by consuming Puris, pakoras and heavy sweetmeats, it is a great way to detox the body twice in a year. The male aspect of Divinity in its omniscient, omnipotent form is Purusha or Shiva. The omnipresent female aspect is Devi, and is called Prakriti (nature). It is all pervading. It assumes various forms like humans, animals, vegetation, landforms, water bodies etc. The invisible divine energy in all of creation; the prana aspect is Purush. The gross

body or visible part of creation is Prakriti. When Purush and Prakriti unite, life happens! The Navratri is the period when we focus on honouring and adulating the Devi in her nine forms as Nav-Durga. Each day of Navratri is linked to a specific form of Goddess Durga. 1<sup>st</sup>- *Shailaputri*- Parvati is worshipped on the first day in her youthful, maiden form as Shaila-putri, the daughter of the mountain king, Himalaya. The unwed Parvati, desired and aspired for the greatest. She inspires us to achieve the highest state of consciousness. 2<sup>nd</sup>- *Brahmcharini*- As Goddess Parvati grew up, she had an intense desire to

marry Lord Shiva. She performed severe penance for Lord Shiva to accept her as His wife. Brahm means divine consciousness and Charini signifies pure, celibate, impeccable conduct. Conduct suffused with divine consciousness is Brahmacharya. On the second day we adulate her for her impeccable conduct and one-pointed-focus on her aspiration. 3<sup>rd</sup>- *Chandragbanta*- The moon (Chandra) presides over the mind. The mind is restless and carries a cornucopia of thoughts. Ghanta means bell. The bell always produces the same sound. On the third Navratri we worship Parvati as one who conquered the restless mind and stabilised it at one point like the

bell. And in that meditative state, she married Shiva. 4<sup>th</sup>- *Kushmanda*- Kushmanda means Ku+Ushma+anda or Small + warm + egg. On this day, we worship the Devi as Kushmanda, when she conceived and carried Kartikeya in her womb. The entire universe originated from the cosmic egg (Hiranyagarbha) that manifests from the boundless energy of the Goddess. 5<sup>th</sup>- Skandamata- On the fifth day, Devi Parvati is worshipped as the mother of Skanda or Lord Kartikeya. She is the embodiment of maternal affection. 6<sup>th</sup>- *Katyayani* - Devi Parvati in her anger against the demons had assumed the form of Katyayani. Her anger was for the cause of Dharma. In anger, Durga can cause destruction and imbalance in creation, in the form of natural calamities. On the sixth day we pray for her to have mercy on creation. 7<sup>th</sup>- *Kaalratri*- This is the form of Parvati akin to the dark night, that emerged to destroy the evil forces. It is the terrifying and destructive aspect of Shakti. On this day we pray to the Devi to help us overcome and destroy the vices in us so that we too can emerge victorious over them. 8<sup>th</sup>- *Mahagauri* - After destroying all that is vicious and demonic, the Goddess became calm, serene and beautiful. Goddess Mahagauri is that divine en-

ergy we worship on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. This day is popular as Durga Ashtami when we do Kanya/Kanjak Poojan. 9<sup>th</sup>- *Siddhidatri*- On the ninth day, the Goddess is worshipped as Siddhidatri – the bestower of supernatural powers, energy, happiness and wealth. Goddess Siddhidatri bestows us with material and spiritual success. She can make the impossible, possible. We pray for her grace. Sri Sathya Sai Baba says, “The Vedas declare that where women are honoured and esteemed, there Divinity is present with all its potency. Unfortunately, today men consider it demeaning to honour women. This is utterly wrong and is a sign of ignorance. *Sthree* (woman) is *Grihalakshmi* (the Goddess of Prosperity for the home). She is hailed as *Dharmapatni* (the virtuous spouse). She is called *Illalu* (the mistress of the house) and *Ardhangi* (the better half). People gloat over petty titles conferred on them. But women have been conferred the highest titles, which are valid for all time.” Do find time to read the *Durga Kavach*, *Mahishasura Mardini Stotram* or any Devi-prayer that appeals to you. The Navratri ends with Dussehra on Oct 2, 2025. Let's pray together for humanity. Let us celebrate Navratri in its true spirit. Jai Mata ki!

# GST reform: Relief at home, strength for industry, and resilience abroad

## OPINION

DR. MAINAN RAY & SUKANATA CHAKARBARTY



The 56th meeting of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Council has produced one of the most significant reforms in India's indirect taxation system since the GST was first rolled out in 2017. By simplifying the rate structure, rationalising anomalies, and offering sweeping relief in critical sectors, the Council has sought to rebalance India's tax regime at a moment when global trade tensions are rising and domestic demand needs fresh momentum. In this article an attempt has been made to assess its impact on households, on industry, and on India's position in the global economy. It also considers the fiscal trade-offs and institutional challenges that accompany such an ambitious recalibration.

**OF RELIEF FOR HOUSEHOLDS AND LOWERING TAXES ON ESSENTIALS AND HEALTH SECURITY** The new structure reduces GST on a wide basket of household goods like soaps, shampoos, toothpaste, toothbrushes, hair oil, bicycles, and kitchenware have moved into the 5% bracket from earlier rates of 12-18%. Staple foods such as packaged milk, paneer, and Indian breads like roti and paratha are now fully exempt. Processed foods such as chocolates, noodles, pasta, and namkeens have seen tax rates cut from 18% to 5%. Analysts estimate that urban households could see a decline of 8-10% in monthly expenditure on essential goods by dint of this indirect tax relief. The most transformative change, however, is in the insurance sector. Until now,

all life and health insurance premiums carried 18% GST, adding a significant burden on policyholders. This has now been abolished, making both categories fully tax-exempt. The move is expected to stimulate higher insurance penetration in a country where coverage remains worryingly low. Currently, India's insurance penetration is around 4% of GDP, compared to a global average of about 7%. By removing the tax wedge, the Council has lowered barriers for families to purchase protection. Hypothetically, if even 50 million additional families take up health insurance with an average annual premium of Rs 20,000, the market could expand by over Rs 1 lakh crore. The implication is clear that more households covered, fewer families pushed into poverty by medical shocks, and stronger demand for formal insurance products. Combined with the decision to exempt or reduce taxes on medicines, medical devices, and life-saving drugs, this reform represents a quiet revolution in social protection. Lower health expenses, coupled with affordable insurance, will not only improve welfare but also reduce the long-term fiscal pressure of out-of-pocket medical spending, which currently accounts for nearly 60% of total health expenditure in India. **BOOST TO THE INDUSTRY AND INFRA-STRUCTURE** The new tax system simplifies and relieves enterprises. Some de-merit commodities are taxed at 40%, although



the Council now has a standard rate of 18% and a merit rate of 5%. This simplicity alone minimises categorisation conflicts and compliance expenses. Sectoral changes are focused. Cement has been reduced from 28% to 18%, cutting construction expenses by 5-7%. Small automobiles and motorcycles have declined from 28% to 18%, possibly increasing sales by 10-12%. Agricultural machinery has dropped from 12% to 5%, boosting farm production. Taxation on renewable energy equipment was dropped from 12% to 5%, supporting India's green transition. Most critically, the reform corrects various inverted duty systems that have punished domestic producers. Textile and fertiliser inputs were often taxed more than finished items, hurting competitiveness and exports. Harmonising these rates will boost labour-intensive

industries like textiles, which employ over 45 million people and make up 10% of India's exports. The simpler structure eases compliance for MSMEs. Working capital, litigation, and investment will improve with lower input taxes, easier refunds, and a rationalised provisional credit system. An address to India's crisis in Global Trade perspective Recently, the United States announced 50% tariffs on a range of Indian goods, highlighting the fragility of global trade in an era of protectionism. In such an environment, lowering domestic tax burdens becomes India's most effective shield. By reducing production costs at home, exporters can maintain competitiveness abroad despite external tariff barriers. Correcting inverted duties in export-oriented sectors such as textiles and fertilisers ensures that Indian producers are not

structurally disadvantaged. In this sense, the GST reform is both a domestic tax policy and a strategic trade policy instrument. However, competitiveness gains will not materialise automatically. They must be supported by complementary measures: export credit facilities, logistics improvements, and proactive trade diplomacy. GST relief provides breathing room; it must be leveraged into market expansion through coordinated policy action. **FISCAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS** Reform provides broad relief but is not fiscally neutral. The GST contributes approximately Rs 15 lakh crore annually to government revenues. Rate cuts inevitably reduce short-term revenue. States largely dependent on GST compensation may have less fiscal space. The Council has mitigated

this risk by phasing in reforms (many services rate decreases effective late September 2025), preserving higher sin goods rates until cess liabilities are resolved, and establishing provisional refund methods to avoid litigation. These initiatives are excellent, but fiscal sustainability requires monitoring. The government expects lower rates to expand. Consumer spending should rise as items get cheaper and insurance adoption rises. Overall collections could recover in two to three years if compliance improves and the tax base broadens. Well-managed reforms of this scale might boost GDP growth by 1-1.5 percent yearly. A stronger GST Appellate Tribunal (GSTAT) and easier registration for low-risk vendors are crucial governance initiatives. Maintaining taxpayer trust requires reducing compliance friction and litigation as well as rates. Though, the reform is widely welcomed, it also demands critical scrutiny. As it raises some concerns can be summarised: In insurance, will companies reduce premiums in proportion to tax savings, or will the relief be absorbed as margin? Regulatory oversight will be necessary to ensure consumer benefit. Lower rates on processed foods may benefit middle-class consumers more than the poor, who spend disproportionately on unprocessed essentials. Careful monitoring of distributive impact is needed. If revenue foregone is not offset by higher consump-

tion, governments may face pressure to raise taxes elsewhere, undermining the relief. Although the structure is simplified, the 40% de-merit band could generate disputes over what qualifies, requiring judicial clarity. These concerns remind us that reform is not an end in itself; it is a beginning that requires vigilant follow-through. In our opinion, this 56th GST reform is bold in ambition and balanced in design. It reduces household costs, strengthens social protection through insurance, relieves industry of distortions, and prepares India for a turbulent global trade environment. At the same time, it preserves fiscal caution and introduces institutional improvements to reduce compliance burdens. Its success, however, will depend on execution: ensuring benefits reach consumers, maintaining fiscal balance, and translating domestic tax relief into global competitiveness. If done well, this reform could mark a turning point, creating a virtuous cycle of higher welfare, stronger industry, resilient exports, and inclusive growth. GST reform, in short, is not just about tax rates. It is about the kind of economy India aspires to build: simpler, fairer, more resilient, and future-ready.

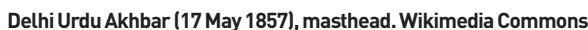
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**RUCHIRA TALAPATRA**  
NEW DELHI

## PROCLAMATIONS AS INSURGENT STATE-

Soldiers' letters and official reports are full of rumours—about chapattis moving as secret signals, about plots glimpsed in processions, about treachery around every corner. These stories travelled, hardened, and justified harsh measures. More sharply, these were habits of “colonial knowledge”: a way of reading Indian society that turned ambiguity into danger and ordinary movement into conspiracy. This mattered on the ground. Once administrators believed that bread meant rebellion, patrols multiplied, checkpoints stiffened, and small encounters tipped into violence. Hence, rumor is not just background noise; it structures decisions and can kill. (District responses varied—from Allahabad under James Neill to Punjab line officers under John Nicholson and civil officials like Frederick Cooper—illustrating how rumor translated into divergent, often brutal, action.) 1857 was fought by many hands trying to hold their worlds together; it was retold in Britain as a moral drama that made the empire feel right; and it was governed day to day by fear that turned signs into threats. The revolt is not a single story: not tidy, but true.







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# Bellwether of national mood: why Dhaka varsity polls matter

**SHUBHAJIT ROY**  
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 21

IN RECENTLY held students' union elections at the University of Dhaka, the students wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Chhatra Shibir, won a whopping 23 out of 25 posts.

The Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) polls are being seen as a bellwether of the public mood ahead of national elections early next year. And if these results are indeed indicative of what may happen in February, Bangladesh seems to be on the cusp of a major political realignment.

## An eventful past

Established in 1921, the Dhaka University, Bangladesh's top public university, has a storied past, of academic excellence as well as political activism.

With an illustrious alumni list, comprising the likes of physicist Satyendra Nath Bose, Bangladesh's founding leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Nobel laureate and Chief Advisor to the interim government Prof Muhammad Yunus, it is the highest ranked Bangladeshi education institution globally.

The Dhaka University has also long been a hotbed for political activism. It played a significant role in the Bengali Language Movement, in which Bengali youth took to

the streets to protest against the Pakistan government's decision to impose Urdu.

In fact, the movement began on campus. The Shaheed Minar, Bangladesh's national monument which commemorates the martyrdom of students killed during the language protests of 1952, is a major landmark in the university area.

## Indicative of the youth's preferences

The university's 46,000-odd student population is seen as a microcosm of the nation's youth. The results of the latest DUCSU elections are thus being seen as a reflection of how educated first-time voters — there are about 5 crore people between the ages of 18 and 35 in Bangladesh — might cast their ballot next year.

The Dhaka University has long been considered the stronghold of the Chhatra League, the student wing of ousted leader Sheikh Hasina's party, the Awami League. But the Chhatra League was absent in the current polls, much like its parent party is expected to be absent in the national elections next year.

In this relative political vacuum, Chhatra Shibir-backed candidates emerged victorious with commanding leads, almost triple



The Dhaka University is Bangladesh's top public university. *Dhaka University website.*

the votes of their nearest rivals in most cases. This is especially significant given the elections saw a phenomenal 75% turnout.

Defying popular perceptions, the Islamist party's candidates won overwhelming sup-

port from young women students at the university. In majority of the women's hostels — Dhaka University calls them "halls" — the Chhatra Shibir won by a huge margin.

That said, the Jamaat has learned some

crucial lessons in recent years. With the approval of the parent party, leaders of Chhatra Shibir offered prayers at the Martyred Intellectuals' Memorial in Dhaka. This was the first time since the Liberation War of 1971 that any Jamaat-affiliated organisation had visited the memorial.

Analysts consider this as a sign of a possible shift in the party's long-standing stance regarding the Liberation War of 1971, which it opposed at the time. Sources suggest that there could be many more similar initiatives in the future.

## A few surprises

One big surprise was the abysmal performance of the Bangladesh Ganatantrik Chhatra Sangsad (Bagchas). This party, formed by young student leaders whose protests ousted the Sheikh Hasina government on August 5 last year, came fourth in most contests.

It is instructive that students of Dhaka University have shifted to the Islamist Jamaat-backed party within a year, for the college elections.

The biggest disappointment has come for the youth wing of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the Chhatra Dal. This has been a surprise to many, since the BNP — led by Khaleda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman — was hoping to replace the Awami League-backed party as the choice for university-go-

ing voters.

The BNP's tenure in power had been marred by corruption allegations. Not surprisingly, Rahman, with an eye towards next February, has expelled or demoted more than 7,000 party members on charges of corruption, extortion, and misconduct, acknowledging the decision was difficult but essential.

"We know the youth want opportunity, not empty rhetoric; citizens want stability, not chaos; and the world wants to see Bangladesh as a democracy that is credible and respected. We are determined to meet these expectations," Tarique said.

Despite Shibir's landslide victory, Leftists have gained some ground in the university. In a first, a woman from the marginalised Chakma tribal community registered a win.

## View from New Delhi

For India, the burgeoning support for the Jamaat among Bangladeshi youth is a matter of concern.

Not only had the Islamist party historically colluded with the East Pakistan government, over the years after 1971 too, it has been behind many of the anti-India protests, activities and attacks in the neighbouring country.

If the University polls are any indicator, both Dhaka and New Delhi have a challenge staring at them.

## EXPLAINED GLOBAL

### WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE U.N. GENERAL ASSEMBLY THIS WEEK



Doctors Without Borders USA and supporters gather in front of UN Headquarters to call on world leaders for action on Gaza in New York. *AP, MSF USA*

WORLD LEADERS gather in New York every September at the annual United Nations General Assembly, which on Tuesday begins its 80th session. Here is what to know.

#### Who speaks at the UNGA?

The United Nations was formed in 1945 and today has 193 members. Leaders of two non-member observer states, known at the UN as the Holy See and the State of Palestine, and an observer member, the European Union, can also speak.

It is tradition for Brazil to always be the first member state to speak. This is because in the early years of the world body, Brazil stepped up to speak first. As host to the UN headquarters, the United States is the second country to address the General Assembly. The list is then based on hierarchy and on a first-come, first-served basis.

Despite a voluntary 15-minute time limit, one of the longest speeches made was in 1960 by the Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who spoke for about four and a half hours. Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi spoke for more than one and a half hours in 2009.

#### What will be discussed?

This year's theme is: "Better together: 80 years and more for peace, development and human rights." Other topics likely to be addressed are:

**GAZA:** A humanitarian crisis worsens in the Palestinian enclave, where a global hunger monitor has warned that famine has taken hold. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is due to address

the assembly next week.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will not attend in person. The US, a staunch Israeli ally, has said it will not give him a visa.

**UKRAINE:** Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will be seeking to shore up global support for Kyiv as US President Donald Trump tries to broker an end to the war. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will also attend. **SYRIA:** A notable debut will be Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa. His Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group led the rebellion that toppled President Bashar al-Assad in a lightning offensive in December, ending 13 years of civil war. HTS was a former branch of al Qaeda, until it broke ties in 2016. The group and Sharaa remain under UN sanctions, but he has a travel exemption to visit New York.

**SUDAN:** The war in Sudan, between the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese army, has created what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The United States, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have called for a three-month humanitarian truce followed by a permanent ceasefire.

**NEW SECRETARY-GENERAL:** Next year, the United Nations will choose a new secretary-general, after António Guterres steps down, and there may be some discussions around it on the sidelines this year. The 15-member UN Security Council has to agree on a candidate to recommend to the 193-member General Assembly for election, which means Britain, China, France, Russia and the US must agree. **REUTERS**

## EXPLAINED ECONOMICS

# The problem with low inflation

Inflation has fallen sharply in recent months and is expected to stay subdued. But while this is a net positive for consumers, it is a problem for the government's Budget mathematics. Here's why

**SIDDHARTH UPASANI**  
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 21

EARLIER THIS month, two sets of inflation data were released by the government and both were heartening for Indian households.

First came the retail inflation data, which showed that Consumer Price Index-based (CPI) inflation stood at 2.07 per cent in August. Next was inflation based on the Wholesale Price Index (WPI), with prices up a mere 0.52 per cent from August 2024.

However, while these subdued price increases are a boon for Indian consumers, they are a problem for the government and its Budget math.

## The growth angle

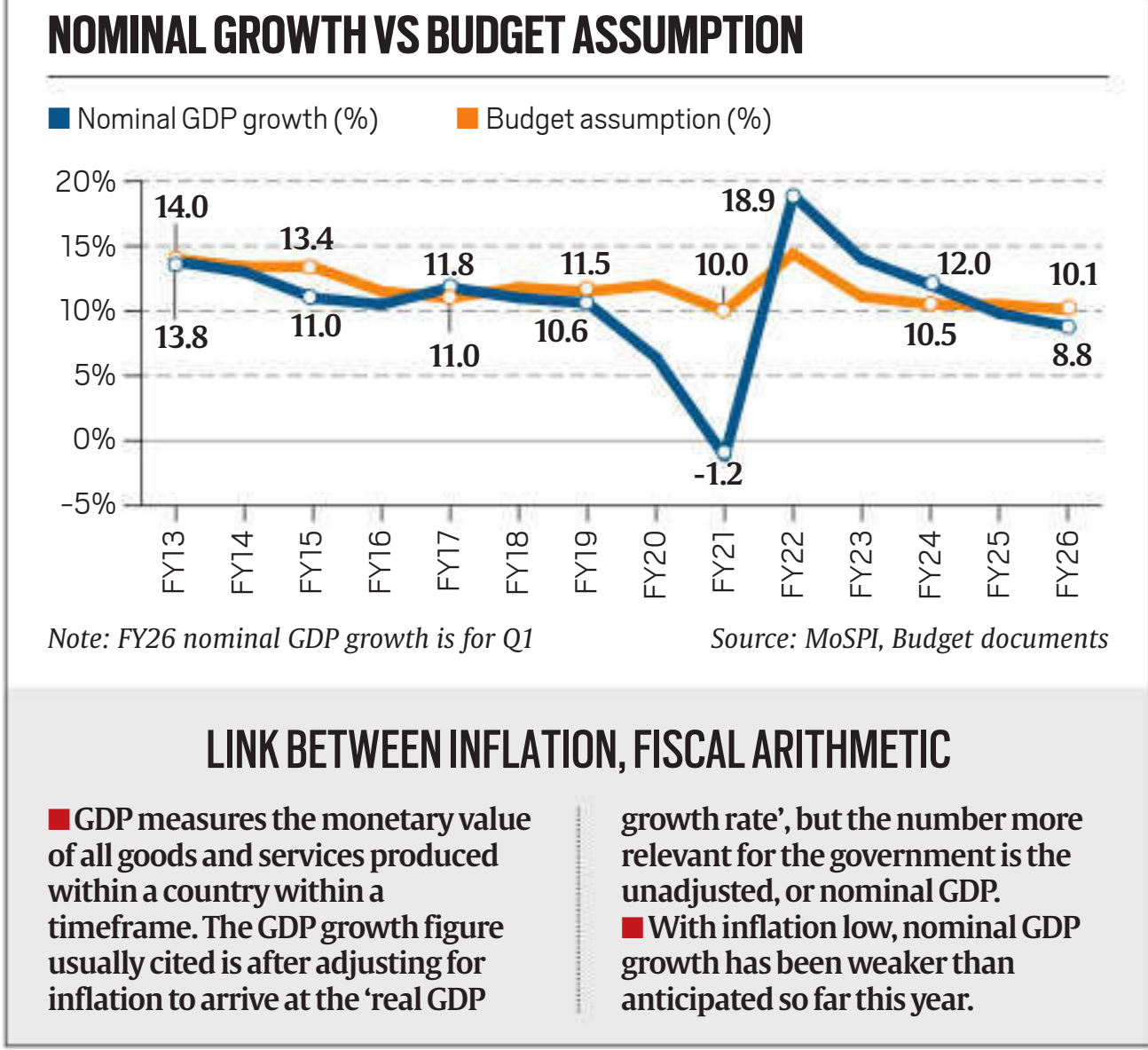
Inflation matters to the fiscal arithmetic via the GDP — the nominal GDP, to be precise. While the GDP growth figure usually cited is after adjusting for inflation to arrive at the 'real GDP growth rate', the number more relevant for the government's accounts is the unadjusted, or nominal GDP.

Data released last month showed India's real GDP growth rate unexpectedly rose to a five-quarter high of 7.8 per cent in April-June. However, the 'nominal' GDP growth rate was at a three-quarter low of 8.8 per cent. And this is crucial, for it is lower than what the government expected.

In the Union Budget for 2025-26, presented on February 1, the finance ministry had assumed that India's nominal GDP in the current fiscal would be Rs 357 lakh crore, 10.1 per cent higher from the revised estimate of Rs 324 lakh crore for 2024-25.

The growth in nominal GDP assumed in the Budget is important as it is used to guide how much tax collections may rise in the coming year. For instance, the 2025-26 Budget projected that the central government's net tax revenue would rise just under 11 per cent.

However, with inflation being low, nominal GDP growth has been weaker than anticipated so far this year — GDP, after all, is just the final value of goods and services in a year, and low growth in prices can lead to GDP growth being subdued even if production in-



creases somewhat. In the first five months of 2025-26, WPI inflation has averaged 0.1 per cent as against the 2024-25 average of 2.3 per cent. Average CPI inflation, meanwhile, has fallen to 2.4 per cent from 4.6 per cent last year.

The impact of weak price increases and nominal GDP growth is showing up in the government's finances: latest data shows that in April-July, the Central government's gross tax revenue was up just 1 per cent year-on-year, while net tax revenue was down 7.5 per cent.

"While the low inflation trajectory is good news for the consumers, it is not so good for the government balance sheet," Paras Jasrai, an economist at India Ratings & Research, said. "Impact of slower GDP growth is already visible in government finances and tax collection growth trailing FY26 budget targets."

## Missing nominal GDP growth targets

To be sure, nominal GDP growth regularly misses the government's Budget assumption; after all, making economic forecasts is difficult at the best of times. Over the last 13 years, actual nominal GDP growth of the Indian economy has been lower than the Budget assumption on nine occasions. The recent past, though, is in the government's favour: in three of the last four years, nominal growth has been higher than what the Budget had anticipated.

There is also what is called the base effect. The GDP for 2024-25 has now been revised higher by 2 per cent to Rs 331 lakh crore. This means that to meet the Budget assumption of Rs 357 lakh crore for the current fiscal, nominal GDP growth only has to be 8 per cent.

Meeting this nominal GDP number is im-

portant for two key indicators: the fiscal deficit and Central government debt, both of which are measured as a percentage of the nominal GDP. As long as the nominal GDP number is achieved, the fiscal deficit target of 4.4 per cent and the debt-to-GDP ratio estimate of 56.1 per cent will be satisfied — assuming the fiscal deficit does not exceed the Budget estimate.

However, the growth in nominal GDP, irrespective of the absolute level of nominal GDP, cannot be ignored. Economists already expect the nominal GDP growth to be well below the Budget estimate, with those from Morgan Stanley expecting it to come in at 8.3 per cent for the full year.

This suggests a further decline in nominal growth from 8.8 per cent in April-June. This is likely, given the reductions in GST rates coming into effect — which will, hopefully, lead to price cuts and a decline in inflation. This will impact nominal GDP growth.

## Is low inflation bad?

Low inflation is not always bad when it comes to impacting nominal GDP growth. What matters is why it is low. It's best if prices are subdued because of oversupply and not weak demand.

However, a Reserve Bank of India (RBI) study from last month showed that while private companies saw a 5.5 per cent rise in sales in April-June, their net profit rose at a far more rapid 17.6 per cent. For private manufacturers, the variation was even more stark on account of cooling global commodity prices: sales rose 5.3 per cent while net profit was up 27.7 per cent. But will companies use these profits to invest?

"...we have a situation where corporate profit margins are robust (and companies are also reportedly sitting on large cash pile), but the capex sentiment has stayed weak," economists from ICICI Securities Primary Dealership said in a note on August 31. "Strong productivity growth could be one potential theoretical reason for low inflation. However, that doesn't appear to be the case given weaker capex backdrop. Moreover, there would not be much reason to worry about urban wage growth and demand if productivity growth was rising."

# Sikh marriage registration: why latest SC order may not fix all legal issues

**KAMALDEEP SINGH BRAR & VINEET BHALLA**

AMRITSAR, NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 21

EARLIER THIS month, the Supreme Court directed 17 states and eight Union Territories (UTs), that are yet to frame rules for the registration of Sikh marriages under the Anand Marriage Act, 1909, to do so within four months.

A Bench comprising Justices Vikram Nath and Sandeep Mehta said that until the rules are framed, states and UTs must accept and register Anand Karaj marriages under existing marriage registration laws.

This judgment is meant to ensure that Sikh couples across India can legally register their marriages under their own religious tradition, a right that has not been uniformly available to them thus far. However, critics say the SC's order does not address some key lacunae.

## The Act & the Amendment

Anand Karaj, literally "blissful union", is the prescribed form of marriage in the Sikh faith. The ceremony is conducted in the presence of the Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture.

To solemnise the marriage, the couple walks around the Guru Granth Sahib four times, as hymns, known as *laavan*, are recited. The four chosen verses, composed by Guru Ram Das, the fourth Sikh Guru, outline the spiritual journey of a married couple.

In the early 20th century, efforts by the Sikh community for legal recognition of the ceremony, specifically to differentiate it from Hindu rituals, led to the enactment of the Anand Marriage Act in 1909.

The one-page Act had one primary purpose: to legally sanctify all marriages solemnised through the Anand Karaj ceremony. However, it did not include provisions for their registration.

This gap was addressed with the Anand

Marriage (Amendment) Act, 2012. It introduced Section 6, which directed state governments to create rules for the registration of such marriages. Once registered under the Act, a marriage would not need to be registered under any other law.

## State inaction, SC intervention

More than a decade later, most states and UTs had still not framed rules for registration of Anand Karaj marriages.

In 2022, Nainital-based advocate Amanjot Singh Chaddha filed a petition before the SC, arguing that the failure to notify rules was denying Sikh couples a statutory facility. Without a marriage certificate, couples faced hurdles in matters of residence, maintenance, inheritance, and succession, he pleaded.

Earlier this month, the SC issued a comprehensive set of directions to ensure the

law is implemented nationwide.

The Bench said, "In a secular framework that respects religious identity while ensuring civic equality, the law must provide a neutral and workable route by which marriages solemnised by Anand Karaj are recorded and certified on the same footing as other marriages."

The court imposed a "positive duty on every State Government to create a workable registration machinery". It noted that the failure to frame rules "withholds the very evidentiary and administrative benefits that Parliament has conferred".

Moreover, the court clarified that no application for registration can be refused solely on the fact that the state has not yet notified the rules.

## Larger debate persists

For various reasons, most Sikh couples

## EXPLAINED LAW





WORDLY WISE  
THE UNITED STATES SHOULD BE AN ASYLUM FOR THE PERSECUTED LOVERS OF CIVIL AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.  
— THOMAS PAINE

*The Indian* **EXPRESS**

FOUNDED BY

RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

# THE VISA BARRIER

US protectionism is targeting mobility of high-skilled professionals. It's a challenge for Indian policymakers, industry

IN RECENT WEEKS, there have been signs of a thaw in India-US relations. But the Donald Trump administration's announcement of raising the H-1B visa fees is a setback — it effectively targets Indians, by far, the biggest beneficiaries of the programme. It's clear that labour mobility and services are the latest targets of America's protectionist policies, which have, till now, used tariffs to repress the goods trade. Both ends of the employment spectrum are now under pressure — tariffs on goods have a bearing on low and semi-skilled jobs, while the visa fee will impact high-skilled IT jobs. Trump's latest salvo will, no doubt, cast a shadow over the India-US trade talks — Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal is slated to visit the US in the coming days.

The Trump administration may well believe that IT firms have "manipulated the H-1B system". But the move will have wide-ranging consequences for the US economy as well. Ensuring cost-effective labour replacement will be difficult for US companies. The demand-supply mismatch will put pressure on firm margins. More critically, skilled migrant workers form the core of the US knowledge and innovation ecosystem. As University of California economist Giovanni Peri has pointed out, 26 per cent of US-based Nobel Prize winners from 1990 to 2000 were immigrants. Stuart Anderson of the National Foundation for American Policy and Michaela Platzer of Content First, LLC, have also shown that between 1990-2005, 25 per cent of founders of public venture-backed US companies were immigrants. As companies are now unlikely to fork out \$100,000 for each visa, talent may simply move to other, more welcoming parts of the world.

The visa fee hike will impact operations of both American and Indian businesses — Indian IT majors like Infosys, TCS, HCL and Wipro have the most H-1B staff on their payrolls, as do US tech giants like Amazon, Microsoft, Meta, Apple and Google. The move will disrupt onshore projects of Indian tech companies. The Indian IT sector, already confronted with an uncertain global environment and grappling with the fallout of increasing adoption of AI, has its task cut out. A reduced flow of migrants could also have implications for remittances to India — the US accounted for 27.7 per cent of all remittances to the country in 2023-24. But there could be some silver linings. The visa restrictions could provide an impetus to India's Global Capacity Centres. Britta Glennon of the Wharton School of Business has shown that restrictions on H-1B immigration result in increased foreign employment, with firms opening more offices and hiring more people. Such an expansion tends to be concentrated in Canada, India, and China. Indian policymakers and the industry have no time to lose. While India and other countries can do little to influence the ideological foundations of the American discourse on immigration, the question is what can be done domestically. Can the innovation hubs that power the US economy be replicated in India? Trump may, hopefully, soften his stance. The market, hopefully, will push him to do so. But hope, when it comes to Trump, is no strategy. India's IT sector leaders have formidable talent, they need to look beyond their cost-plus, labour arbitrage model, get better at creating talent and nurturing an enabling ecosystem.

# NO BIG DEAL

Saudi-Pakistan defence pact shouldn't alarm India. But Delhi needs to reflect on its security stakes in West Asia

INDIA HAS DONE well to react with restraint to last week's signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Over the past decade, Delhi has built an increasingly substantive partnership with Riyadh; Saudi officials also appear to have kept India informed about their talks with Pakistan. This has spared New Delhi the temptation for an over-the-top response of the kind so visible on social media. The pact is undeniably important for the kingdom and for the West Asian region, where India's stakes have grown rapidly. Amid India's current tensions with Pakistan, it deserves careful assessment. Saudi motivations for rebooting its long-standing security ties with Pakistan are not hard to discern. Signals from the Trump Administration that Washington is no longer a reliable security guarantor for the Arab Gulf — despite the region's lavish indulgence of the US President — have compelled Riyadh to diversify its options. Israel's growing military assertiveness — bombing Arab targets with impunity — has added urgency. And America's inability to "defang" Iran — its nuclear programme and its proxies that threaten the Kingdom — has left Riyadh little room for complacency.

Yet, much of the commentary about a Pakistani "nuclear umbrella" for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf is exaggerated. Having long financed Pakistan's faltering economy, and even underwritten parts of its nuclear programme, the Saudis are now merely collecting old IOUs in Rawalpindi. It is Pakistan's establishment that is taking the real risk by posing as a Gulf security provider. Since Partition, the Pakistan Army has offered various low-level security services to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies. But it is in no position to confront either Israel — with its unlimited US backing — or Iran, a difficult neighbour for decades. Domestic opposition in Pakistan further constrains Rawalpindi. In 2015, for example, Pakistan's parliament unanimously rejected participation in a Saudi-led coalition against the Iran-backed Houthis. The simplest explanation for the latest bravado may lie in the ambitions of Pakistan's army Asim Munir, who seems to be reaching for foreign-policy adventures to shore up his position at home.

Delhi, therefore, has little reason for panic. But the pact should still prompt reflection on India's reluctance to extend security support to partners in the Gulf. But can India forever remain a mercantilist by-stander in the Gulf? Despite the growing salience of its partnerships in the Gulf, Delhi has chosen to stay on the margins of the region's geopolitics. This may be an opportune moment for Delhi to debate the prospects — and constraints — of a more active involvement in the region's security.

# FREEZE FRAME



# E P UNNY



KANTI BAJPAI

PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA Modi is right. One of the greatest dangers facing India is the country's dependence on foreign countries, he said while addressing an event in Bhavnagar, Gujarat on September 20. For all the talk of strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, what we are faced with is the opposite — strategic and multi-dependence. Our governments, our businesses, and we ourselves, as Indians, have contributed to the state we find ourselves in with China, Russia, and the US. We seem to be in a foreign policy corner.

With China, we are dependent on a range of manufacturing products, from everyday household consumer items to commodities and capital goods. As middle-class Indians, we are hooked on Chinese consumer items, all the way up to white goods. We need Chinese precursor chemicals, active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs), without which our famed pharmaceutical industry would collapse. As for commodities, India imports most of its rare earth metals, which are vital for batteries and other electronic devices, and polysilicon, wafers, and solar cells from China. We are increasingly dependent also on Chinese fertilisers and tunnel boring equipment. We are assembling mobile phones in larger numbers, but key components are imported including from China. Most of our computers are also from China. We buy large amounts of semiconductors from China as well.

With Russia, we are heavily dependent on arms and oil. Our arms dependence is difficult to put an exact number on. Estimates vary from 60 to 70 per cent dependence in key platforms and systems including spares. While India has tried to diversify to France, Israel, and the US, dependence on Russia goes back a long way, to the 1970s, and it is hard for the armed forces to wean themselves off



VANDANA KALRA

CELEBRATED FOR CREATING value but criticised for propelling hype alongside, art auctions have always been subject to intense scrutiny. So, in May this year, when a 1955 bronze bust by Swiss artist Alberto Giacometti, with an estimate of \$70 million, failed to find a buyer at a Sotheby's auction in New York, it led to widespread shock and speculation about the future of premium art sales.

The result was unexpected, though perhaps not completely surprising, considering that days earlier, Andy Warhol's 1967 *Big Electric Chair*, valued at \$30 million, had been withdrawn from a Christie's auction, presumably to avoid a similar fate.

The two events, however, did give the already struggling global art market a hint of the deeper challenges that likely await. Some of these concerns were affirmed when filings from Sotheby's parent company, Bidfair Luxembourg, revealed that the auction house's losses have increased to \$248 million for 2024, from \$106 million the previous year. Its rival auction house, Christie's, has also witnessed a decline in sales and is reportedly shutting its digital art department.

Christie's and Sotheby's are considered to be market makers with the power to influence pricing and perception. The grim revelations by both are therefore being viewed as indicative of future uncertainties in the art market, being shaped in no small measure by geopolitical shifts and political tensions in the Middle East and in Europe, including US President Donald Trump's tariffs, the ongoing conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and in Gaza.

On the art front, meanwhile, inflated pricing and changes seen in collector preferences

# A wake-up call

Worries over H-1B visa fee hike speak of India's larger problem – economic self-reliance is long way off

Indians in recent years have topped the list of H-1B visa recipients, up to 70 per cent of those issued. Indian students in the US rival Chinese students in terms of numbers, and the US is the top destination for our students going abroad. Plus, which elite and middle-class Indian family does not dream of a Green Card for their young? American arms and military technology are seen as vital for India's defence modernisation, including assault rifles, helicopters, missiles, reconnaissance, cargo, and fighter aircraft, and unmanned aerial systems, among others. And whether we say it publicly or not, we do count on Washington to be a strategic backstop against Beijing in the Indo-Pacific.

Russian equipment. Domestic production is increasing, but except for capital ships, India depends on Russian equipment for all three services, the army, air force, and navy. Our oil purchases from Russia were small, at about 4 per cent of our oil needs in 2022. Since then, we peaked at about 40 per cent of our oil purchases from Russian sources. Major refineries in India are now heavily dependent on Russia's supplies.

With the US, we are dependent on four things — markets for our exports, H-1B visas for our professionals and student visas and Green Cards for our young, key military armaments and components (including GE engines for our indigenous fighter aircraft, the Tejas), and counterbalancing against China's power in the Indo-Pacific. The US is our largest export destination. Indians in recent years have topped the list of H-1B visa recipients, up to 70 per cent of those issued. Indian students in the US rival Chinese students in terms of numbers, and the US is the top destination for our students going abroad. Plus, which elite and middle-class Indian family does not dream of a Green Card for their young? American arms and military technology are seen as vital for India's defence modernisation, including assault rifles, helicopters, missiles, reconnaissance, cargo, and fighter aircraft, and unmanned aerial systems, among others. And whether we say it publicly or not, we do count on Washington to be a strategic backstop against Beijing in the Indo-Pacific.

Dependence on these three powers means that we are in a tight corner. New Delhi cannot afford to offend China over the border and India's relationship with the US beyond a point. It cannot offend Russia over the Ukraine war, its arms sales to China, and its burgeoning relationship with Pakistan. And it cannot annoy Moscow by stopping oil

imports altogether either. Finally, it cannot offend the Americans over tariffs and India's relations with China and Russia as well as Iran beyond a point.

Our foreign policy difficulties have become clear ever since President Donald Trump declared war on India's tariffs and oil imports from Russia. The American President's actions have brought our overall dependence on China, Russia, and the US into sharp focus. This is as much of a wake-up call as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the country's predicaments after the end of the Cold War were in 1989.

The road ahead is clear enough, though traveling down that road will be even more difficult than the road of economic reforms in the 1990s. How do we fix our dependence over such a wide range of economic goods and other needs? As the prime minister noted, we require a revolution in manufacturing. Despite several changes rung in by the government, our manufacturing companies, in the private and public sector, are not rising to the challenge. The Indian economy, since the 1990s reforms, has averaged roughly 7 per cent GDP growth rates. Yet, our manufacturing sector stubbornly refuses to take off.

Manufacturing is not the only bottleneck — we desperately need various commodities including energy, rare earths, and APIs, and must diversify our suppliers of these plus increase domestic sourcing. We also need to diversify our exports. Above all, though, we need to galvanise the "animal spirits" of our manufacturers.

*The writer is visiting professor of International Relations, Ashoka University, and emeritus professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore*

# STRAINS IN THE CANVAS

Geopolitics has clouded global art business. But India is doing better

In contradiction to the global sentiment, the Indian art market is exhibiting not just admirable resilience but also sustained growth. The "Indian Auction Market 2024" report by Assign Data Sciences notes that the auction season saw "remarkable activity across 93 auctions conducted by nine auction houses", generating a total turnover of Rs 1,558.97 crore.

are also impacting the dynamics, with younger bidders gravitating more towards the relatively affordable contemporary segment. French database Artprice's "Global Market Report for 2024" revealed that compared to 2023, the global art auction turnover had dropped 33.5 per cent to \$9.9 billion. While the number of lots sold was a record high at 804,000, nearly half of these were priced below \$600.

In contradiction to the global sentiment, the Indian art market is exhibiting not just admirable resilience but also sustained growth. The "Indian Auction Market 2024" report by Assign Data Sciences notes that the auction season saw "remarkable activity across 93 auctions conducted by nine auction houses", generating a total turnover of Rs 1,558.97 crore. The highest demand was in the below Rs 5 lakh category, with 1,804 lots sold, followed by 1,287 lots in the Rs 5 lakh to 25 lakh range.

The recent months have also seen Indian art achieve significant milestones, including breaching the Rs 100-crore threshold with MF Husain's *Untitled (Gram Yatra, 1954)* that fetched \$13.75-13.8 million (Rs 118-119 crore) at a Christie's auction in New York in March. The sale also marked a new record for the most expensive Indian artwork ever sold at an auction. Less than a month later, Tyeb Mehta's 1956 canvas *Trussed Bull* garnered Rs 61.80 crore, making it the second-most expensive Indian artwork to come under the hammer.

Although analysts remain cautious, the broader consensus is that the growth momentum in India is driven by internal dynamics rather than external — led by the fast-growing economy, maturing seasoned

collectors, rising disposable incomes and expanding base of young collectors. The Indian diaspora, meanwhile, views art both as an investment and a means to connect with their cultural roots.

Considered significantly undervalued compared to its global counterparts, Indian art also appeals to collectors seeking diversification. To put things in perspective, the highest price for an artwork sold at an auction is a staggering \$450.3 million for Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi* at Christie's in New York in 2017 — a figure that dwarfs MF Husain's \$13.75-13.8 million.

Though Indian art appears to be doing comparably better, scepticism remains. Inevitable comparisons are being drawn to the art surge of the '90s, when prices in the contemporary segment suddenly soared and then drastically plummeted following the 2008 financial crisis.

Analysts argue that the upward trajectory, this time, has been more organic; accompanied by continued efforts by the rising number of private museums, galleries and artists to cultivate domestic interest, with increasing representation at prominent art forums, fairs and biennales. It is widely believed that it will take far more for the chips to fall, and the downturn, if any, will be measured. If the momentum continues, industry experts estimate the Indian art market to reach Rs 10,000 crore by 2030. Is this realistically achievable if the global collectors remain restrained? Can domestic demand remain insulated from international volatility over a long period? While optimism is high, challenges are undeniable.

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# SEPTEMBER 22, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

## ANTI-TERRORIST DRIVE

IN A MASSIVE operation to flush out terrorists, sleuths of the crime branch, Delhi police, raided at least 40 places, including gurdwaras, in the Capital and apprehended more than 100 persons believed to be involved in recent terrorist activities in the city. The arrested persons include Army officers and politicians, though the police did not disclose their names. The operation gave the police several important clues and confirmed many suspicions.

## TAMILS SHOT

FIFTEEN TAMILS WERE shot dead and 10 injured when unidentified armed men, believed to be home guards, entered a house at

Kalvettu in Sri Lanka's eastern Amparai district and opened fire on a group of people watching a video film. The injured had been brought to Kalmunai hospital, and hospital sources said that all bore gunshot injuries. Four Tamils, whose condition was serious, had been transferred to Batticaloa general hospital in the neighbouring district. The sources quoted victims, who included two children and one woman.

## FLOOD RELIEF

THE WHOLE GAMUT of flood and drought relief measures will be given a second look, and long-term plans formulated to protect the country from recurring floods. This was stated by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi,

after surveying the four flood-hit districts of Lucknow, Barabanki, Sitapur and Sultanpur, by air and visiting a relief camp and the site of the Kukrail bund breaches. The Prime Minister felt that the damage was confined to areas inundated by the Gomti, and the relief provided was inadequate.

## MEXICO EARTHQUAKE

A THIRD EARTHQUAKE hit Mexico City, causing fresh panic as Mexicans mourned 4,000 dead and rescuers scrambled for survivors trapped in the smoking debris of the ravaged city. The tremor at 8.30 p.m. (IST) struck 12 hours after a second major quake that toppled at least 12 buildings and twisted streets like paper ribbons.





# THE IDEAS PAGE

## The illusion of free speech

Jimmy Kimmel affair shows that world is not a marketplace of ideas. Speech is tied to owners, advertisers, regulators, and moods of power



PARTHA SINHA

THE LATEST STORM over “free speech” came when Disney’s ABC yanked *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* after the host joked in the aftermath of conservative activist Charlie Kirk’s assassination. The White House nodded, boycotts trended, and corporate statements poured in like pre-mixed cocktails. The episode revealed something we often pretend to forget: Speech is never just speech. It is tied to owners, advertisers, regulators, and moods of power.

We like to believe free speech is a clean switch — on or off. In truth, it is a mixer. Volume turned up here, cut down there, fine-tuned by those who control the sound system. The First Amendment in America protects citizens from the state, not from their bosses. A company can silence you in the name of brand safety or culture fit, and still claim to be defending freedom. The law keeps you out of prison, but it does not guarantee you a primetime slot or even the courage to raise your hand in a meeting.

Inside offices, “freedom” is usually reduced to posters and pep talks. Real speech is managed through appraisals, non-disparagement clauses, and a well-oiled culture of “fit”. Sociologists have long pointed to the chilling effect. Employees swallow harassment, bad leadership, and even honest ideas, because the risk of offending power outweighs the right to speak. The workplace is not a marketplace of ideas. It is a mall with security guards, where even your tone of voice is policed.

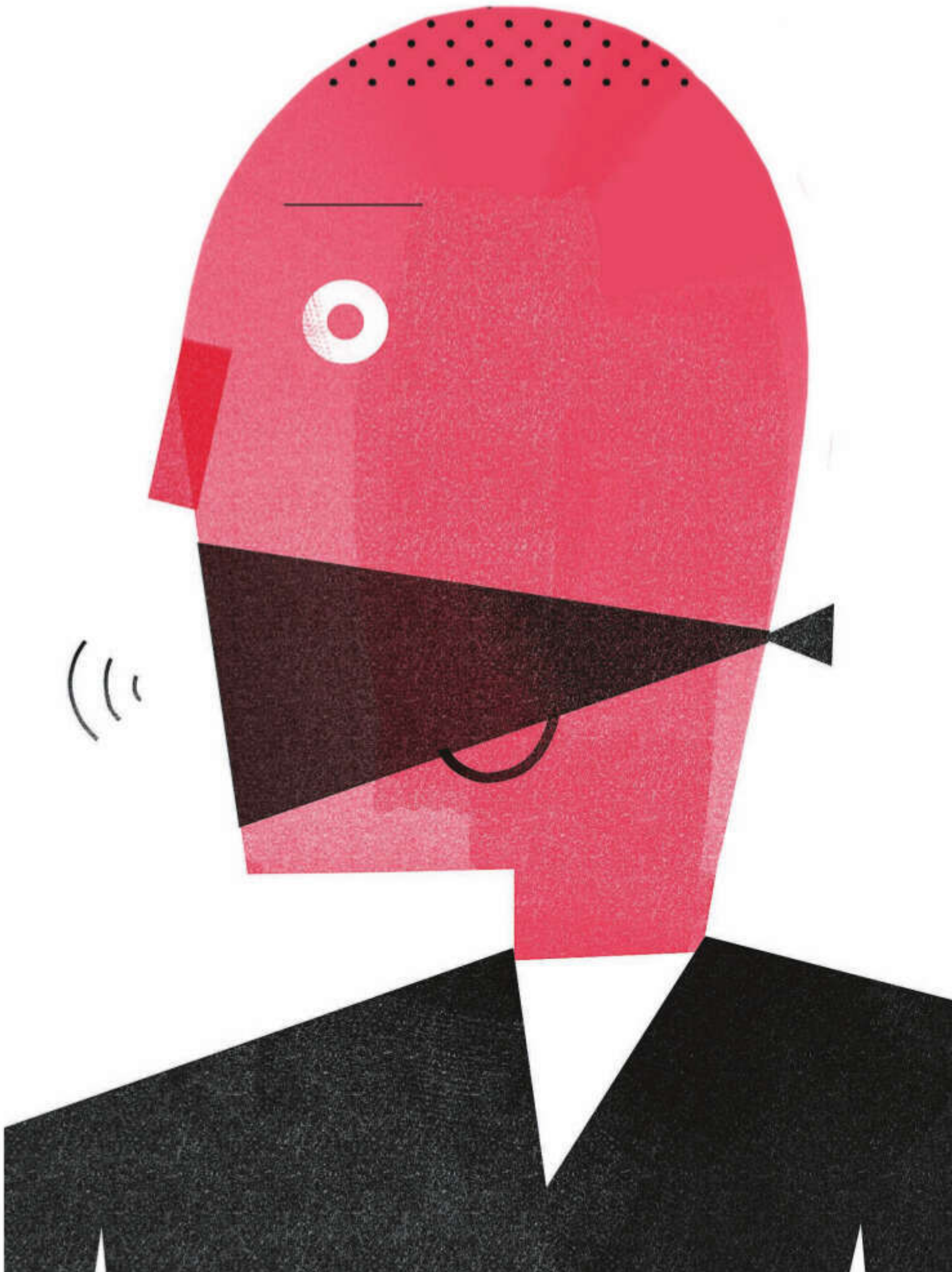
And rulers? Show me one head of state who enjoys being mocked daily on front pages and television screens. Even in strong democracies, governments lean on media houses, whisper to platforms, and signal displeasure. In the Kimmel episode, political pressure hung in the background like humidity. Louis Brandeis once said the purpose of speech is to free us from irrational fears. Yet, in practice, it is fear — of advertisers pulling out, regulators frowning, mobs trending — that silences faster than any censor.

Theorists have been saying this for a century. Walter Lippmann spoke of the “manufacture of consent.” Democracies, he argued, need managed persuasion to survive. Noam Chomsky later showed how ownership and advertising shape journalism long before a censor’s hand. By the time a talk-show host sits at the desk, the boundaries of expression have already been marked in pencil by economics and access.

And there is the deeper question: Whose speech is even counted as “public”? Scholars of coloniality remind us that the doctrine of free speech was born inside unequal orders. Neutral rules often amplify those who already have reach, while marginal voices are left shouting into the void. Freedom without equality is simply a megaphone for the loud.

The algorithm has only made this more visible. Platforms boast: “We don’t remove speech, we reduce reach.” In reality, the two are indistinguishable. What good is a right to speak if your words vanish into silence? Censorship is no longer scissors. It is a slider on a dashboard, tuned by engineers who answer not to voters, but to quarterly earnings.

Then there is the hypocrisy when power gets personal. One business magnate, a fierce champion of free ideas in public, learned that a senior executive once told his college-going daughter her idea was “not well thought out”. The man was shown the door by week’s end, humiliated in front of his peers as punishment for exercising the very freedom his



C R Sasikumar

boss so often preached. Liberty sounds noble in speeches. It feels less noble in drawing rooms.

So, is freedom of speech a myth? If you define it as the absolute right to say whatever you want, wherever you want, without consequence, then yes, it is. As a protection from the state, it still matters greatly. But once you step outside the courtroom and into the newsroom, or from the street into a studio, the microphone belongs to owners, advertisers, and unwritten rules. That is not conspiracy. That is architecture.

What would real freedom look like inside companies and countries? It would mean more than slogans on walls. It would mean allowing criticism of leaders to breathe. It would mean drawing a line between harm and embarrassment. It would mean clear rules applied evenly, real appeal systems, and honesty about when reach is reduced. Most of all, it would mean knowing the difference between protecting the brand and protecting the boss. One safeguards the enterprise. The other only cushions egos.

The Kimmel affair should not be seen as a television drama. It is a case study. It shows how speech bends under ownership, regulation, politics, and fear. It shows how governments can silence without bans, how corporations can punish without censors, and how audiences, too, join the game — rewarding, boycotting, amplifying, ignoring. Free speech is not a switch.

The Kimmel affair should not be seen as a television drama. It shows how speech bends under ownership, regulation, politics, and fear. It shows how governments can silence without bans, how corporations can punish without censors, and how audiences, too, join the game — rewarding, boycotting, amplifying, ignoring. Free speech is not a switch.

The myth, then, is not that free speech exists. The myth is that free speech is untouched by power and consequence. If we want the ideal, we will need to build it: Transparent rules, plural platforms, and leaders who can endure the sting of being questioned. Until then, we will keep mistaking the loudest microphone for the people’s voice. Free speech will remain a rented loud-speaker, cut off the moment it becomes inconvenient. And that, not a stray joke at 11:35 pm, is the real punchline.

The writer is an advisory professional

### WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

If the American ideal of freedom means anything, it is that Americans can engage in an extremely wide range of political speech, including the tasteless and the offensive.

— THE NEW YORK TIMES

## Tax system that cares

GST 2.0 showcases government’s resolve to make taxation an instrument of welfare. It addresses concerns of industry and consumers



ANIL BALUNI

NAGRIK DEVO BHAVA – every citizen is the face of the divine. Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s heartfelt mantra is the spirit behind the new Goods and Service Tax (GST) regime. This has changed the way a common person thinks about taxation in India. Under the Modi Government, India has completed its journey from a multitude of taxes to the “One Nation, One Tax” regime — a tax reform that has created a common national market.

By exempting over 300 essentials — staples like rice and pulses to household must-haves like soap and school supplies — from taxation, this bold zero-tax proposal slashes prices, shields families from hidden inflationary pressure and channelises their savings into nutrition, well-being and their children’s future.

This simplified GST regime has made people more confident about the tax structure. Conversations on GST are taking place today in streets, towns, and village squares in the country. Even small traders proudly say, “We pay GST. we contribute to the nation’s development.” GST is not just a tax system but a symbol of New India’s self-confidence.

During the Congress regime, food, clothing, medicines, education, and even children’s toffees bore the brunt of high taxes. The common citizen was caught in a “web of taxes”. But all this changed in 2017 when the vision of “One Nation, One Tax” was realised under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The new regime replaced numerous central and state indirect taxes. This also heralded a new economic journey in which concerns of industry and consumers were accorded primacy, while trade also received a fillip.

In implementing the GST regime, Prime Minister Modi followed the principles of “Ram Rajya”. Lord Ram says that a king should collect taxes in the same way as the sun draws water from the earth: Where there is more water, the sun draws more; and where there is less, it draws less. That same water later returns to the earth evenly in the form of rain. This ideal arrangement shows that taxation should never be a tool of injustice or exploitation, but a means of welfare.

Unfortunately, during the rule of the Opposition parties, the tax system strayed from this ideal. According to Kautliya, a tax structure should be simple — a king should collect tax just as a bee gathers nectar from flowers without harming them, yet produces honey for the benefit of all. PM Modi has put these principles into practice in letter and spirit. A true government is one that makes taxes not a burden on the people, but a tool for their development and growth. This is the essence of “Ram Rajya”, and today the Modi government is working in the same direction.

Under the Congress governments, taxes were a constant headache on one hand, while on the other hand, everyday inflation disturbed the budget of every household. With several layers of taxes, estimating the real price of goods was akin to solving a puzzle. During the Congress era,

the tax on everyday items like toothpaste, soap, and hair oil amounted to more than 25 per cent. Even the common man’s ride, the bicycle, was taxed at 17 per cent. A 16 per cent tax on sewing machines made women’s hard work even more taxing.

This was not an ordinary mistake, but the Congress’s way of running a government where the poor and middle class were kept under the burden of taxes. Having one’s own home is the biggest dream of a common man, but under the Congress rule this dream became even more difficult. Cement was taxed at 29 per cent. Buying a TV, fan, AC, or other household goods attracted a 31 per cent tax.

Even health services were not spared from the Congress’s “tax loot.” Diagnostic kits, necessary for conducting medical tests, were taxed at 16 per cent. Poor and middle-class people used to think multiple times before getting a simple blood test or scan done. That is why treatment in India was considered expensive.

Under the Congress rule, hotel bookings were taxed at 14 per cent besides a hefty luxury tax. That meant travel could burden the pockets of common people twice, when they travelled. Tourism and the hotel industry had reached a state of stagnation because of Congress’s policies. The Modi government has either abolished or greatly reduced these taxes.

The Congress’s tax system made lives of villages and farmers even more taxing. On agricultural essentials like tractors, irrigation equipment, pumping sets, and hand tools, taxes ranging from 12 per cent to 14 per cent were levied. The farming community was the worst hit under the Congress’s regressive tax regime. As a result, the cost of farming kept rising and farmers sank into debt. Moreover, a similar product was sold at different prices in different states, which hurt consumers.

GST 2.0 regime has brought in major relief to all sections of our society. On essential goods, GST has either been reduced to zero or placed in only the 5 per cent slab. The earlier regime had many tax slabs, but GST 2.0 has only two slabs, which have provided major relief to everyone, from ordinary citizens to traders and entrepreneurs. The journey from the Congress’s tax loot regime to the Modi government’s tax relief is not just the story of reform but also evidence of steps towards making India developed.

Next Gen GST 2.0 reforms have brought in five revolutionary changes — simplification of the tax system, improvement in the quality of life, a renewed boost to consumption and growth, fresh strength to investment and employment, and making of India developed through strong cooperation between the states and the Centre.

The reforms in the GST regime have once again proven that the BJP government’s mantra of “*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas, Sabka Prayas*” is not just a slogan but a commitment of the Modi Government to the people. These reforms come after the recent income tax relief package, which exempted earnings up to Rs 12 lakh for millions of salaried individuals and small businesses. This is, therefore, a synergistic double boost. It sends the message that the Modi government understands people’s needs and wants to help them fulfill their aspirations. This change speaks of a new, resurgent India.

The writer is a Lok Sabha MP from Garhwal and National Media Head and BJP’s chief spokesperson

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

#### AGAINST FREE SPEECH

THIS REFERS TO the report ‘Court set aside order asking journalists to take down content against Adani firm’ (*IE*, September 19). The September 6 civil judge order in favour of AEL (Adani Enterprises Limited) was grossly violative of the principle of natural justice. Stranger was the notification based on this now impugned order asking all platforms to take down all that content, which AEL claims to be defamatory.

I R Murmu, New Delhi

#### STRATEGIC PARTNERS

THIS REFERS TO the article ‘Partners in turbulent times’ (*IE*, September 19). As America is moving towards unilateralism, underscoring the importance of multilateralism and the emerging axis between Japan and India is much needed. Their shared concern lies in countering China’s military assertiveness. Despite the fact that India and Japan have distinct strategic priorities, both of them support each other at the UN. India seeks Japan’s investment and technology to become a “developed nation.”

Madhusree Guha, Kolkata

#### UNTOLD STORIES

THIS REFERS TO the report ‘Musical presentation based on PM’s life depicts his ‘untold story’ (*IE*, September 19). PM’s life is full of untold stories. I remember when he was going to Gujarat first time as CM, he told party leaders and workers gathered at the party headquarters in Delhi, “Do not send letters of recommendation to me, let me govern and develop Gujarat”. He brought Gujarat to an international level. He is now acknowledged all over the world.

AL Agarwal, Delhi

#### DISSENTING VOICE

THIS REFERS TO the article ‘Here’s to the Sundance Kid’ (*IE*, September 19). It reminds us that Robert Redford’s truest gift was his ability to institutionalise dissent in Hollywood’s formula-driven industry. By founding Sundance, he democratised cinema. In many ways, Redford anticipated today’s streaming revolution. Sundance preserves cultural memory by ensuring alternative narratives are not eclipsed. Redford’s enduring relevance lies in building an ecosystem where authenticity and artistic risk can thrive.

Zainab Irshad, Patna



MIRWAIZ UMAR FAROOQ

THE PASSING OF Professor Abdul Ghani Bhat is a profound personal loss for me and an irreparable loss for the people of Jammu and Kashmir. To me, he was more than a colleague in the Hurriyat Conference — he was an affectionate elder, a friend, and a guide with whom I shared a bond of over 35 years. Bhat will be remembered as a man of intellect and moderation, who consistently championed dialogue and engagement as the only viable way to resolve the Kashmir issue. At a time when many believed otherwise, he had the courage to speak openly that “guns must give way to talks”. He often reminded us with his characteristic phrase: “*Sab ki thodi-thodi nak kategi, par khubsurti mein kami nahiin ayege*” — meaning India, Pakistan, and the people of J&K would all have to make compromises, but the beauty of peace would only grow. His conviction that dialogue was not weakness but wisdom gave strength to our collective efforts. What set him apart was not only his po-

## A man of moderation

Abdul Ghani Bhat saw dialogue as way to resolve Kashmir issue

litical clarity but his intellectual stature. A professor of Persian by training, he was deeply immersed in the world of literature, poetry, and philosophy. Our conversations would often move from politics to Islam, Sufism, Rumi, and Iqbal. He guided me in my PhD thesis, drawing upon his vast knowledge and scholarly discipline. Many evenings, I recall him reciting Rumi or Iqbal to explain the deeper meaning of patience, justice, or hope. He had the unique habit of beginning our meetings by asking if I had seen any dream, and then interpreting it with a blend of spirituality and mystery. He was, in truth, a dreamer — but a dreamer of peace.

He bore personal tragedies with extraordinary resilience. He lost his brother to violence, just as I lost my father, Mirwaiz Molvi Farooq, and later my uncle, Molvi Mushtaq. We grieved together the assassinations of Abdul Gani Lone sahib and the attack on our colleague Fazal Haq Qureshi. Yet, despite this trail of loss, Bhat never allowed bitterness to

cloud his vision. His response was always the same — to persist in engagement and dialogue, because without it, there could be no way forward. This moral courage is what defined him. Bhat was also far-sighted in his understanding of geopolitics. Long before it became part of mainstream discourse, he would speak about the role of China in South Asia and its implications for Kashmir. He urged us to think beyond rigid positions and to approach the issue with imagination and pragmatism. He saw peace in the Subcontinent not as a utopia but as a realistic necessity. For me personally, he was always present in moments of struggle, in moments of doubt, and in moments of grief. He stood by me through thick and thin, offering guidance rooted in faith and wisdom. It pains me beyond words that when his final journey came, I was denied by the state the simple human right to walk with him to his resting

place. To be locked inside my home, unable to shoulder his bier, is a cruelty that compounds the sorrow of his passing. I will miss his nuance, his gentle humour, his mystical insights, and above all, his unwavering belief that peace is possible if we dare to dream it. Abdul Ghani Bhat’s legacy will live on as that of a scholar-statesman who combined intellect with humility, courage with patience, and conviction with compassion. His absence leaves a void that cannot be filled, but his words, his dreams, and his example will continue to guide us. As Mawlana Rumi reminds us: “Don’t get lost in your pain, Know that one day your pain will become your cure.” Bhat believed in this truth — that out of suffering must emerge healing, and out of conflict, peace. He was, and will remain, a dreamer of peace for the Subcontinent.

The writer is chairman, Hurriyat Conference



# 12 IDEA EXCHANGE

## NEWSMAKERS IN THE NEWSROOM

### ON TARIFF MITIGATION

What's clear is that economic size is important but so are your vulnerabilities. How India addresses that, be it creating diversified markets or building its competitiveness, is what matters

**Sukalp Sharma: How concerned is the industry about US tariffs? How would you rate the Indian government's response so far?**

There is a concern in the industry, definitely, because India and the US have enjoyed a strong, bilateral economic relationship. There are companies that were exporting substantially to the US and some were labour-intensive. But, I believe that the noise around it is probably disproportionate to the economic impact. The industry, by and large, feels that it is something that shouldn't have happened. But, at the same time, there is a large section which sees this as an opportunity for India to look at the next generation of changes. What can we do to enhance India's competitiveness, for instance? A lot of these changes are not easy because they involve various ministries and states. At least this is something that will give the government, the industry and the stakeholders an impetus to create greater economic opportunities in India. As for the government's response, India has been measured in its response. The behaviour of Indian political leadership is what one would expect from one of the largest democracies in the world. It's very important that India maintains its stature of being free, fair and independent in its thought process.

**Sukalp Sharma: Given how the Trump administration seems to have thrown the conventional diplomatic playbook out the window, what can the government and the industry do to mitigate this crisis?**

Whatever has to be done is being done. From India's side, it's business as usual. What's become clear is that economic size is important, but equally important is what your vulnerabilities are. How India addresses that, be it in terms of supply chain, creating diversified markets, building the strength and competitiveness of its own economy — India needs to address these with greater vigour.

**Sukalp Sharma: What consultations has the CII had with the government on US tariff impact, particularly for sectors that are most affected?**

You can break the engagement into two parts — sectors which are impacted and those outside of these sectors. The government, led by the Prime Minister himself, is keen to use this as an opportunity to bring in changes which should have happened earlier. On the first one (sectors impacted), I would say that the delta is so high that any normal relief measure honestly won't work. Similar to what happened during Covid, we have sought specific relief. Payment of outstanding dues by various PSUs and other government agencies can be accelerated so that working capital blockages can be taken care of. Issues around inverted duty structures should be addressed. Obviously, there has been an ask to provide a direct, straight subsidy for some sectors. But you also have to engage with the government in areas where they are more receptive to change. Then I would think, solvency. The general belief is that this too shall pass, it's unsustainable to have this kind of tariffs. It's very important that organisations remain solvent. So, whatever can enable that, especially for MSMEs. The second is that the government is also working with the industry to see how we can diversify markets — building new relationships, accelerating the trade agreement with the EU and accelerating the implementation of trade pacts signed with the UK. Around these areas, we will probably see greater activity.

**Anil Sasi: Large industrial houses have lobbied and got certain things done, QCOs (Quality Control Orders) for instance. The problem with these tariffs is that it seems to be hurting smaller exporters than bigger companies.**

I don't think QCOs is a big versus small debate. QCOs basically came into being when MSMEs went to the government to say that they have been rendered uncompetitive because of cheap, substandard material coming from different parts of the world into India. The challenge later on was that QCO was imposed on products where maybe India either did not have adequate production capacity or, in many cases, zero production capacity. That created challenges for MSMEs and larger companies because neither could they import or if they imported, they had to import from destinations where it was very expensive. That is something that has been presented to the government to say that when they look at QCOs, they should do an economic impact assessment to say it should only be applied where it doesn't impact the overall manufacturing of the finished products. Now the government

### WHY RAJIV MEMANI



A seasoned and leading voice from the Indian industry, Rajiv Memani, Chairman and CEO — EY India, is currently the face of India Inc as the President of the Confederation of Indian Industry. His tenure at CII coincides with several external challenges, primarily stemming from an

international tariff war, trade-related uncertainty and global volatility. At this critical juncture, his task, as the head of the country's foremost industry chamber, is cut out — to work with the government on softening the impact of external headwinds, along with identifying opportunities in adversity.



### ON THE US TARIFFS

The industry, by and large, feels that it is something that shouldn't have happened. But, at the same time, there is a large section which sees this as an opportunity for India to look at the next generation of changes

# ‘In the new global order, economic strength and resilience matter. India should focus on building that’

Rajiv Memani, Chairman and CEO - EY India, and President of the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), on seeing opportunities in the US tariffs, why business with China is important and the areas we need to work on to become a global economic force.

The session was moderated by Sukalp Sharma, Deputy Associate Editor, *The Indian Express*



(Right) Rajiv Memani, Chairman and CEO - EY India, and President, CII, with Sukalp Sharma, Deputy Associate Editor, *The Indian Express* at the Noida office. Tashi Tobgyal

has set up inter-ministerial committees, so the QCOs will go through a more detailed review.

**Anil Sasi: What kind of an opportunity do we have at this point to look at branding Indian products and services. A lot of our products are back-end, non-branded. Is that a constraint?**

Absolutely. There are two-three elements to it. First, Indian corporates have massively underinvested in R&D. If you look at the percentages, it's 0.6-0.7 per cent (of GDP). And if you were to compare that with averages around the world, that number is 3-4 per cent. You also have to facilitate industry-academia partnerships, which is also not happening as effectively as it is overseas. The third is tourism. It's for both the industry and the government to ask, what does brand India stand for? If you are saying we are the fifth-largest economy in the world, the number of global brands that we have which are respected or accepted outside is far less.

**Harikishan Sharma: Can you help us understand the much-needed reforms in the agriculture sector? What should the government bring in, for short and medium term?**

I think that the Bills (2020 farm laws that were repealed after farmers' protests) had some very positive changes. Unfortunately, the government tried to push it but it could not get through. That has put us back. The government is looking at how to strengthen FPOs (Farmer Producer Organisations) in terms of procurement, technology and enablement. The second is fertilisers. India's imports of fertiliser are continuing to grow. So how can we get greater manufacturing in India? What are the things that we can do to ensure direct subsidies to farmers, give them the choice whether they want urea or NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium) and also encourage usage of other fertilisers. The third area is the availability of a digital stack where farmers get data on monsoons, weather conditions and soil usage that they can access locally and freely.

**Siddharth Upasani: Could the government and industry have predicted the global volatility given what had happened in the first Trump administration, when the focus was on China? Second, the GST reforms have led to fears of fiscal slippage, banks have started increasing lending rates. Does the RBI need to do more to**

### ease financial conditions?

In the earlier Trump administration, the relationship between both sides was strong. It's not only about leadership but a strategic partnership. If you look at various comments that former President (Joe) Biden made, it talked about being the most significant relationship of this century. So, I won't blame the government for not having foreseen this.

Everyone understands the US concern that you have a mounting trade deficit. Everyone understood that issue and everyone was trying to see how to figure that out. The US and other markets have been wanting to build more supply chains within. But still, one felt there was enough playing space within that for countries like India. Things will play out as they will but sometimes these events also create opportunities. Our focus has to be much more on trying to say what are the reforms? How do you galvanise industry? How do you attract FDI? That has to be the focus then the economic momentum will catch up. It is now clear in the new global order that global economic strength and economic resilience matter. India should be focused on building that.

I personally don't feel that its (GST reforms) impact on tax collection overall will be that significant. GST rate rationalisation is expected to put \$10 billion-\$12 billion in the hands of the Indian consumers on an annualised basis. This is positive for the Indian economy and may lead to 0.5 per cent (higher) economic growth on an annualised basis.

The RBI is very aware of what's hap-

pening. Right now, they will ensure that transmission impact is happening and credit availability is there. Again, there are various schemes that the government has launched, particularly to support MSMEs. That has started playing out and is getting more capital in the banking system. We'll have to see how inflation behaves.

**Prasanta Sahu: We have seen that the countries with which India has FTAs, the industry has not been able to take full advantage of it. Why is that and what are industry bodies like CII doing to disseminate information to smaller units? Also, there are concerns over whether the industry will pass on the GST benefit to the consumers. What can CII do about this?**

The FTAs that have happened recently, particularly, when you look at the UK, Australia and others, we feel reasonably positive. And what CII has been doing is, one, taking delegations to the respective countries to see how these trade relationships happen. And also, through our various regions, talking about what each of the FTAs are doing. CII in partnership with the Ministry of Commerce are doing a lot of these sessions. On GST, I think that's a genuine concern. We will ensure that this benefit is passed on. What CII has realised is that trust is very important. If you are looking at long-term success for the country, for business, trust within the industry and trust between industry and government and stakeholders is very important.

**Sukalp Sharma: The government has**



SCAN THE CODE TO WATCH VIDEO

### INDIA'S FUTURE

For India to become economically strong, the bottom 30 per cent has to grow. The industry has to address it, be it through skilling, minimum wages or creating opportunities

**voiced a concern about private capex not picking up enough, while it is doing all the heavy lifting. Could the GST rate rationalisation lead to a pickup in private sector investment?**

Yes, I think so. Definitely capacity utilisation should get better and that will increase capex. Having said that, there are two-three things. One, there is no concrete number to suggest that private capex slowed down. So, if you look at an ICICI Securities report of all listed companies in India and their balance sheets, private capex in 2024-25 had grown by almost 20 per cent or so to Rs 11 trillion. So, I would say that it is not that private capex is not happening. I definitely do foresee that because of the volatility and the distraction that is there in business right now, some of it may slow down. But we must do the things that we are talking about in terms of reforms and ease of doing business.

Today, if you start a project, it takes you six to nine months to get a piece of land, then six months to get environmental clearances, then three months to get forest clearances. Then, getting NOCs. Or, if you want to build a hospital, you have to get 70 approvals, for a hotel, 50 approvals. If some of them can be crunched up, it would get the capex momentum going.

Private capex has been happening, the potential to do more is much greater, GST is one leg of the stool, it will definitely enable better capacity utilisation, greater sales and, therefore, greater economic impetus to do it. But equally important are the other factors that need to be simplified. For instance, in terms of the number of audits that are done, the manner in which they are done and how you deal with decriminalisation. If there is a mistake of Rs 1 crore in some computational error, you can have prosecution for a year and if it is Rs 5 crore, you can have prosecution for three years. These are things where we should just have compounding.

**Aggam Walia: Because of tensions with the US, India is sort of cosy'ing up to the Chinese. Does the industry have an independent view on how India should deal with China?**

One area where industry is very keen that India engages with China is to look at building the supply chain for manufacturing in areas such as EVs, electronics and components. For instance, with the new component policy that's come out, for India to get technology and capital goods it's very important that we have partnerships and joint ventures with Chinese companies.

So, by and large, Indian industry is keen that those joint ventures, technology tie-ups, visas, and freedom to travel are maintained. At the same time, India has a large trade deficit with China. That's because India is exporting electronics in a significant way and a lot of the components are now imported from China and other places. But you want to ensure that if there is dumping, there are anti-dumping agencies and if you have minimum protection agreements, those protections are there. You also want to encourage manufacturing, technology transfer and capital equipment purchases because a lot of items that India wants come from China. The Indian industry is very keen that the government has a more proactive stance and a more clearly laid out policy which is unambiguous in the way we interact with China.

**P Vaidyanathan Iyer: The industry hasn't quite kept pace on the employee income front. While profits have risen 4x in the last four years, wage growth has been in single digits. Could India Inc do better? This could help boost consumption and economic growth.**

I have two or three different strands of responses. First, for India to grow and become economically strong, the bottom 30 per cent has to grow. The industry has to address it, whatever it takes to be competitive, be it through skilling, what the minimum wages should be, how we create opportunities. There are different ways to address it.

Second, to compare profit growth and wage growth is like comparing apples and oranges. For instance, you could have a bank which has had a profit growth of 30 per cent, but you cannot have wage growth of 30 per cent. And in some years, you would have negative growth. It doesn't mean that the wage growth will be negative. We had a very strong, secular growth post-Covid. I think what it should translate into is greater economic activity, greater opportunities and, therefore, greater competitiveness for talent.

The third thing is you have AI coming in a big way and there is tremendous pressure on competitiveness. So, if you combine all these forces, it won't be easy to say that 'just pump-up wage growth' because then you could have issues with competitiveness. Also, in many ways, faster displacement using technology will happen, it's a matter of time. The bigger challenge and opportunity for India (more than US tariffs) is actually technology and AI.



## A shock to IT

Indian firms should take the H-1B hit and move on

United States (US) President Donald Trump, in his second term, has shown that he is willing to take major decisions without any public deliberation or notice. This is certainly the case with his announcement that a \$100,000 fee would attach to H-1B visas henceforth — a declaration that led to a certain amount of panic among those who are on that visa. There were even reports that passengers on flights out of the US asked to be deplaned on hearing of the news. The White House has since clarified that the fee will be imposed only on new applicants. But there is certainly little or no trust that it will stick to this plan. Those on existing H-1B visas will certainly continue to feel a degree of apprehension when they travel. The lack of clarity on how this decision will be applied and who it will apply to is part of the point, perhaps — Mr Trump's administration has come to glory in the notion that it does not have to explain itself to anyone, least of all to foreigners.

The decision also shows that Mr Trump is becoming more radical with his time in office, not less. In his first term as President, his attorney general attempted to restrict and reform H-1Bs, but could not follow through on the plan. The subject of these visas came up again, shortly before Mr Trump's second inauguration, in a debate between prominent members of the Big Tech and "America First" wings of his coalition. On that occasion, the president-elect seemed to come down on the side then represented by Elon Musk. But since then, Mr Musk has left the President's orbit and corporate America has demonstrated its willingness to subordinate itself to the White House. The business side of his coalition appears to have decisively lost to the America-Firsters, and the President himself has shifted his emphasis since December.

While India officials have attempted to put on a brave face on this decision, noting that India's own tech and startup sector can absorb a great deal of additional talent, there is no doubt that there will be serious implications for many of India's flagship information-technology-enabled services (ITeS) corporations. The fact is that about 70 per cent of H-1B visas went to Indians, and some reports say that almost half the slots in the H-1B lottery were taken by outsourcing or staffing companies. They will naturally feel a disproportionate shock. The people these companies employed on the H-1B were also paid below the average wage for their role, as opposed to other H-1B lottery winners, for example those employed by Alphabet or Meta. There was clearly an outdated business model at work here which this new policy, however clumsily or maliciously, has disrupted.

Indian ITeS firms must now go back to the drawing board. The political climate in the US has changed regarding their business model. It will similarly change in other locations, including Europe. Wage arbitrage is no longer a tenable basis for an entire business plan. Nor, for that matter, is it as effective as earlier. In the north of England, for example, average wages for a worker in ITeS are only two or three times what they are in Bengaluru. The growth of agentic AI and other innovations are in any case reducing the level of low- and middle-level assistance required by clients. Indian ITeS firms should account for such changes in the business environment and find a different way forward that creates new value for their stakeholders. This may not be easy in the immediate near term, but Indian businesses will need to adapt quickly.

## Saudi-Pak dynamics

India must consider collateral impact

The mutual defence pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan essentially formalises a well-known, longstanding military cooperation between the two nations. The nuclear dimension of the pact, as articulated by the Pakistani defence minister, who said his country's nuclear programme would be "made available to Saudi Arabia" under the new pact, has also been an integral element in this collaboration. In his 2012 book, *Eating Grass*, Pakistani military insider Brigadier General Feroz Hassan Khan reveals that Saudi Arabia provided "generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear programme to continue, especially when the country was under sanctions". This tacit understanding of nuclear cooperation became clearer after US military intelligence revealed Riyadh's acquisition of intercontinental ballistic-missile technology from China following Saudi misgivings at the Biden administration's attempts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. It is the timing of this public announcement that is significant, however. Concluded soon after Israel's bombing of US ally Qatar, the Saudi-Pakistan agreement implies a new dynamic in West Asian politics vis-a-vis the US.

Israel's bombing of Qatar has signalled that the Trump White House has given Binyamin Netanyahu a *carte blanche* in the region. Not surprisingly, this development has raised an acute sense of vulnerability about the security guarantees between Washington and the Gulf monarchies. Deep defence ties make it difficult for Saudi Arabia to extricate itself from relations with the US — not least because Riyadh buys the bulk of its conventional weaponry from the US. Israel's bombing has heightened Saudi threat perceptions, which were already elevated by the presence of Iran-backed Houthis on its southern border. By formalising an informal defence pact, Riyadh has sent an unambiguous signal that it is seeking more robust deterrence against potential nuclear threats in its neighbourhood. The fact that the Gulf nations hailed Islamabad's nuclear weapons test as the "Islamic Bomb" in 1998 offered early indications of the perception of Pakistan's role in West Asian military security.

Though the pact is not directed at India, the possibility of collateral impact cannot be ruled out. There is unlikely to be a material change in cordial relations between India and Saudi Arabia. India is Saudi Arabia's second-largest trade partner and Saudi Arabia is India's fifth-largest. Beyond the geoeconomics of crude oil, where Russia has taken prime position, the Saudi wealth fund has significant investment in India and the two countries conducted joint land and naval military exercises for the first time last year. It is noteworthy that it is Pakistan rather than Saudi Arabia that has highlighted the reciprocal arrangement under which an attack on either Pakistan or Saudi Arabia would be considered an attack on both nations and both would respond. However, one implication of the formalisation of the Saudi-Pak agreement is that other West Asian nations will also be seeking new partnerships in response to altered threat perceptions. As such, given India's friendly relations with Israel, India is unlikely to figure high in the strategic calculus of West Asian nations. Another implication of the agreement is that Islamabad could well feel encouraged to escalate political provocations. Though the deal may not be new to the Indian foreign policy establishment, it has undoubtedly introduced a new dynamic into India's "Look West" policy, which calls for a new and nuanced response.

## Indian exceptionalism is over

President Donald Trump seems to have dismantled the consensus that India deserved special treatment from the US



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA MOHANTY

Is United States (US) President Donald Trump's crack-down on H-1Bs only the latest step in a sustained campaign that targets India, in particular? After all, more than two-thirds of H-1Bs are handed out to Indians, and it is Indian companies that are among this visa's biggest beneficiaries.

Perhaps. From one point of view, Mr Trump's actions, taken together, might indeed look like he is singling us out. Indian goods exports have the highest cumulative tariff rate so far, at 50 per cent. Earlier this year, a remittance tax was imposed, the burden of which might disproportionately be borne by those of Indian origin in the US. The US' relations with Pakistan appear to be on the upswing, without any objective reason why this should be so. Multiple members of Mr Trump's Cabinet have gone out of their way to needle India.

And while the H-1B decision might have hogged the headlines in the past few days, two other developments occurred in parallel. Republican senators introduced a Bill targeting imports of Indian shrimp in particular for 40 per cent tariffs. And the US administration decided to suspend an India-specific waiver to the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act, which was being used to ensure that Chabahar port could be built without the threat of sanctions. This waiver was originally granted in 2018, during Mr Trump's first term, and is an indication of how the vibes have changed since then.

It's worth noting, however, that there is considerably more that the US could do. For example, the full provisions of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or Caatsa, might be applied to India for its purchase of the Russian-made S-400 surface-to-air missile system — particularly if New Delhi

indicates that it does not intend to buy any more major American weapons platforms in the immediate future.

Many Republicans want to go further than Mr Trump already has. There is the looming threat of tariffs or other charges on Indian services exports. White House Trade Advisor Peter Navarro has suggested that outsourcing should receive similar policy treatment to goods imports. There is some support on the Hill for another Republican proposal that would impose a 25 per cent tax on "any money paid by a US company or taxpayer to a foreign person whose work benefits consumers in the United States". Any of these passing would only increase the sense that India is, for some reason, a particular bother for Mr Trump or his party.

There is another, less solipsistic way of looking at things. The fact is that many countries around the world, if they examine Trump administration policies that affect them, believe that their nation is being specifically targeted. Mr Trump is about to host President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey — but many of the latter's supporters believe, like many Indians, that the White House is singling out Turkish interests. They too can stitch together a

narrative: Turkey has been excluded from the F-35 project, for example, and has been denied the Caatsa exemption that India received. Similar patterns are being discerned by Brazilians, who also have been targeted with 50 per cent tariffs, and even Koreans, whose engineers were recently deported from the US in handcuffs.

Can India legitimately claim that its treatment is different from what these others have been receiving? Perhaps. But the real difference maybe lies elsewhere, in that India has further to fall than most other

POLICY RULES  
MIHIR S SHARMA

## Trump visa salvo a boon in disguise?

On September 19, United States (US) President Donald Trump dropped yet another bombshell. He ordered that all new petitions for H-1B visas filed on behalf of workers outside the US would now carry a \$100,000 fee. The measure, which will last a year unless renewed, is aimed at deterring firms from sponsoring foreign workers, particularly in entry-level roles. The immediate impact will be felt disproportionately by Indians, who form roughly three-quarters of all H-1B recipients.

Under the H-1B system, firms petition the government for the right to hire foreign workers in specialty occupations, often in technology or engineering. Outsourcing giants such as Infosys, Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), Wipro, and HCL, which have long relied on sending junior engineers to the US, are likely to be hit the hardest. By contrast, firms may still pay up for specialists in fields such as artificial intelligence (AI), chip design, biotechnology, and cybersecurity, where domestic talent is scarce and salaries high enough to justify the cost.

Students in the US on F-1 visas may be spared if they convert to H-1Bs without leaving — a strong incentive to remain in the country and push for permanent residency. Dependents too may find themselves constrained if the principal worker is affected. In short, the new fee reshapes mobility for a substantial slice of India's professional diaspora.

All these months, Mr Trump's trade negotiations have focused on merchandise exports, making export-oriented countries like China, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam particularly vulnerable. To escape disaster, they quickly struck deals with Mr Trump, some promising impossibly large investment and jobs. India refused to either give in or make false promises to mollify Mr Trump, probably because it thought it had less to lose. But India is more vulner-

able than others: Software exports and remittances from abroad, mainly the US, are lifelines for the perennially weak Indian rupee. Without these two, economic growth will be hit noticeably. Mr Trump has gently twisted India's arm with the new H-1B fee. He can do more harm, including the imposition of a remittance tax.

The White House argues that the H-1B programme is being abused. The order accuses American companies (without naming any) of laying off citizens while hiring foreigners at lower wages with specific details. Microsoft, Intel, Amazon, and Salesforce are the possible culprits, which have approved thousands of H-1Bs while cutting tens of thousands of domestic jobs. American firms plead for access to foreign talent even as they dismiss local workers, creating the perception of a programme skewed in favour of cost savings over skill.

## Will it last? Hope it does

The market will suffer a knee-jerk reaction on Monday and tech stocks will possibly drift lower, but will this restriction last? And if it does, will it turn out to be positive for India after all?

First, there will be a pushback from within the US. With one stroke, Silicon Valley has lost its pipeline of talent. In 2023, around 65 per cent of H-1B visas were for "computer-related" roles — software

engineers, systems analysts, etc. Top sponsors of H-1Bs are Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Meta, and Apple, along with large Indian firms operating in the US, like TCS. Startups, hospitals, research labs, and financial service firms too rely heavily on H-1B workers. The surcharge will raise costs, discourage new hires, and slow the taking on board talent for projects that require skills that are scarce. High-tech innovation may also slow down, if the pipeline from abroad dries

IRRATIONAL CHOICE  
DEBASHIS BASU

## Kamala Harris reflects on the 2024 election



JENNIFER SZALAI

When Joe Biden phoned Kamala Harris to tell her that he was dropping out of the 2024 presidential race, he said he was just minutes away from announcing his decision to the world. It was a Sunday afternoon in late July — not yet a full month since a wan, feeble Biden had delivered a listless debate performance against a red-faced, fulminating Donald Trump. For more than three weeks, Biden had been bucking demands to drop out, and Harris assumed he was going to persevere.

Harris was initially bewildered by

Biden's sudden switch, including his determination to rush out an announcement. "Give me a bit more time," she thought to herself. She was wearing sweats and had just served her grandnieces pancakes. But in another sense she felt ready: "I knew I was the candidate in the strongest position to win."

Was she? It's a question that looms over *107 Days*, Harris's memoir about her second presidential campaign. The early pages have her making the rounds right after Biden went public, asking Democratic insiders whether she could count on their support. As someone who prides herself on doing "the work," she reprints the notes she made from those calls, including the few demurrals. Nancy Pelosi thought there should be "some kind of primary, not an anointment."

*107 Days* takes us through the next 106 days until the night of November 5, when Trump won both the popular vote and the

Electoral College — an evening that Harris says was so awful for her and her husband, Douglas Emhoff, that they "never discussed it with each other until I sat down to write this book." She had just come out of "the shortest campaign in modern presidential history."

Political figures aren't known for baring their hearts and souls in their books, especially if they are keen to keep their options open. When news broke that Harris had worked with the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Geraldine Brooks, there was speculation that this might be a different kind of memoir. But even Brooks's estimable talents can't make up for an obvious reluctance on Harris's part to let down her guard, even now.

The book's structure accommodates this aversion to reflection. The diaristic organisation permits her to give a play-by-play of those gruelling 107 days, moving through events as they happened, issuing her rebuttals. Regarding the famous

Trump campaign ad — "Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for you" — she defends the decision to "quickly pivot" in her response ads to economic issues like price gouging and small-business tax relief.

For the most part, she favours the blunt-force declaration, the rat-a-tat recitation of facts. "I do not regret my decision to follow my protective instincts," she writes about her ad strategy, as if delivering a statement. "I do regret not giving even more attention to how we might mitigate Trump's attacks."

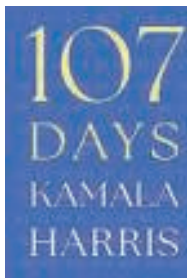
Still, glimmers of a more private self come through. Recalling a run-in with JD Vance, whom she calls "a shape-shifter" and "a shifty guy," she allows herself a moment of profane comedy. In Wisconsin, Vance violated security rules by walking toward Air Force Two, later telling reporters, "I just wanted to check out my future plane." Had she known what Vance was up to, she says, "I

would've been inclined to step from my car and use a word I believe best pronounced correctly. It begins with an m and ends with ah."

But it's her fraught relationship with Biden that forms the undercurrent of the book: "My feelings for him were grounded in warmth and loyalty, but they had become complicated, over time, with hurt and disappointment." She enumerates how she felt sidelined and taken for granted, given thankless jobs like trying to fix undocumented immigration while Biden and his team failed to stand up for her when she was attacked.

Yet during those 107 days she found it difficult to specify what she would do differently from him. In the book, she recalls — not once, but twice — that her campaign adviser David Plouffe pulled her aside and told her, "People hate Joe Biden."

It's inadvertently revealing that some



107 DAYS

by Kamala Harris  
Published by  
Simon & Schuster  
304 pages \$899

of the sharpest lines about Biden come not from her, but from other people. *107 Days* insinuates that her loss in November had much to do with him. But whenever she was given the chance to separate and distinguish herself from him on the campaign trail, Harris says, her sense of loyalty and honour prevented her from doing so: "I've never believed you need to elevate yourself by pushing someone else down."

A different kind of politician might have been able to thread the needle.

Harris describes the moment on the night of the election when her team understood that the returns were not going to go her way: "All I could do was repeat, over and over, 'My God, my God, what will happen to our country?'"

The reviewer is the nonfiction book critic for *The Times*.  
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CONTRAPUNTO

Fandom can keep something alive,  
and fandom can take it down

-CHRISTOPHER HEYERDAHL

# Hello Swadeshi

Globalisation isn't dead. But self-reliance, spotlighted in PM's speech, across sectors is now an urgent necessity

It was very much against the backdrop of yet more Trump policy damage to India, that PM addressed the nation yesterday. Both the themes he picked – GST reforms and atmanirbharta – speak to what's needed to keep our economy robust in the face of global headwinds.

With Indians getting almost 70% of the H-1B visas that were issued in 2024, obviously the country will be the one most impacted by a one-time \$100,000 fee that exceeds the median annual salary of India's H-1B visa-holders. This is on the heels of Trump imposing a 50% tariff on Indian exports to US and revoking the Chabahar sanctions waiver. But there's turbulence from other directions as well, whether it's China reminding India of its rare earth vulnerability or Europe also taking an anti-immigration turn. Deep and wide as different countries' economic ties still remain, clearly a new phase of globalisation is now underway, where India really has to watch out for itself in a way that's perhaps never been needed since Liberalisation 1991.

As Modi reminded yesterday, we have gotten out of the habit of thinking whether or not the comb in our pocket is Indian-made. It's also true that India's large domestic market is what provides relative resilience to external shocks. The test of GST reforms as they become operational today will be what savings they pass on to consumers, and thus spur demand, but they're definitely in the necessary direction. As for meaningful movement in the direction of atmanirbharta, that will, again as Modi's speech underlined, need Centre and states to work together. States governed by different political parties will need to act in concert.

From chips to rare earths to pharma to defence... India's dependencies in sector after sector are all traceable to its abysmal R&D ecosystem. The private sector has shown a confoundingly poor appetite for this spend. So, pretty pledges aside, GOI has to ensure something fundamentally shifts in the research and innovation space. This is what govts of China, South Korea and Taiwan got right and India must as well. External uncertainties leave us no other option. It's possible that the H-1B visa will see India benefit through more GCCs expansion. But it's not impossible that MAGA's crusade for tariffs on services succeeds, flooring even this opportunity. Shifting global sands call for India to keep Plans B, C and D...ready. It has to create, build and deploy more nimbly than it ever has.



## Death Of A Star

Assam shows the deep hold of regional pop culture figures on popular imagination

Assam is in a state of mourning over the death of local superstar Zubeen Garg, who died in Singapore while swimming without a life jacket. The singer, whose songs have enthralled millions in Assam with hits like *Mayabini Ratir Bukut*, *Hiya Diya Niya*, and *Maya Mathu Maya*, was perhaps the most striking figure in Assam's cultural firmament since Bhupen Hazarika. That a sea of humanity turned up to pay last respects to the singer as his body lay in state shows the deep emotional connect people had with him. In a state with a history of complicated ethnic relations and language politics, Zubeen transcended all divides. He sang in multiple languages, including Bangla, and was a great representative of the Northeast.



The popularity of Zubeen also highlights the regional nature of icons in a vast country like India. True, south India has long been a trendsetter, with superstars from the local film industry smoothly making the transition to politics. From NT Rama Rao in Andhra, to MGR, Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi in Tamil Nadu, these local stars had massive following, bordering on hysteria. But there is no set formula by which popular personalities are elevated to stratospheric stardom. Some are able to ride the zeitgeist of the times and live on in people's hearts long after they are gone.

But the hysteria is also a double-edged sword. Many had committed suicide or died of shock after Jayalalithaa's death in 2016. When news of Zubeen's death reached India, many of his fans filed multiple FIRs against his manager Siddharth Sharma and organiser of North East Festival – for which Zubeen had gone to Singapore – Shyamkanu Mahanta, holding them responsible for Zubeen's death. However, this is more emotional than rational as Singapore authorities have so far not found any foul play, and Zubeen's wife herself has requested for the FIRs to be withdrawn. Mourning is best done quietly.

## Book club

In which all members munched seriously

Ratna Manucha



Having recently been inducted into one of the newly formed book clubs in town, I felt I had arrived! We were meeting in a fortnight. Meanwhile, the matter of the book had to be settled. What was it going to be? Mystery? Thriller? Horror? Romance? Science fiction? Fantasy? Dystopian? Magical Realism?

WhatsApp messages flew fast and furious. Suggestions – some with book covers, some without – poured in faster than one could read them. Each time a proposal was put forward, other group members went on an overdrive with their views. Too long, too boring, font too small...the disagreement was endless. So I came up with the brilliant idea, why don't we meet over lunch and decide on a book? A date was set. All members arrived with their selected book in tow. This was serious stuff.

Each person puts forth her views about her choice of book interspersed by cups of hot coffee and finger foods. The protagonist, who is on (*munch munch*) the run, seems to...(this coffee is nice, have you tried these croquettes? I make them too, but these are different), what was I saying? After about half an hour the waiter comes with the menu and all the members take a well-deserved break to discuss the pros and cons of the various dishes animatedly.

After almost another half hour the order is decided and everyone sits back satisfied. Was the book discussion completed? Or was it to continue after lunch? I hadn't a clue, and frankly, I don't think the others had either. By now the conversation has shifted to the children, grandchildren and gardens...in that order.

With lunch served, the chatter settles into soft murmurs plus the clinking of the forks and spoons. Then it is time for a dessert conference, then the bill. Dividing the amount by the number of attendees, 'It's X amount!' announces the lady in pink, triumphantly. In another flurry of activity everyone dives into their bags but many don't have the exact amount so bigger notes are exchanged for smaller ones within the group. Finally, the job is done and the waiter summoned one last time as he is handed over the motley collection of notes (tip included) with a flourish. Everyone gets up to air kiss and say their goodbyes when one voice pipes up, 'We haven't yet decided on the book!'

# ₹50K Cr Reply To \$100K H-1Bs

GOI's best response to Trump will be creating a big fund to channel investments into deep tech. And reforming govt procurement to support buying Indian tech products

TV Mohandas Pai & Nisha Holla



Trump dropped a bombshell on the global tech community. Every new applicant for an H-1B visa will be required to pay an extraordinary fee of \$100,000. New clarifications are rolling in on details like renewals and on the treatment of those already resident in US, and opinions are divided on other edge cases.

The intent is clear: to curtail the flow of high-skilled foreign talent into US. A sweeping waiver clause empowers the Secretary of Homeland Security to exempt entire industries or firms, leaving vast discretion in Washington's hands.

The official justification is familiar: foreign workers are supposedly replacing Americans at lower wages, depriving locals of jobs. Yet the data tells a very different story. Among the top 25 H-1B sponsors, many are leading American tech companies like Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Meta, Apple, Intel, and Accenture, alongside global and Indian consulting firms.

Their average salaries for H-1B holders range from \$100,000 to over \$200,000 per year, far above the US median household income. Indian consulting firms typically charge their clients \$150,000 to \$200,000 annually, more than employees' salaries, to make up for the cost of travel, visa applications, leave, etc. By no measure is this "cheap labour". Instead, these are critical roles in digitalisation, artificial intelligence, cloud infra, chip design, and enterprise software where domestic supply simply does not meet demand.

The cheap labour narrative is further undercut by the composition of the industry itself. Indian IT consulting firms that once relied heavily on H-1Bs have, for several years now, invested significantly in building American workforces. Many employ 50-65% local staff in their US centres.

What is at stake is not the substitution of American workers but the capacity to run globally integrated teams. In fact, post-Covid, the very model of where work is done has shifted. The pandemic normalised distributed teams and catalysed the growth of Global Capability Centres (GCCs) in India. These hubs now handle core research and development work in AI, digitisation, R&D, and semiconductors, not because of cost arbitrage, but because of abundant, high-quality talent.

For US tech companies, the new proclamation is a classic case of self-sabotage. H-1Bs have long been the engine of American innovation. Nearly half of all US unicorn founders are immigrants; many entered initially on H-1Bs. Elon Musk and Jensen Huang are emblematic of how the programme has delivered immense value to



the US economy.

America's \$1 trillion-plus market-cap giants did not build their global dominance by closing doors, but by tapping the world's best talent. Shutting down this pipeline in the name of protecting jobs risks weakening precisely the sectors that generate the most jobs and value domestically, and are the source of American technological power globally.

For India, the immediate shock is likely to be muted. New H-1B applications had already slowed in recent years and the cap for last year has already been reached, and Indian IT majors are fairly hedged with local hiring. Over the next six to twelve months, the impact may be minimal.

What may in fact accelerate is the migration of work offshore. Indian service providers have already demonstrated they can deliver 90% of project work remotely. With advanced telecoms and the widespread acceptance of distributed teams post-pandemic, moving to 95% offshore delivery is now entirely feasible.

Far from cutting Indians out of the value chain, the new US rules may deepen the role of Indian talent by forcing more work to flow into India rather than on-site.

The larger opportunity lies beyond IT services. This disruption should serve as a wake-up call for India to transform from a services hub into a next-generation product nation.

Govt must act decisively to catalyse deep tech, instead of merely lamenting the private sector's efforts. That means establishing a sovereign fund of at least ₹50,000cr to channel capital into artificial intelligence, semiconductors, space, defence technologies, synthetic biology and other frontier sectors via Alternative Investment Funds.

It also means opening procurement doors. In US, govt demand was pivotal in scaling deep-tech industries. In India, bureaucratic bottlenecks and risk-averse, slow and unpredictable procurement practices continue to hinder the growth of startups and MSMEs. This must change if India is to capture the innovation dividend.

India has no shortage of talent or entrepreneurial energy. What is missing is patient sovereign capital and access to anchor markets. The very companies that built India's reputation as the world's IT service provider are now seeding product-focused startups in fintech, SaaS, AI, and chip design. The Indian startup ecosystem remains robust. With the right policy push and public sector funding, India can evolve into a frontier tech product nation.

If India seizes this moment – by funding deep tech, supporting entrepreneurs, and significantly reforming procurement – it can emerge stronger. America may be retreating from openness, but India has the chance to step forward and dominate tech delivery globally.

Pai is chairman and Holla is research fellow, 3one4 Capital

## Economic Shocks? Get Potholes Filled

There's billions of man-hours of civic work waiting to be done in our cities. It's an opportunity to employ unskilled labour, boost income and demand at the bottom of the pyramid, and boost growth in times of global uncertainties

Abhilash.Gaur@timesofindia.com



This week marks a month since Trump's penal tariff on India came into force. It's also started with worrying news about sky-high fees for H-1B visa applications. Since 70% of these visas – 2.8L last year – go to Indians, there's a cloud over the employment, dollar earnings, and remittances, of India's elite STEM workers. All told, \$87bn worth of goods exports and substantial services earnings may be hit.

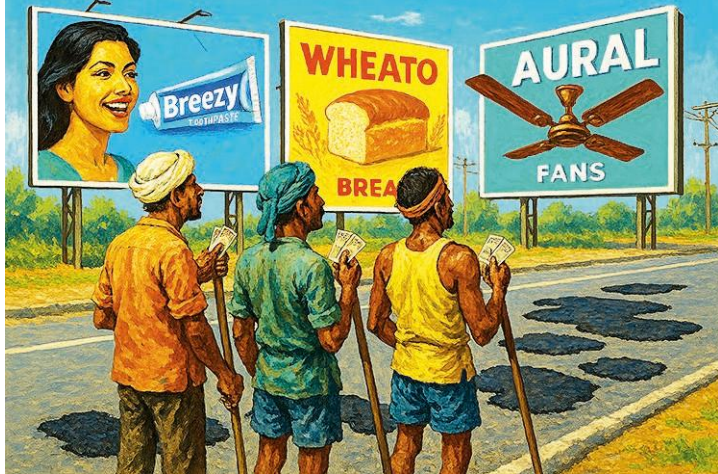
That's why the rollout of GST 2.0 couldn't have been better timed. Lower prices across the board – car and bike prices have reduced sharply – will spur demand and production, countering some of the impact of Trump's actions.

Yes, foreign trade is important for economic growth, but it isn't the only way. For example, export earnings make up 20% of GDP in China – about the same as India and Japan in percentage terms – but only 11% in America. Yet, America's been the most powerful country since the end of WWI over a century ago. Between 1930 and 1970, the share of exports in its GDP never exceeded 7%, and that only once in 1947. Otherwise, US export earnings hovered around the 5% mark through the years when it put troops in Korea and Vietnam, and landed six manned missions on the Moon.

That shows a country can become powerful and prosperous without being overly dependent on foreign trade. Few things symbolise the ascendant America of the 1920s more than the Ford Model T. It was the first mass-produced car, and so popular that by 1926 half of all cars on America's roads were Model Ts. Annual production peaked at over 2mn in 1923, but how many were exported? Less than 10% – only 142,641 sold abroad in 1924. Why? Because of high freight rates and tariffs.

A five-seater that cost \$348 in Detroit sold for \$715 in Dover, \$779 in Calcutta, \$864 in Shanghai and \$1,158 in NSW, Australia.

If that example sounds dated, consider the European Union – 27 member countries with one currency and one official interest rate. Population is less than a third of India's, but trade between EU members far exceeds India's GDP. Last year, intra-EU goods trade alone amounted to 4.1tn euros (\$4.8tn). Germany exported



goods worth 845bn euros (\$980bn) to other EU states. We need that dynamic – an 'India Growth League' – within the country. Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and UP have all been talking about becoming \$1tn economies, and perhaps the path to India's rapid rise lies in helping them get there.

What will it take? Making more iPhones and sneakers for export is one way, but not the only one. The idea that other countries have disposable incomes

and our people can earn only by selling to them is very limiting. We are an enormous country with enormous resources. We also have an enormous population, which implies an enormous market, but most of our people are too poor to make discretionary purchases. Not very often at least. If we could put more money in the hands of more people, growth would rev up automatically. But how? By creating work. Not digging trenches and filling them up, but meaningful work that's crying for attention all around us.

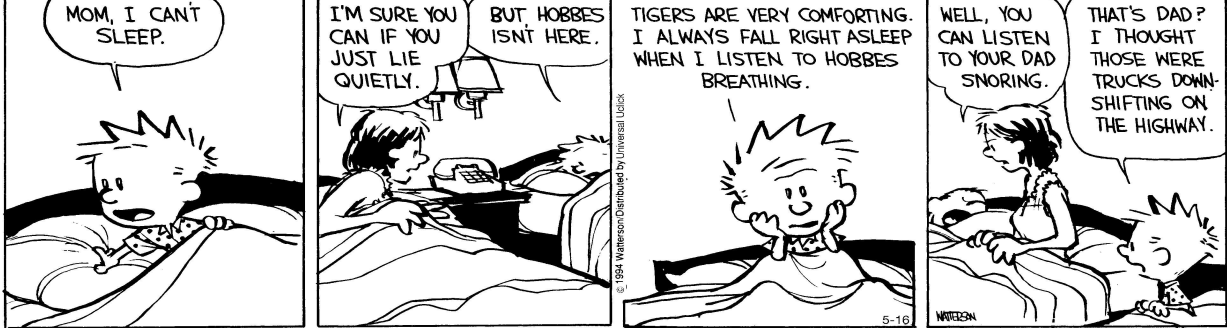
Indian cities, barring their "VIP areas", are unlivable. Open drains, broken roads and lights, missing pavements, garbage, shabby parks. This is work waiting to be done. It's true that the vast majority of Indians are unemployable in modern industries due to lack of training, but sweeping streets, catching cattle, tending to parks, digging drains and covering them, do not require a university education or technical diploma. There's billions of man-hours of work there. It won't spur demand for cars immediately, but soap, toothpaste, biscuits, shoes and T-shirts will fly off the shelves faster.

There's so much more to do. We need more teachers and doctors and cops – in the hinterland even more than cities. We need reliable public transport systems – factories will supply buses but somebody's got to hire drivers, cleaners and maintenance staff.

And this is just an indicative list. There will be as many ideas for work that needs to be done as there are people – excluding vanity projects like clock towers and welcome gates that our urban bodies pass off as civil works.

Trump is what insurers would call 'force majeure' – he's beyond India's control – but using the country's manpower to solve problems, create work, and improve the quality of life while spurring growth is in our own hands. What are we waiting for?

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Navratri & Vijaydashami: Remove Darkness Within

Swami Sukhabodhananda

Festivals are not just about rituals, decorations, or cultural nostalgia.

They are living metaphors, offering us insights into how to live with wisdom and joy. They carry a powerful message: victory of clarity over confusion, resilience over weakness, light over darkness.

The word *navratri* means night, a symbol of ignorance or forgetfulness. Navratri, nine nights, can be seen as nine opportunities to remove layers of darkness that often cloud our lives. These nights are not merely to be counted on the calendar; they can be seen as steps in a journey from confusion to clarity, from scarcity to abundance, from fear to courage.

Traditionally, the festival unfolds in three phases. The first is devoted to learning, symbolised by Saraswati.

Here, the emphasis is on cultivating insight and curiosity. In a world flooded with information, what we truly need is wisdom – the ability to see clearly and act with discernment. The second phase is devoted to wealth, represented by Lakshmi. But wealth here is not restricted to money. True wealth includes health, peace of mind, harmony in relationships and a sense of gratitude for life itself. The third phase is devoted to power, represented by Parvati; it is the power to face challenges, overcome negativity, and rise when life pushes us.

When these three dimensions – wisdom, wealth, and resilience – are nurtured, we arrive at Vijaydashami, the day of victory. But what kind of victory is this? It is not overcoming of others, nor accumulation of trophies.

It is a quiet triumph of inner clarity over confusion, of meaningful choices over foolish impulses.

Rituals of Navratri – lighting lamps, singing hymns, decorating homes – become more than traditions. They become reminders. The lamp reminds us to keep our inner light burning.

Hymns remind us to nurture gratitude. Celebrations remind us to find strength not in possessions but in purpose. If we limit ourselves to external alone, the festival remains incomplete. When we link the outer with inner, every act becomes transformative.

Each day, we are confronted with challenges that test our patience and clarity. We must choose whether to react out of fear or to respond with wisdom. Festivals teach us that we are not powerless in the face of life's darkness.



THE SPEAKING TREE

## Sacred space



If a person realises his position and stays in his own self, things that are to happen will happen. Things that are not to happen will not happen...All these troubles arise if we think that we are separate from shakti.

Ramana Maharshi