

{ OUR TAKE }

All the air we can't breathe

CAQM's long-term strategy to fix air pollution in the NCR has no new ideas, recycles old prescriptions

The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) submitted its long-term pollution strategy to the Supreme Court on Wednesday, weeks after the bench criticised the body responsible for air quality in the NCR for "failing in its duty" and appearing to be "hurried" to identify causes or solutions. The court has directed states to implement the document and submit action plans within four weeks. The submission matters beyond this winter's severe pollution — it represents the first major test of an agency created in 2021 with expanded statutory powers specifically designed to overcome the jurisdictional fragmentation that stymied its predecessor. CAQM replaced the Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority, or EPCA, which had until then been the main agency regulating activity to mitigate air pollution. Wednesday's submission represents CAQM's first long-term strategy as a body with powers transcending state boundaries.

But this is not the first time a long-term roadmap to fix the air pollution crisis — a problem that has plagued the Capital for over a decade — has been proposed. EPCA had in 2018 drawn up a similar plan. And a close comparison between the two documents, prepared eight years apart, does not inspire confidence. Start with public transport. In 1998, the Supreme Court directed Delhi to operate 10,000 buses. EPCA reinforced this in 2018 and asked the city to ensure "total compliance" by December year. Current estimates suggest Delhi operates fewer than 6,000 buses. CAQM now proposes "augmentation of city public bus service through E-buses/CNG as per model yardsticks and service level benchmark" — no numbers, no deadline. Traffic management follows the same script. EPCA's 2018 plan mandated the deployment of an integrated traffic management system across Delhi and major NCR cities. Eight years later, CAQM has repeated the same recommendation, almost verbatim. The parking policy that was to be finalised by year-end 2018 returns as "implementing parking area management plans" with the deadline scrubbed. In fact, more than two-thirds of the latest plan is identical to its 2018 predecessor.

This plan arrives over a decade into Delhi's pollution emergency. The pollution sources it identifies remain unchanged since 2015. This reality reveals a portrait of governance that cannot — or will not — solve the problems it was designed to address. For a country that positions itself as a rising global power, the inability to give hundreds of millions of people breathable air is simply unacceptable.

All AIADMK hands on NDA deck in TN

The return of TTV Dhinakaran's Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK), a breakaway of the AIADMK, to the NDA ahead of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's rally in Chennai today will aid the alliance in at least two ways.

One, it helps the NDA to project itself as the main Opposition alliance in the state ahead of the assembly elections. The 2024 general election turned out to be a walkover for the DMK-led INDIA bloc in Tamil Nadu, mainly because the Opposition votes were fragmented, with the AIADMK floating a coalition of its own after refusing to align with the NDA. The INDIA bloc swept the polls, winning all 39 Lok Sabha seats from the state with 46.9% votes; the AIADMK-bloc and NDA drew a blank despite logging vote shares of 23.05% and 18.2% respectively. Two, the BJP has convinced AIADMK splinter groups to contest the assembly polls as part of the NDA. The AIADMK's decline after the demise of J Jayalalithaa in 2016 had much to do with splits in the party. Former chief minister and current chief of the AIADMK, Edappadi Palaniswami, is influential mostly in western Tamil Nadu. Dhinakaran and another former CM, O Panneerselvam (talks with whom are still ongoing), are electorally insignificant if they fight elections on their own, but both can add heft to the NDA if they fight together with their mother outfit, the AIADMK, especially in the southern districts. An alliance of all AIADMK splinter groups and the BJP has the potential to consolidate the old social base that once backed Jayalalithaa, and before her, MGR.

In short, the NDA has successfully expanded the caste and geographical imprint of the alliance. With state politics more fragmented than ever, and a new untested entrant in actor Vijay waiting in the wings, the 2026 assembly election in Tamil Nadu is likely to be a closely fought affair.

India's aviation sector needs a regulatory reset

IndiGo received only a mild rap for its mess-up in December. The meekness of DCA while dealing with the monopoly exposes its inability to provide redress to passengers and address structural issues plaguing the industry

The legal action against IndiGo for precipitating the aviation crisis last year in December, which left thousands of fliers stranded by multiple flight cancellations and extended delays, turned out to be a mere slap on the wrist. After a detailed investigation into the episode — caused by IndiGo's failure to be ready in time for the new flight duty time limitations (FDTL) regime — the directorate general of civil aviation (DGCA) last week issued a notice to the airline, and merely issued warnings to a few key airline personnel.

The DCA report should stoke concern in the airline's boardroom and top management — it rules out any kind of systemic, procedural or process failure or any acute shortage of personnel and almost entirely blames human negligence or incompetence, and indicts specific members of the airline's top management, even ordering the

removal of one. The IndiGo board is conducting its own investigation to determine and address the factors that caused the mess-up. Some sectoral decisions are expected given the financial and reputational hit to the airline.

Some airline personnel believe the credibility of the board and the promoters now hinges on the actions taken; this alone can secure the future of IndiGo's carefully built business. Failing to do this, they will lend credence to the airline's estranged co-founder Rakesh Gangwal's allegations of misgovernance; Gangwal had earlier claimed that the airline was being run like a ponzi scheme.

The fact that IndiGo's management and board are under scrutiny is confirmed by the DGCA's order, which requires the airline to furnish a bank guarantee of ₹50 crore to ensure the implementation of reforms across four areas: Leadership and governance, manpower planning, digital systems, and board oversight. The regulator will release the plan after verification of compliance. The order is unprecedented in the sector.

There are three key areas where the airline and the authorities fell short of broader expectations. To begin with, the quantum of the fine amounts to barely three hours of revenue for the airline (back-of-the-envelope calculations). The airline's share price rose on the day of the announcement, likely reflecting a

market perception that IndiGo had got off lightly. There is a strong belief that airline management only understands the need for probe leading to some aggrieved passengers and commanders included — to say that it should have been made to pay a fine that actually hurt. The official explanation, however, is that the airline has been fined the maximum prescribed penalty that the regulator is authorised to impose. A revision of prescribed limits is clearly needed.

Moreover, if exemptions are possible, exceptions (larger than prescribed penalties) should be toed.

Given the airline's choice of redress, after the flight cancellations, IndiGo offered a voucher of ₹10,000 to affected fliers, which stated that if accepted, the passengers would forfeit their right to any further claims against the airline for its failure to deliver as promised. Instead of mollifying passengers, this "gesture of care" raised the hackles of many since the sum that fliers lost exceeded the fine offered by the airline to many multiples. The cascading effect of cancelled weddings, holidays, and hotel bookings with no viable alternative flights or hotels available may be quantifiable to an extent, but missed funerals of loved ones and other such losses aren't. And, those who did find alternatives paid ridiculously inflated amounts to reach their destinations.

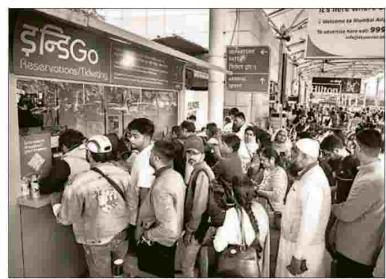
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Some aggrieved passengers, in the absence of an ombudsman for the sector, are planning to claim appropriate compensation in consumer courts.

REUTERS

all clauses by April.

Still, the absurdity of the regulator being unable to extend its reach into the airline's innermost business cannot be lost on anyone. The episode also spotlights a monopoly's confidence in its ability to game the system and not comply with norms. How far will this go? The regulator, to retain its credibility, must ensure the court's directives on the enforcement of FDTL norms are complied with at the earliest.

While this civil crisis, orchestrated by the country's civil aviation market leader, might have abated for now, it has reverberated across industries in the sector. It has reinforced the assertion that unless systemic problems are tackled, such crises shall recur. Almost like an aircraft flying into turbulence, India's aviation ecosystem appears to have flown into a cloud of absurdity.

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India, middle powers and the emerging global order

The modern rules-based international order emerged from the wreckage of World War II. Designed by the victors and led by the US, its institutions — from the United Nations system to Bretton Woods — were created to preserve western strategic and economic order. Yet despite their self-serving elements, these arrangements helped maintain a degree of global stability, predictability and prosperity for nearly eight decades. That order is now under strain.

This was evident even at Davos, where US President Donald Trump — despite deep differences with most western allies — framed western power and prosperity as the product of a shared and "very special" culture, which he argued must be defended and strengthened.

The emphasis on cultural inheritance, rather than shared interests or institutions, reflected the righting of the lineage of the old order has shifted.

As China's rise accelerates and Russia grows more assertive, the US appears increasingly sceptical of the very system that it once championed. Convicted that multilateral institutions constrain American freedom of action, and that allies have grown complacent under the US security umbrella, Washington has begun to prioritise disruption over adaptation, seeking to reassess its right to be the relative advantage diminishes further.

What remains unclear is what vision, if any, the US has for a successor order. Beyond a narrowly transactional pursuit of advantage, there is little articulation of a coherent alternative framework capable of stabilising a multipolar world.

The emerging great powers have not yet filled this void. India and China, despite their growing global weight and civilisational depth, have largely responded tactically to the erosion of the old order rather than addressing a new one.

Most of their diplomacy has focused on navigating uncertainty, rather than shaping the terms of a future settlement. Traditional middle powers — Japan, Germany, Australia, Canada and others — have also tended to react rather than lead. Even legacy great powers such as the United Kingdom and France, though still relevant, appear constrained by alliance dependencies and domestic pressures.

In contrast, in West Asia, countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have begun to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, redefining their regional and global roles. The broader pattern is unmistakable. The international system is drifting toward fragmentation and narrow transactionalism, with diminishing regard for shared norms or institutional restraint.

Recent precedents in global diplomacy suggest a future in which arrangements are episodic and power-driven. If Thucydides articulated this logic in western political thought, the *Mahabharata* had warned that in an era of rupture, "the strong devour the weak."

INDIA TODAY IS NO LONGER MERELY A BALANCING POWER. IT IS INCREASINGLY RECOGNISED AS A GREAT POWER IN ITS OWN RIGHT

weak like fish in water" unless a higher order is maintained. Absent such an order, the result is a world closer to Mad Max than to any sustainable model of global governance.

It is precisely this danger that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau alluded to his speech at Davos on Wednesday. What is clear is that great powers abandon even the pretense of rules and values for the unhindered pursuit of their power and interests. The gains from transnationalism will become harder to replicate. Carney articulated a concern shared by many middle powers. His remarks underscored a simple truth: Unrestrained power politics ultimately undermine even those who believe they benefit from them.

Carney's intervention also highlights a larger opportunity. The next phase of the global order is unlikely to be shaped by a single hegemon. Instead, it will require coalition — particularly amidst middle powers — that have a shared interest in stability, openness and predictability, and the credibility to engage across ideological and geopolitical divides. For many middle powers, the question now is not whether the old order is fraying, but who has the credibility and reach to help shape what comes next.

This is where India's role becomes pivotal. India today is no longer merely a balancing power. It is an increasingly powerful actor seen as a great power in its right, with substantial influence across Europe, the Indo-Pacific, West Asia, Africa and Latin America, and a demonstrated ability to mobilise the Global South. While India's relationship with Canada has experienced periodic strains, there is now space for recalibration within a broader convergence among middle powers concerned about the direction of the international system.

One available platform is India's current chairmanship of BRICS — if approached with care. While often viewed through the prism of great-power rivalry, BRICS also brings together a diverse group of middle powers with a shared interest in reforming, rather than dismantling, global governance. Used judiciously, it could complement existing institutions by helping articulate principles for a more inclusive and functional order.

More broadly, India is uniquely placed to convene an initial core group of like-minded States — middle powers, and possibly some open-minded great powers — to begin a serious conversation about what a new global order should look like. This would not be an exercise in block-building or institutional replacement, but rather one of identifying legitimate, balanced and purposeful international cooperation. Such an endeavour will require political confidence and the willingness to step into uncharted territory. History suggests that moments of transition reward those prepared to invest early in ideas and institutions, rather than merely adapt to outcomes shaped by others. The challenge today is not to replicate Bretton Woods or San Francisco, but to reimagine their spirit for a multipolar age — one in which power is diffused, interdependence unavoidable, and legitimacy indispensable. In a world drifting toward fragmentation, India has the credibility, relationships and confidence to help anchor that effort — if it chooses to lead.

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| FRIEDRICH MERZ | CHANCELLOR, GERMANY

A world where only power counts is a dangerous place. First for small states and for the middle powers, ultimately for the great ones

Speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos

How to make the most of a trade deal with EU

India and the EU look set to conclude negotiations on a long-pending Free Trade Agreement (FTA), with both sides politically aligned on the need for it. Earlier this week, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, said the EU is "on the cusp" of signing a historic trade agreement with India, which, she added, some call "the mother of all deals." The renewed momentum was evident during German chancellor Friedrich Merz's visit to India in January, which underscored Europe's growing recognition of India not merely as a market, but as a long-term partner in a global growth strategy.

The signing of the FTA will be just the start, lining up businesses on both sides. The real impact of the India-EU FTA will be shaped by how effectively it is implemented, how ambitiously industry engages with it, and how decisively both governments support collaboration beyond tariff reductions and legal frameworks.

The India-EU economic partnership works because of complementarity. Europe brings deep expertise in advanced engineering, clean technologies, precision manufacturing, and trusted regulatory systems. India brings scale, cost efficiency, a large and skilled workforce, and some of the world's fastest-growing domestic markets. The FTA has the potential to align these strengths far more systematically than has been possible so far.

This alignment is already visible in the ground. Across India, European companies are increasingly moving beyond sales and assembly operations to establish manufacturing, design, and engineering hubs. In Karnataka, for instance, an Italian precision engineering firm operates a highly advanced manufacturing facility. In Bihar, a German engineering firm has established a local production base, evolved into a global export hub, supplying sophisticated machines to markets across continents. The lesson is clear: When European technology and Indian capability are integrated effectively, the outcome is globally competitive.

Today, nearly 6,000 European companies operate in India, supporting millions of jobs across sectors such as clean energy, mobility, digital infrastructure, aerospace, advanced materials, and manufacturing. These are sectors where India and Europe share long-term priorities.

The FTA matters because it provides a framework to scale such collaboration. Predictable rules, smoother market access, and greater regulatory clarity can accelerate joint investments, technology partnerships, and research and collaboration. It allows India not just to import European technology, but to co-create, manufacture locally, and export to global markets.

In investments in logistics, digital public infrastructure, regulatory simplification, and faster approvals have strengthened India's investment appeal. European companies are increasingly acknowledging these improvements and are responding with deeper and longer-term commitments. Many now view India not just as a cost-effective market, but as an innovation and export base.

This shift from operating in India to building with India is one of the most encouraging developments of the past decade. The FTA can reinforce this through nudging companies towards long-term investments, deeper technology integration, and collaborative research.

Ultimately, the India-EU FTA should be seen not as an end in itself, but as a foundation. The real work will begin after the agreement is signed — aligning standards, easing the movement of goods and services, strengthening institutional mechanisms, and enabling SMEs on both sides to internationalise. As existing collaborations already demonstrate, when India and Europe build together, the results are not incremental, they are transformative.

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Sanjiv
Tiwari

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India founded 1818

Managed Transition

The appointment of Nitin Nabin as the national president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) marks a moment that is less dramatic than it appears, yet more revealing than it seems. In Indian politics, generational change is often mistaken for ideological renewal. In fact, the two rarely travel together. At 45, Mr Nabin represents a cohort shaped by liberalisation-era aspirations, expanding urban-rural mobility, and the transformation of politics from street mobilisation to system-driven organisation, one that operates comfortably in a political ecosystem driven by data, artificial intelligence and rapid communication. His elevation, therefore, signals not novelty, but organisational confidence.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's repeated assertion that he remains a "party worker" even after three terms at the helm of government is not merely symbolic humility. It is a reminder of how the party seeks to define itself - as an institution where authority is structured, transferable and larger than individual stature. This distinction matters because Indian political parties have often struggled with succession. Many have relied on charisma, lineage, or crisis to manage leadership change. The BJP, by contrast, continues to emphasise internal grooming and cadre legitimacy, projecting stability rather than transition anxiety. His rise also reflects a conscious organisational choice. By elevating a leader without an independent national power base, the party reinforces central coherence, rewards organisational reliability, and ensures that authority flows from structure rather than personal charisma or regional mass following. Yet, youth here should not be confused with dislocation. Mr Nabin does not represent a break from ideological direction. Instead, he embodies a managerial generation of politics - one focused on execution, message discipline and organisational coordination rather than ideological experimentation.

Technology, in this framework, becomes an instrument rather than an idea. Artificial intelligence and digital outreach expand reach, but do not redefine political purpose. The emphasis remains on continuity, not reinvention. The repeated invocation of tradition, culture and national identity further underlines this approach. Leadership may change, but the narrative framework remains intact. The generational shift is therefore tactical - aimed at energising party workers and preparing for sustained electoral engagement rather than signalling a philosophical pivot. For younger political entrants, the messaging is carefully calibrated. Politics is presented not as spectacle or shortcut, but as endurance - a marathon requiring patience, hierarchy, and long-term loyalty. This discourages impulsive ambition while reinforcing organisational discipline.

At the same time, such stability carries its own challenge. A generation raised entirely in the digital era may eventually demand politics that extends beyond symbolism and structure - seeking sharper accountability, governance outcomes, and economic mobility. For now, however, the leadership transition reflects confidence rather than uncertainty. The party appears less concerned with redefining itself than with proving that its political model can be reproduced across generations. In that sense, Mr Nabin's elevation is not a reset, but a relay. The baton has changed hands, but the track - carefully laid over decades - remains the same.

Power Unbound

The international order built after World War II was never flawless, but it rested on a shared assumption: that power would be exercised within agreed limits. Allegiances, institutions, and international law existed to eliminate conflict, but to manage it. That assumption is now under visible strain. President Donald Trump's return to the White House has accelerated a shift already under way - from rule-based cooperation to raw transactional politics. What distinguishes this transition is not merely unpredictability, but an open rejection of the idea that constraint itself has value. Power, in this worldview, needs no justification beyond national interest. In his second term, President Trump has dispensed with diplomatic language that once softened American dominance. Long-standing alliances are treated as liabilities rather than assets. Multilateral institutions are dismissed as obstacles. Even the sovereignty of friendly nations is increasingly discussed in terms once reserved for adversaries. This is not an impulsive departure from convention; it reflects a deeper philosophical break. Supporters describe this approach as realism - a long-overdue correction to decades of strategic indulgence. They argue that allies benefited from American protection while contributing too little in return. From this perspective, pressure succeeds where persuasion failed, and disruption delivers outcomes consensus could not. Coercive diplomacy has occasionally unlocked stalemates others could not move. In a fractured world, decisiveness can appear more effective than deliberation. Yet such gains carry costs that are less immediate but far more lasting.

When power becomes personal rather than institutional, stability depends on temperament instead of principle. When alliances are conditional, trust weakens. When rules apply only until they aid the strong, smaller states begin to hedge, diversify, and prepare for a future without guarantees. Countries once anchored firmly within established strategic frameworks are quietly recalibrating. Trade routes are being diversified. Security relationships are being reassessed. Diplomatic language has grown more guarded, less idealistic, and more transactional. The danger is not an abrupt collapse of the global system, but its gradual hollowing out. Institutions may continue to exist, but their authority erodes each time norms are breached without consequence. Over time, international order decays not through dramatic rupture, but through repeated exception. Perhaps the most profound change lies in how leadership itself is defined. Where earlier eras sought legitimacy through example, the emerging model seeks compliance through leverage. Victory matters more than consensus. Outcomes matter more than process. The message is blunt: strength commands respect; restraint invites challenge. This approach may deliver tactical successes, but it reshapes global expectations. If the world's most powerful democracy no longer values predictability, others will follow - not out of admiration, but necessity. History suggests global systems rarely collapse from external assault alone. They weaken when those who once sustained them stop believing they are worth preserving. What the world is experiencing today is not a smooth transition between orders. It is a rupture - one in which the future depends less on shared rules, and more on how long raw power can stand in for them.

Tale of two mayors

There is a lineage of conscience which accompanies the violent history of conquest and subjugation. Zohran Mandani's inauguration is seen in this context of the awakening of conscience. As a Pakistani supporter congratulating the young mayor said, "logon ke dil badal gaye hain" (people's hearts have changed)

When on a bitterly cold January afternoon outside New York's City Hall, Zohran Mandani raised his right hand and took the oath of office as mayor of New York City, the first Asian and Muslim mayor to do so, a universal political tradition was once again being embodied in 2026: conscience in public life. Beyond the spectacle of a victory against all odds, and the accompanying pageantry of inauguration, Mandani in office is a moral signal in America and for those who are in awe of the American way of life.

For us in India, it became an occasion to recall another young mayor in another era, when the country was subjugated under British colonial rule. Subhas Chandra Bose when he assumed office as mayor of Calcutta (now Kolkata) in August 1930. He was barely 32 at that time, hailing from a privileged, cultured family which could trace its ancestry over 27 generations in Bengal. Subhas Chandra as mayor captured the imagination of Bengal and for the youth it was a call to their conscience, being unafraid of facing ruthless subjugation of colonial power. The brutality of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919 was still fresh in their minds, nor was the partition of Bengal and the upsurge of the Swadeshi movement forgotten at age 15. It was a spiritual revolution for life.

From Vivekananda, he turned to the former's master, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, and imbibed his teachings from books and diaries published by his disciples. Vivekananda taught Subhas that the greatest ideal was service of humanity, including service of one's country. Ramakrishna stressed that renunciation of lust and gold was the test of a man's fitness for spiritual life. Subhas had found a new ideal, which inflamed his soul; to effect his own salvation and to serve humanity by abandoning all worldly desires and breaking away from all undue restraints. The more his parents tried to restrain him, the more rebellious he became like a true-to-type teenager.

As he approached the end of his school career, his religious impulse began to grow in intensity and studies were no longer of primary importance. Subhas was fortunate to grow in an environment conducive to the broadening of his mind. His attitude towards Muslims in general was largely influenced by his early contacts living in a Muslim locality, taking part in their festivals, watching his father whom Muslims looked up to as a patriarch, and having Muslim teachers and Muslim class-mates, to say nothing of devoted Muslim servants at home, wrote S.A. Ayer in the introduction to 'Selected Speeches of Subhas Chandra Bose', published in 1962. Ayer was a minister in the Azad Hind Government.

In Subhas' undergraduate days, Aurobindo Ghosh was easily the most popular leader in Bengal, despite his voluntary exile in Pondicherry since 1909. A regular reader of Sri Aurobindo's monthly journal *Arya*, Subhas



Bose as the product of the tempestuous 1920s when Bengal was seething with discontent against repressive policies of the British Empire. To say that the young Bose symbolised the indomitable rebellious spirit of Bengal would not be an exaggeration; and his fervent patriotic attitude was that: "no sacrifice is too great in the national cause." The intellectual foundations of young Bose were laid when he voraciously read writings and speeches of Swami Vivekananda at age 15. It was a spiritual revolution for life.

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Ghosh was easily the most popular leader in Bengal, despite his voluntary exile in Pondicherry since 1909. A regular reader of Sri Aurobindo's monthly journal *Arya*, Subhas was impressed by the mystic's deeper philosophy - how by a proper use of the different yogas one could rise step by step to the highest truth. Sri Aurobindo's simple words were a clarion call: "I should like to see some of you becoming great; great not for your own sake, but to make India great, so that she may stand up with head erect amongst the free nations of the world. Those of you who are poor and obscure - I should like to see their poverty and obscurity devoted to the service of the motherland. Work that she might prosper, suffer that she might rejoice."

In his January 2026 inaugural address, Mandani thanked his parents: "Mama and Baba" acknowledged family "from Kampala to Delhi", and recalled taking his oath of citizenship on Pearl Street.

When he declared, "New York belongs to all who live in it," he rejected the logic that has long justified war: that difference must be governed through force. "No more will New York be a city where you can traffic in Islamophobia and win an election," is a quote echoing in the global media. He vowed that under his administration City Hall will "deliver an agenda of safety, affordability, and abundance, where government looks and lives like the people it represents, never flinches in the fight against corporate greed, and refuses to cover before challenges that others have deemed too complicated."

BBC reported: Mandani ran an impressive campaign, recruiting an army of volunteers 100,000 strong to pound the pavements and knock on doors. His social media/ideos in multiple languages are credited for a vastly increasing voter turnout from a range of South Asian communities. A left-wing democratic socialist, his message was laser focused.

By naming mosques alongside churches, synagogues, temples, gurudwaras, and mandirs, Mandani has affirmed pluralism as a

condition of peace, not a threat to it. By speaking of halal cart vendors, Palestinian New Yorkers, Black homeowners, and immigrant workers bound together by labour and survival, he articulated a civic vision rooted in coexistence rather than coercion. He did not defend his Muslim identity in the face of a vicious, abusive campaign by the opposition.

In 1921 in Calcutta, Subhas met Deshbhandu Chittaranjan Das; he knew he had found a leader and meant to follow him. Deshbhandu had always been a friend of youth; Subhas began to feel that here was a man who knew what he was about and to whom youthfulness was not a shortcoming but a virtue.

When the Calcutta municipal corporation was established, and elections were held in March 1924, the Swaraj Party won with a comfortable majority. Chittaranjan Das was elected as the Mayor of Calcutta; Husain Shaheed Suhrwadi was deputy Mayor. Under Das, Subhas Chandra Bose joined as the chief executive officer of municipal administration. It was an initiation in public life and administration for Subhas who devoted himself completely to the work of the corporation, paying special attention to improving health and educational infrastructure. He set up primary schools and dispensaries in every ward, providing access to basic amenities. A weekly paper 'Calcutta Municipal Gazette' was begun to spread awareness among citizens.

Bose's work in the corporation suffered a blow when he was arrested on 25 October 1924, but he continued with political and administrative work on the Alipore Central Jail for six weeks until he was shifted to Berhampur jail. Bose's role in the corporation exemplified the meaning of Swaraj and furthered the nationalist cause. The functioning of municipalities, headed by Indians, was not a smooth affair, as nationalistic objectives of Indian leaders often collided with repressive counter-policies of the British government.

The exile in Burma from 1924 to 1927 was the first major turning point in Subhas's public career; in that it saw the transformation of a lieutenant to a leader. Netaji Research Bureau notes, "In the late 1920s, Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru, despite fundamental differences in ideological foundations, emerged as two ambassadors of youth and the spokesmen of the rising Left in national politics.

Bose's appearance at the Calcutta Congress in 1928 in resplendent military uniform was not so much a spectacle as a vision of the future. His sponsoring the Independence resolution at that historic meeting in opposition to Mahatma Gandhi was the first demonstration of his being ahead of his time and of his contemporaries. He went a step further at Lahore in 1929 by his call for a parallel government and mobilisation of peasants and workers." In 1930, Subhas became the fifth Mayor of Calcutta and the journey which had begun with Deshbhandu Chittaranjan Das had now reached a milestone. For Zohran Mandani in New York, the journey has just begun in 2026.

THE KATHMANDU POST

An uncommon test of political readiness

Nepal is undergoing variegated yet interconnected crises, where conjoined challenges stemming from perpetual political instability, stunted and uneven economic growth, weakened social capital and ever-escalating climate impacts are amplifying one another in ways that exceed the sum of their individual impacts. Yet, the political will and leadership needed to tackle these issues remain largely ineffective. His void has drawn many into politics, clamouring for the seemingly ever-elusive idea of 'good governance'.

However, aspiring leaders and parties have yet to comprehend the depth of these crises or articulate clear roadmaps to address the stunted economic growth by accelerating public investment and diversifying beyond remittance. This cannot be addressed without building resilience against the escalating climate risks, as they are closely intertwined.

The earlier the aspiring leaders acknowledge

that we are fast descending into this abyss of intersecting precarity - worsened by decades of performative politics - the greater our capacity to mobilise the much-needed collective action will be.

The political landscape has never been so depressing in the history of modern Nepal. For the past two decades, no single party has secured a clear majority in parliament. Political alliances of all possible permutation and combination, often representing the same individuals under different conditions, became the norm in the relentless pursuit of power. This 'power first' political wrangling, unfortunately, pushed the ever-growing critical issues concerning the public.

The everyday concerns - from the economy to socialities and the environment - the bread-and-butter issues that matter most to people failed to receive the political backing they deserved.

The political landscape has never been

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importance as the nerve centre for coordination, discipline and conflict management. The leadership's trust in Nabin suggests a preference for administrative efficiency. His organisational background positions him to manage financial pressures, oversee state units and ensure alignment between the government and the states.

The tasks ahead for the new President are demanding. Nabin will have to arrest signs of organisational fatigue in states

This in turn has worsened the issues and has now necessitated far greater, costlier and sustained efforts, which, at least considering the current political and economic scenario, seems to be a pipe dream.

Political instability has also fanned a pervasive mood of anxiety and despair among citizens. People's confidence in the state machinery has eroded so much that they will not confront it unless absolutely necessary.

It's not the rules or the rights but rather acquaintances within the machinery that people look to when they need to get things done. The younger generations in particular report widespread hopelessness amidst these overlapping pressures. Economically, the growth rate remains stunted and uneven. In 12 of the last 25 years, the growth rate hovered around 3 percent, while it fell below 1 percent for three years due to both internal and external factors.

These growth rates are inadequate to

support the growing population and modern infrastructure. The promulgation of the constitution in 2015 ushered in a brief period of political stability, it contributed to an economic rebound when the growth rate jumped to 9 percent in 2017.

But it declined to 7.6 percent the following year due to the 2017 floods, and 6.7 percent in 2019. The drop is likely to have been caused by summer droughts in the eastern region that severely impacted agriculture. In 2026, the growth rate is projected to fall to 2.1 percent reflecting, among other extant factors, the impact of the Gen Z-led September protests and the subsequent political instability.

S IN MEMORIAM
KARNANI KISHAN LALL WHO LEFT FOR HIS HEAVENLY ABODE THIS DAY IN 1976. FONDLY REMEMBERED BY FAMILY MEMBERS

Boon for pilgrims

Sir. It was heartening to learn that Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a new 15-km railway line in Bankura between Jayrambati and Maynarpur, and launched a new passenger train in this section (PM Modi flags off three Amrit Bharat Express trains, inaugurates new 15-km rail line, MEMU service), 19 January.

Jayrambati is the village where Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi was born in 1853, and thus, thousands of disciples of Bhagwan Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Ma Sarada visit the pilgrimage spot throughout the year. Now that the train has been flagged off on the new route, it will surely be much easier for many to reach Jayrambati.

Yours, etc., Sourish Misra, Kolkata, 19 January.



India slips in quest for economic freedom

PATRANGA BASU

Economic freedom is one of the most desired fundamental human rights. It gives one confidence and ability to live in peace and to combat the hurdles of life boldly. Economic liberty includes freedom to decide how to use one's labour and work, to enjoy the fruits of labour; the freedom to own and control private property and also to participate in a free market.

Free markets and free people are the major propellants of economic progress. We value freedom as individuals and as a society, and a good economy is one that promotes freedom.

The common belief that enthrals millions of minds is that more the GDP, the better is the condition of the people. It is not just economic size that can bring true prosperity and freedom. It ignores crucial factors like income inequality, environmental damage, health, education, and quality of life, focusing only on market transactions. GDP measures material goods and services, but leaves out the assessment of the state of freedom.

Economic freedom is being measured and expressed as a numerical figure. The Heritage Foundation of America has published every year since 1995 an Index of Economic Freedom covering every country. The index takes a comprehensive view of economic freedom. The Index Report 2025 conceded that economic freedom is under attack worldwide.

India is no exception. In the 2025 Index, India ranked 128th among 176 countries. India's status, with a score of 53 on a scale of 0 to 100, is described as 'mostly unfree'. India is consistently being marked as 'mostly unfree' since 2002. Prior to that, India was designated as a 'repressed' country.

The report observed that freedom of the middle-class is stifled while the powerful are getting richer. It recommended rebuilding the well-functioning and healthy institutions of civil society that need and deserve.

India's GDP growth is predominantly

consumption driven, about 60 per cent of the GDP. The main 'consuming class' is the top 10 per cent of the population. They have the power for 66 per cent of the discretionary spending on non-essential goods in the country. They enjoy real economic freedom. Capacity to spend on non-essential goods is the critical indicator of economic freedom. This top 10 per cent group is not widening but is deepening.

The Indus Valley Report 2025 published by Blume Ventures designates this top 10 per cent of population as 'India', the 'engine of the Indian consumer economy'. The report advocates that India constitutes a 'high income country' within India, and will be an advanced economy well before India overall becomes a developed country. India alone would form the tenth most populous country in the world, with 14 crore people. In terms of per capita income, India would rank 63rd in the world, way ahead of India's 140th rank, as per World Bank data.

The spending pattern in the market is changing over recent years based on mostly the preferences of the top 10 per cent population. These people suggest how the consumption pattern should look like from gated communities, travel, destination weddings to luxury brands and even 'the way our cities look'.

The Indi segment prefers living in gated communities which are the concentrations of affluence. Their rights are well protected here. These are the 'islands' where people pay a premium not for quality but for invisibility of other Indians. Currently

premium-brand products give high profit margins. Corporates' rising

16 million such gated households comprise 32 per cent of the population in 50 cities. These communities have become an economic powerhouse as they account for a disproportionately large share - 45 per cent - of overall spending in top cities despite having fewer households. The trend of 'luxury living' in gated communities reinforces existing disparities in society.

India's real estate market is now



booming and is projected to reach the milestone of \$1 trillion by 2030. The sector is driven by strong demand in residential (especially luxury), commercial housing. Share of high end to ultra luxury housing has doubled in last five years. This sector is gradually being overtaken by big builders and developers. India's housing market is shifting as more buyers seek larger, premium homes. Survey shows 36 per cent buyers now prefer properties priced between Rs. 90 lakh - Rs 1.5 crore up from 18 per cent before Covid-19. Luxury home demand in India remained strong in 2025, with sales of Rs. 4 crore and above rising nearly 28 per cent YoY across seven major cities.

Share of foreign travel expenses in outward remittances increased from 21 per cent in 2014-15 to 54 per cent in 2023-24. India's car market experiences slow growing passenger vehicle sales while a sharp rise has been seen in premium segment cars over the years from FY 2019-20 to 2023-24. The market forces consumers to behave in certain ways. On the other hand, the market is also energised by the high-income household's spending which leads to skewed growth. The luxury market has experienced exponential growth signifying economic inequality in society. This implies that while GDP increases, the market is also energised by the high-income household's spending, along with it increases inequality.

Premium-brand products give high profit margins. Corporates' rising focus on producing and selling high-margin premium luxury items divert resources, innovation, and attention away from providing affordable quality products to low-income consumers. The monopolistic inclination of the market poses constraints for the enhancement of freedom of individuals. Without free markets and free enterprises, big corporations can exploit both consumers and their own workers thus expanding their profit. They enjoy freedom in the economy through the power of coercion.

The bottom 90 per cent in India

are not in a position to join the top 10 per cent. A staggering one billion Indians are left with no money for discretionary spending after meeting their basic needs. Most are operating on razor-thin margins, with rising food costs, housing, healthcare and education consuming their entire incomes. They have nothing to save; luxury is a dream. Poverty is the major obstacle to economic freedom.

The ability of individuals to find good employment opportunities and work is essential to the advancement of economic freedom. But job creation remains weak. Individuals in India are being faced with difficulties in choosing work. Inflation overshoots increase in wages, resulting in decline in real wages. Markets are not delivering what a majority in society want and need - like social security, jobs, increase in wages and better working conditions for labour.

The problem is not only about poverty in the traditional sense but also about the growing financial constraints among all segments of society barring the top 10 per cent. Society faces a serious imbalance of freedom. Economic freedom in general is in danger. Freedom of a few has increased at the expense of freedom of many.

The problems in our economy and society were not inevitable. They are in a sense a matter of choice; the result of policies, rules and regulations that have been adopted.

The Indus Valley Annual Report

warns: 'When a billion citizens can no longer participate in the non-essential economy, the ripples effects will be felt across every sector - from industry to innovation. The challenge for policymakers is to restore not just incomes, but hope.' Protection of economic freedom requires elimination of coercive power from market. Reforms in the economic sector are essential to establish balance of freedom. Economic intent of national policies should aim at breaking the shackles of poverty for good. The same people should not suffer forever.

(The writer is a Cost Accountant who served as General Manager (Finance & Accounts) of a public sector power utility.)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 23 January 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE scandalously inadequate punishment meted out on Friday to a drunken taxi-driver by the Third Presidency Magistrate affords a partial explanation why the Calcutta taxi is rapidly developing into a serious danger. The man in question was chased for a mile by a police sergeant in a motor bicycle and was eventually brought to a halt opposite the Lower Circular Road Cemetery. The policeman swore that the taxi was driven at between 35 and 40 miles an hour and the magistrate accepted this statement. When arrested the man was found to be drunk and to have no licence. He was fined Rs. 50, the magistrate arguing apparently that because no one had been killed, the gravity of the offence was somehow lessened. At a time when in Great Britain heavier penalties of imprisonment are being enacted for the drunken motorist the punishment in this case cannot be regarded as other than an example of judicial perversity.

News Items

"SOVIET EFFRONTERY"

THE RUSSIAN MASK DISCARDED

(SPECIAL CABLE)
PEKING, JAN. 22.

THE Press Comments reveal extent of the Sino-Russian disagreements.

A semi-official organ the *Peking Daily News*, talks of the effrontery of the Soviet agents in China and invites the student leaders to examine M. Karhan's protest in the light of his teachings against so-called imperialism, and also to examine the reasons for the loss of Mongolia, the activities of the Soviet agents in Sian Kiang and elsewhere, and the ruinous conditions imposed on South China by the Soviet agents at Canton and other southern centres.

The Chinese newspaper *Shih-chi I-pao* referring to the threat of armed Soviet intervention, says: If reports are true, then the mask of friendship which the Soviet agents have been wearing in China in the past years will be exposed in all its nakedness. We are opposed to imperialism, but equally oppose Red Imperialism.—Copyright.

"A LEAKY HOUSE"

COUNT VOLPI & ITALIAN DEBT NEGOTIATIONS

(TIMES "SPECIAL SERVICE")
LONDON, JAN. 21.

THE Italian Press is inclined to be pessimistic regarding the London debt negotiations which are considered to have reached a difficult stage.

The Rome correspondent of the Times states that Count Volpi is reported as saying "Our house has been built but rain pours through the roof," which has prompted a cartoon in which Count Volpi is pictured offering Mr. Churchill an umbrella labelled "May, 24, 1915," showing that Italy has not yet abandoned hope, and that her war intervention to save the Allies, is being used as a deciding factor in the negotiations.

GRAVE SITUATION

RUSSIAN RAILWAY MANAGER ARRESTED

TOKIO, JAN. 22.

ACCORDING to the newspaper *Asahi* a message from Dairen says that Marshal Chang Tso-lin has ordered the arrest of M. Ivanoff, a Russian, and general manager of the Chinese Eastern Railway.

A message from Harbin says that the situation is becoming graver. Chinese troops are preparing to concentrate at Harbin. The Soviet Ambassad, M. Kopp, is reported to have declared that the Russian Government is prepared to back up its demands forcibly, if necessary meeting troops with troops.—Reuter.

Modern methods aid revival of golden fibre

PURBA SAHA

Jute has long been known as the 'Golden Fibre' of West Bengal, supporting the livelihoods of farmers across districts such as Murshidabad, Nadia, Hooghly and North 24 Parganas. For generations, jute cultivation has played a central role in the rural economy of the state. However, in recent years, many farmers reduced jute acreage due to rising labour costs, uncertain market prices and competition from synthetic materials. Today, jute farming is slowly witnessing a revival, driven by modern agricultural practices, improved varieties and renewed demand for eco-friendly products.

One of the most visible changes in jute cultivation is the shift in sowing methods. Traditionally, farmers broadcast jute seeds by hand, which often resulted in overcrowded plants and uneven growth. This led to poor fibre quality and additional labour for thinning. Farmers in Murshidabad and Nadia are now increasingly adopting line sowing with recommended spacing. Line sowing ensures uniform crop establishment, better sunlight penetration and easier intercultural operations. Many farmers have reported improved fibre quality and better yields after switching to this method.

The introduction of improved jute varieties has further strengthened farmers' confidence in the crop. New varieties developed by research institutions are high-yielding, disease-resistant and better suited to the agro-climatic conditions of West Bengal. These varieties mature earlier and produce uniform fibre, reducing the risk associated with unpredictable weather. Farmers in Murshidabad district, in particular, have reported more stable yields after switching to certified seeds of recommended varieties.

Retting, the post-harvest process of separating fibre from the jute stem, has traditionally been one of the most problematic stages of jute cultivation. Conventional water retting depends heavily on rainfall and the availability of clean water bodies, often resulting in inconsistent fibre quality. In recent years, improved retting methods such as ribbon retting and microbial retting have been introduced in several parts of the state. These techniques reduce retting time, require less water and produce cleaner fibre with better colour and strength. Farmers adopting these methods have been able to secure higher fibre grades in the market.

Market demand for jute is another encouraging sign for farmers. With increasing concern over plastic

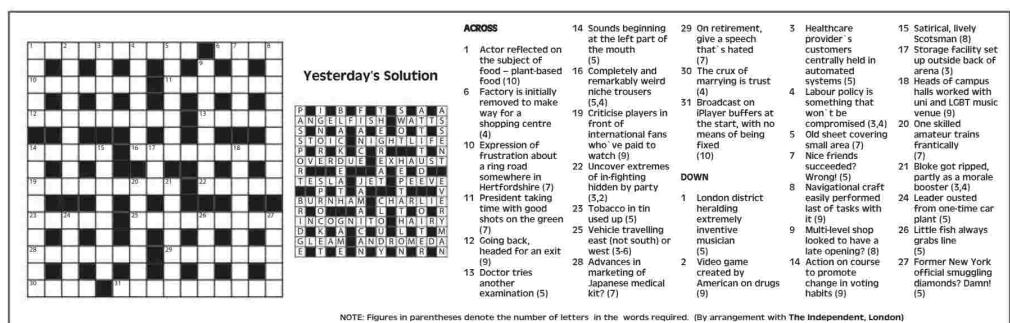


pollution, jute is gaining renewed importance as a biodegradable and sustainable alternative. Jute products are now widely used in packaging, geotextiles, handicrafts and eco-friendly consumer goods. Government initiatives promoting natural fibres and restricting single-use plastics have further boosted demand. For jute-growing farmers in West Bengal, this shift presents new income opportunities.

Despite these positive developments, challenges remain. Climate change has made rainfall patterns unpredictable, affecting sowing and retting operations. Small and marginal farmers often lack access to modern tools, quality seeds and timely extension support. Delayed procurement and price fluctuations also discourage farmers from fully investing in jute cultivation.

To ensure the long-term sustainability of jute farming, coordinated efforts

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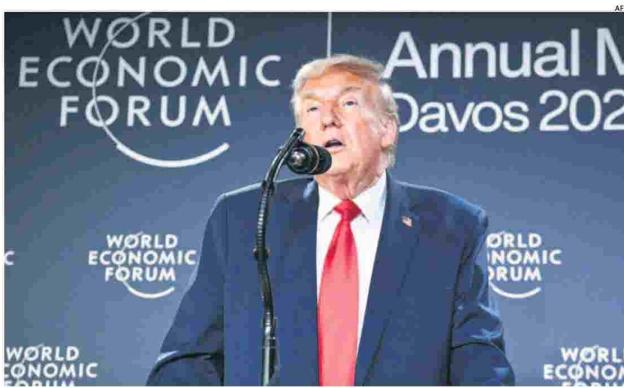


NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)





OUR VIEW



It's an odd time for the US to blow its trumpet

America might be using economic integration as a weapon, but as its fast-shrinking share of global economic output shows, it needs the rest of the world as much as the other way round

Over the past two days, leaders from three major Western powers—French President Emmanuel Macron, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney and US President Donald Trump—have spoken at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Switzerland. Their speeches are a study in contrast, a kind of requiem for the idea of a Western world-view. While both Macron and Carney called out the US, the latter more forcefully, the French leader offered a Eurocentric view. Carney's speech, in contrast, was far wider in its scope and appeal. Trump's view, in keeping with his record on 'America First' myopia, was not just US-centric and full of swagger, but rife with imperialist overtones to boot. Almost palpable sighs of relief arose soon after, though. Europe, especially, may be tempted to breathe easy after he called off his threat of a Greenland grab by force as well as that of punitive tariffs for those openly resisting his Arctic plan. He attributed his step-back to a "framework of a future deal" within the Nato alliance over the island.

Critics of Trump might point to this about-turn as yet another example of Trump living up to his 'TACO' reputation in some market circles: 'Trump always chickens out.' But there is no space for complacency. The US leader has put the global economic order at risk of falling apart. The sooner the world unites against it, the better. As Carney put it, speaking at Davos a day before Trump, what the world is experiencing is a 'rupture, not a transition... the end of a pleasant fiction and beginning of a harsh reality where geopolitics [among great powers is not subject to any constraints]'. As Carney pointed out, other countries are not powerless.

They have the capacity to build a "new order that embodies our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty and the territorial integrity of various states." Though he spoke in the context of what he called "middle powers like Canada," it was amply clear from his message that it was aimed at the world at large.

The US might be using economic integration as a weapon and financial infrastructure for coercion, as Carney noted, but the reality is that the US is dependent on the rest of the world as well. Much of its ability to hold the rest of the world to ransom springs from the 'exorbitant privilege' that arises from the US dollar's global status as a reserve currency. This enables it to live way beyond its means, with its profligacy financed by the printing of dollar bills and issuance of low-rate IOUs in the form of Treasury bills for others to pile up. As of November 2025, foreign investors held about a third of all US Treasuries by value and almost 40% of this was by just five countries: Japan, the UK, China, Canada and Belgium. A drop in their appetite for US debt could turn the bond market 'yippy,' send US interest rates up and slow the American economy. Moreover, as China and India emerge as economic powerhouses in their own right, US hegemony over the global economy is sure to weaken.

According to the International Monetary Fund's 2026 projections, the EU, China and India account for 42.3% of world GDP, up from 36.3% in 2000, with the US share down to just 14.5% from 20.4% in terms of purchasing power parity. The rest of the world is not as powerless as Trump seems to assume. We only need to heed Carney's wake-up call. And stand together.

—Shashank Pandey

SHASHANK PANDEY



is a lawyer and the founder of Politics and Disability Forum

As the world approaches the India AI Summit 2026, the conversation on AI has evolved beyond algorithmic efficiency to encompass more significant issues of digital sovereignty and ethics. A critical legal and ethical gap needs to be plugged: the definition of 'AI accessibility.' In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016 provides a robust legal framework for persons with disabilities (PwDs). But it defines accessibility primarily in negative terms, with a 'barrier' taken as denial. To ensure that 'AI for All,' the central theme of this year's summit, becomes more than a slogan, we must construct a three-tiered definition of AI accessibility rooted in legal and disability jurisprudence.

The *definition of AI*: Under the RPwD Act, a 'barrier' is defined broadly as any factor, be it 'communicational, cultural, economic, environmental, institutional, political, social, attitudinal or structural,' that hampers the full participation of PwDs. By extension, Indian law has treated accessibility as

the mere absence of these obstacles. But AI is not a static physical structure like a ramp. It is a recursive form of software that evolves. If the summit is to set a global benchmark, it must go beyond calls to remove barriers and demand what AI needs to be from its very inception.

For AI accessibility must be understood as a spectrum of time and utility, operating at three distinct levels.

First, instant stage accessibility: This is an entry threshold that covers basic requirements for participation. It means ensuring that foundational models and interfaces are compatible with assistive technologies from day one. For instance, in the context of the India AI Mission's focus on multilingualism, we should ensure that speech-to-text tools for regional languages account for the diverse vocal patterns of PwDs. This is the 'right to entry' aspect.

Second, medium-term accessibility: For this, AI must move from mere compatibility to 'active facilitation.' Accessibility at this stage is defined by convenience. AI should deploy features that ease the access of PwDs to goods or services compared to traditional means. Whether it is an AI-driven vision assistant to navigate government portals or a predictive interface to reduce motor load, we must

focus on enhancing AI-interaction quality.

Third, long-term accessibility: This is the ultimate goal. Accessibility must translate into systemic 'inclusion.' This occurs when the recursive nature of AI is used to eliminate historical biases. At this level, AI does not just 'assist' PwDs; it restructures the environment to ensure their participation is equal in society and the workforce.

The Raturi framework: A pivotal moment in Indian accessibility jurisprudence was the *Rajive Raturi vs Union of India* judgement of 2024. The Supreme Court made a sharp distinction between accessibility and reasonable accommodation. It characterized accessibility as an *ex-ante* obligation; i.e., a proactive and universal mandate that must exist the moment an entity or service is created. Hence, *ex-ante* accessibility must be baked into every training sets and 'model cards' of India's sovereign AI projects. We mandatorily need universal designs to ensure that AI tools are

usable by as many people as possible right from their initial deployment. Corrective patches that can be applied later will not do, as this is a legal and constitutional must.

Conversely, reasonable accommodation is an *ex-post* duty; i.e., an individualized adjustment made after a specific barrier is identified for a particular person. This is where AI's greatest strength, its recursivity, comes into play. Because AI can learn and adapt, it can fulfill customized duties that physical infrastructure cannot. If a universal interface fails to provide a tailored experience to a specific user with a unique combination of impairments, AI can be prompted or fine-tuned at the edge to deliver a more effective solution.

The recursive nature of AI lets us bridge the gap between universal standards and individual needs in real-time.

Quick Read: We need a definition that aligns AI development with India's legal and disability jurisprudence so that 'AI for all' doesn't end up as just a slogan and this technology proactively promotes inclusion.

We must move from defining it as the mere absence of barriers to setting a mandate that makes AI inclusive from inception and uses its self-learning to make it universally accommodative too.

with the legal jurisprudence of disability on accessibility. We must move away from the negative definition of removing barriers and towards an affirmative national AI accessibility standard, one that we could nudge the rest of the world to adopt.

This standard must recognize that while developers have an *ex-ante* duty to build accessible models, the AI model or tool itself must be trained to recognize when it needs to provide *ex-post* reasonable accommodation.

The recursive nature of these models enables a self-correcting accessibility loop that was impossible in the era of brick-and-mortar infrastructure.

Defining accessibility for AI is not merely a technical challenge. It is imperative from the perspective of fundamental rights. By adopting the *Rajive Raturi* framework, the India AI Summit could help ensure that the next generation of technology is inclusive by design (*ex-ante*) and adaptive by nature (*ex-post*).

If India is to lead the Global South in the AI revolution, we must prove that our own code respects the dignity of all citizens. Our goal should be to ensure that in the automated future, the 'barrier-free' environment promised by our legal framework is finally realized in our algorithms.

MY VIEW | FARM TRUTHS

India needs long-term solutions to address its inequality problem

Cash transfers are expedient but we must intervene strongly in the labour market to fix distortions



HIMANSHU
is associate professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University and visiting fellow at the Centre de Sciences Humaines, New Delhi.

groups for reservations are protests against inequality, for example, and so are farmer agitations for remunerative crop prices and protection from price fluctuations. Protests demanding basic rights for women and those for equal treatment irrespective of caste, region and religion also reflect unequal underlying conditions that deny some groups basic rights while the privileged bask in their privileges.

Some inequalities are structural and even historical to an extent, given their deep-rooted existence in society. Yet, every process of growth creates winners and losers. Economic processes magnify these inequalities and it is here that the role of the state is important. The state is not just supposed to provide a level playing field to all its citizens, but also create regulatory structures that restrain any rise in inequality driven by such economic processes.

Some measures are guaranteed by India's Constitution, which provides for affirmative-action relief in the form of a reservation policy to assure citizens a level playing field. But it is silent on the state's role in regulating excessive concentration of wealth or income, although this does find mention in the fundamental duties of the state. Governments at the Centre and in states have also used redistribution as a tool to

reduce inequality. But there is concern over administrations resorting to freebies, which are only increasing in form and magnitude. The recent push for cash transfers to women, youth and other groups is an acknowledgement of growing inequality and the consequent marginalization of some population groups. It is also a recognition of the fit to redistribute income, even if it results in political competition for cash transfer generosity.

Clearly, fiscal policies involving subsidies and taxation play an important role and their use has been rising in India over the years as a tool to reduce inequality. While such redistributive transfers certainly help, they come at a fiscal cost that causes other harms. Like the Centre, most state governments are now feeling the pressure of these fiscal transfers. In some cases, it has resulted in a reduction in spending on essential services such as health, education and nutrition. The net result may be rising inequality in access to critical services, which would be counterproductive.

State intervention by way of fiscal policy can be helpful when taxation is progressive. Unfortunately, the last few Union budgets have seen large tax giveaways to India's middle class and corporations, an approach that has ironically failed to deliver on economic growth while making it harder to reduce income inequality.

For governments, redistributive transfers are an easy way to respond to rising inequality. These are tangible and visible, yielding political dividends in the short run. No doubt, they are even necessary at times. But such efforts are no substitute for the core measures that governments must take to reduce inequality, which requires intervention in labour and capital markets. Since it is distortions here that widen inequality, we need substantive efforts to curb unfair market practices. For a long-term solution to our problem of inequality, we need to intervene especially strongly in India's labour market.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

As long as poverty, injustice and gross inequality persist in our world, none of us can truly rest.

NELSON MANDELA

GUEST VIEW

AI accessibility: We need to clearly define what it means

SHASHANK PANDEY



is a lawyer and the founder of Politics and Disability Forum

As the world approaches the India AI Summit 2026, the conversation on AI has evolved beyond algorithmic efficiency to encompass more significant issues of digital sovereignty and ethics. A critical legal and ethical gap needs to be plugged: the definition of 'AI accessibility.' In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act of 2016 provides a robust legal framework for persons with disabilities (PwDs). But it defines accessibility primarily in negative terms, with a 'barrier' taken as denial. To ensure that 'AI for All,' the central theme of this year's summit, becomes more than a slogan, we must construct a three-tiered definition of AI accessibility rooted in legal and disability jurisprudence.

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It is a recursive form of software that evolves. If the summit is to set a global benchmark, it must go beyond calls to remove barriers and demand what AI needs to be from its very inception.

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Conversely, reasonable accommodation is an *ex-post* duty; i.e., an individualized adjustment made after a specific barrier is identified for a particular person. This is where AI's greatest strength, its recursivity, comes into play. Because AI can learn and adapt, it can fulfill customized duties that physical infrastructure cannot. If a universal interface fails to provide a tailored experience to a specific user with a unique combination of impairments, AI can be prompted or fine-tuned at the edge to deliver a more effective solution.

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QUICK READ

We need a definition that aligns AI development with India's legal and disability jurisprudence so that 'AI for all' doesn't end up as just a slogan and this technology proactively promotes inclusion.

We must move from defining it as the mere absence of barriers to setting a mandate that makes AI inclusive from inception and uses its self-learning to make it universally accommodative too.

With the legal jurisprudence of disability on accessibility, we must move away from the negative definition of removing barriers and towards an affirmative national AI accessibility standard, one that we could nudge the rest of the world to adopt.

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THEIR VIEW

Sisyphean challenge: Can China reverse its demographic decline?

The prognosis is grim for multiple reasons and even heavy-handed policies can hardly hope to defy global fertility patterns



YI FUXIAN
is a senior scientist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, who spearheaded a movement against China's one-child policy.

China has just announced that births in 2025 plunged to 7.92 million, from 9.54 million the previous year, and almost half of what was projected (14.33 million) when the one-child policy was repealed in 2016. In fact, China's births have fallen to a level comparable to that of 1738 CE, when the country's total population was only about 150 million. Having finally acknowledged the country's grim demographic reality, Chinese authorities introduced new pro-natalist policies last year, expecting the number of births to rebound. But a decline in China's fertility rate was inevitable, like a boulder rolling down a hill. Even if it can be pushed back uphill, it will not happen quickly.

After all, the downward trend in marriages will be difficult to reverse, since the number of women aged 20-34, who account for 85% of Chinese births, is expected to drop from 105 million in 2025 to 58 million by 2050. Compounding this, China's marriage market suffers from a pronounced mismatch. Decades of sex-selective abortion have created a severe shortage of women of childbearing age and women's higher educational attainment has created a 'løftet' women phenomenon, with female students outnumbering males. Whereas the male-to-female ratio among six-year-olds in 2010 was 109:100, by 2022, when this cohort entered college, the ratio in undergraduate admissions was only 59:100. As a result, more men are unable to find wives and more women are likely to remain unmarried, given their preference for more highly educated husbands.

China's current policies are a scaled-down version of Japan's ineffective response to demographic decline. In Japan, fertility fell from 1.45 (far below the replacement rate of 2.1) in 2015 to 1.15 in 2024. With China facing even deeper structural demographic constraints, it is not surprising that its fertility rate has already fallen below Japan's.

It is an ecological law that density inhibits the growth of bacteria, plants and animal populations, and humans are no exception. Across wards and cities in Tokyo, population density is negatively correlated with fertility rates; the same pattern can be found in London, New York, and Shanghai. Built-up urban areas in the US typically have 800-2,000 people per sq km, compared to about 6,000 per sq km in Tokyo. In China, the average is 8,900 per sq km, with many districts in first- and second-tier cities, where young people flock, often reaching 20,000-30,000 per sq km.

High population density drives up housing costs, while higher price-to-income ratios negatively affect fertility. In recent years, fertility in Canada, the US and Europe has been partly driven by soaring housing prices. Since China's price-to-income ratio far exceeds Japan's, and



since its housing bubble is much larger, boosting fertility would require transforming (demolishing and rebuilding) its cities to lower their population density and housing costs. Doing that could trigger a financial crisis or even an economic collapse.

Japan's experience also shows that the average age for men and women at first marriage is negatively correlated with fertility, as is the proportion of unmarried women aged.

25-29. In China, the average age at first marriage rose from 26 for men and 24 for women in 2010 to 29 and 28, respectively, in 2020. Worse, the share of unmarried women aged 25-29 surged from 9% in 2000 to 33% in 2020 and to 45% in 2023. The Chinese government has introduced a "new quality productive forces" policy to offset the drag of ageing on the economy. But such pro-growth measures will inevitably prolong education, which will delay childbearing, increase the proportion of unmarried individuals and lower fertility further.

Again, funded childbearing subsidies by raising its consumption tax. But the burden ultimately fell on households, reducing disposable income as a share of GDP, which had fallen from 62% in 1994 to 55% in 2024, less than subsidies can scarcely offset. Similarly, Taiwan's fertility rate fell from 1.68 in

QUICK READ

As China's fertility rate might have dropped to around half the replacement rate of 2.1, Beijing is trying to encourage childbearing, but the decline now looks like a boulder rolling down a hill.

State incentives are likely to offer only temporary relief since China has too many weak socio-economic links to address. One hopes that Beijing does not end up violating human rights.

2000 to 0.72 in 2025, partly reflecting the decline in household disposable income from 67% of GDP to 55%. In mainland China, household disposable income already accounts for only 43% of GDP, making child-rearing even more difficult.

China's best option to increase fertility would be to raise its household income share, which would also boost consumption and absorb excess capacity.

But Beijing is unlikely to pursue such a paradigm shift because it could weaken its own finances and power, potentially reshaping China's political landscape.

Moreover, even if China could afford to increase fertility by providing generous social benefits, the effects would not last, because such interventions risk weakening family structures and reducing male labour-force participation. After Nordic countries adopted similar policies, the proportion of children born out of wedlock surged to 50-70%, with taxpayers supporting the elderly.

This collectivist model, reminiscent of China's Great Leap Forward (1959-62) that led to millions of famine deaths, is unsustainable. The strength of a chain is determined by its weakest link, and in China's case, several links need strengthening. Fertility can rise only if China addresses them all. One hopes that it can set an example that does not violate human rights.

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MINT CURATOR

Cement has hit a wall and this should help contain emissions

China's construction slump could end up doing the world a favour



DAVID FICKLING
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering climate change and energy.



Cement remains a hard-to-abate industry as far as carbon emissions go. ISTOCKPHOTO

What's the most important commodity for modern civilization? There's a good argument that it's not the ones we think about—oil, gas, copper, iron ore, gold—but something that's ubiquitous and rarely grabs the attention of financial markets: concrete.

After water, it's the substance we use most abundantly, with between 25 billion and 30 billion tonnes poured annually. That's roughly three times as much as all the coal we dig up. It's also a major contributor to the world's carbon footprint. Cement—*the* crucial mineral glue that holds concrete together—accounts for roughly 8% of our annual emissions.

Something striking is happening right now, however. After decades of growth, cement consumption has hit a wall. On current trends, we may never return to the peak 5.4 billion tonnes that were produced in 2021, even as India, Southeast Asia and Africa continue to industrialize and urbanize.

China has driven the global cement market for three decades and still accounts for nearly half of all output. But its boom is now well and truly over, with further falls ahead. Its output has slumped almost 30% since 2020, according to data released on Monday, and credit-rating agency CSCI Pengyuan expects it will decline for the sixth year in a row in 2026. Prices are around their lowest levels in a decade and factories are saddled with more than twice the capacity they need. Despite regular predictions that the market is bottoming out, the floor area of newly-started commercial buildings through December, a key leading indicator, was the lowest since 2003. Yet, China is still producing nearly twice as much cement as it was back then.

If this was a one-time effect of China's housing crash, it might be expected to eventually correct itself. But cement doesn't work that way. With most commodities—such as energy, copper or plastics—consumption keeps growing as income rises, before hitting a plateau at developed-economy levels. Cement, however, drops off a cliff once a country industrializes. Per-capita cement emissions—a decent proxy for output—are about the same in the upper-income US as they are in low-income Burkina Faso and Syria. Those in Albania and Cambodia are about three times what they are in the US.

Even by those standards, China's construction boom was extraordinarily cement-intensive. At its peak in 2014, the country was consuming about 1.8 tonnes per person annually, compared to 0.25 tonnes in the US. At current levels, it's still twice as much as it was back then.

This is good news, because our efforts to clean up cement's carbon footprint have been glacial. Each tonne of cement releases about 0.8 tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere—not much compared to metals and plastics, but huge when accounting for the sheer volume we produce. Technological fixes, by adding volcanic ash to the concrete mix, or waste materials from steel production and coal-fired power, are only likely to cut emissions by 5% to 10%.

Carbon capture and storage is a nice idea, but it's hardly ever been seen in the wild. The countries most likely to adopt such measures tend to be rich ones where concrete consumption is already in decline. They won't make more than a marginal difference to the big picture.

A plunge in consumption is likely to be our best bet of cleaning up this industry. Luckily, it's coming about through ineluctable processes of economic development and industrialization. Cement's best years are in the past and its future already seems to be crumbling.

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THEIR VIEW

Is geography destiny? Innovation can thrive anyway

PAVAN SONI



is the author of 'Design Your Thinking and Design Your Career'

Ever wonder why Germans seek perfection, Japanese pursue miniaturization and waste reduction, Americans are fussy about services and Indians settle for improvisation and what's good enough? Is it something to do with where you reside?

With pervasive technologies, affordable means of communication, maturing labour and capital markets and instant information dissemination, one may think that geography has become history, that who you are trumps where you are. But is that simple? Or is geography destiny?

"Who we are cannot be separated from where we're from," notes writer Malcolm Gladwell. "When and where you are born, what your parents did for a living, and what the circumstances of your upbringing were make a significant difference in how well you do in the world."

It takes either aeons, as in the case of Europe after the Dark Ages, or sheer will power, as seen in post-war Japan and Singapore. Where you are can severely limit your

resources at hand and ability to make the most of them. Social filters, political conditions and economic forces may have isomorphic effects on how individuals and institutions behave. This creates micro-cultures. At any rate, locational effects are more enduring than universalists argue.

The Dutch social psychologist and former IBM employee Geert Hofstede made a pioneering contribution to the study of cultural dimensions. His research began with a fundamental question: In the context of multi-national companies like IBM, what's more pronounced: the culture of a company or a country?

He found that a country's culture dominates and it could be traced to shared socialization skills specific to its people. He posited that national cultures could be contrasted on specific parameters and offered six: 'power distance,' 'individualism versus collectivism,' 'uncertainty avoidance,' 'masculinity versus femininity,' 'long-term orientation' and 'indulgence.'

'Power distance' indicates the extent to which inequality in power is tolerated, 'individualism versus collectivism' reflects how societies integrate into groups, 'uncertainty avoidance' considers how unknown situa-

tions and unexpected events are dealt with; 'masculinity versus femininity' (even fawkishly named) refers to motivation towards achievement and success; 'long-term orientation' signifies a willingness to forgo immediate success and 'indulgence versus restraint' represents the tendency of a society to fulfil its desires.

At the risk of over-generalization, according to scores published by The Culture Factor, an advisory, here's how India stacks up against the US and Germany respectively: power distance (77, 40, 35), individualism (24, 46, 65), masculinity (40, 46, 65), masculinity (56, 62, 66), long-term orientation (51, 50, 57), and indulgence (26, 68, 40).

For innovation, the general dichotomies of 'sustaining' versus 'non-sustaining,' where the former could either be incremental or radical, while 'non-sustaining' is disruptive. For instance, in data storage, devices such as disk drives,

floppy disks, CDs, DVDs, etc. were incremental, whereas solid-state devices, which have non-moving components, are radical. The disruptive type is cloud storage.

Do cultural nuances impact the nature of innovation? It seems so. If we focus on just three factors—power distance, individualism and uncertainty avoidance—we sense that product innovation, especially of the radical or disruptive kind, would gain from cultures with a low power distance (ease of insubordination), high individualism (eschewing consensus) and high uncertainty avoidance (pursuit of perfection).

India, which scores high on power distance and low on both individualism and uncertainty avoidance, would favour incremental innovations. Take the instance of rental startups. They are mostly aggregated, linking buyers and sellers in better ways. Radical innovations, let alone of the disruptive kind, have eluded India. Perhaps this can be

traced to our acceptance of what's good enough and behaviours of seeking constant validation and immediate gratification.

It won't be a stretch to slice the northern hemisphere into North America, Europe and Asia, and label these as disruptive, radical and incremental champions. Since oriental cultures, chiefly Chinese, Indian and Japanese, have so much to preserve, an incremental outlook is natural. The relative youth of North America gives its people an explorative and experimental knack, well suited for disruptions. War-torn Europe, which boasts of ancient civilizations punctuated by revolutions, has taken the path of reliable and radical innovations. This is reflected in corporate cultures.

What's the lesson for India? Forget about culture but focus on the work climate. In the midst of a dominant country culture, you could still create a climate of low power distance, an abhorrence for uncertainty and a streak of individualism for disruptions. This is indeed the need of the hour. Our problems need solutions that go beyond incremental redressals.

Even if geography is destiny, our young country with an old civilization needs to script its own.

Primary concerns

Tighter rules needed for pre-listing session of IPOs

The secondary market might have turned sluggish in 2025, but the primary market has continued to boom, with 103 public issues raising ₹1.76 lakh crore. This was the second consecutive year when more than ₹1.5 lakh crore was raised in the primary market, and the hefty listing gains delivered by these issues have been a major factor behind the boom. With a strong pipeline of primary issues lined up in 2026 as well, it is imperative that the regulator addresses pain points in this segment.

The outsized listing gains delivered by some of these issuances in the last two years have raised doubts about possible manipulation in the pre-listing sessions of some IPOs. It is, therefore, welcome that the market regulator is taking a closer look at the pre-listing session for IPOs and re-listed stocks, as reported recently by this newspaper. The pre-listing session is held for an hour, from 9-10 am on listing day. There are no price bands in this session and the price at which the maximum volume is executed is taken as the equilibrium price or the listing price. But this method of price discovery is susceptible to manipulation. In 2024, circular trading was observed in the pre-listing session to set the listing price higher. Also, there can be concerted trading by a group of people to raise the equilibrium price. The suggestion that the call auction will be deemed successful only if the price is based on orders from at least five unique investors, verified with their PAN cards, will help check such price manipulation. In 2024, the exchanges were also told to increase surveillance on trades which were cancelled within the pre-open session. Such surveillance and action against wrongdoers can help.

The other key suggestion is to allow standardised price bands in the pre-open session. Currently, the exchanges put dummy price bands for IPO stocks in the pre-listing session, but they vary across exchanges. This is a good move, but the price band needs to be fixed after careful consideration. While it needs to be broad enough to address under- or over-pricing issues, it need not be so broad as to lead to heightened speculative activity. Excessive speculation on listing prices erodes the credibility of our capital markets. The proposal that the pre-listing session can be extended to the following days until price is discovered by genuine buyers, will help send the signal that the regulator will not accept ad-hoc price fixing.

The manner in which the base price for stocks seeking relisting is determined also needs review. Currently, it is the lower of book value determined by statutory auditors, and the face value. But in the case of stocks which have been suspended from trading for an extended period, the face value does not capture the change in a company's prospects; it can distort the base price. The formula for calculating base price must be changed so that it captures the prospects of the business accurately, and is not distorted by past market actions.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"Yes, I left the 'last salary drawn' column blank. That's what I drew."

CHETNA ARORA
VAIBHAV CHATURVEDI

India's automobile industry is at an inflection point. Electric vehicle sales are rising, with EVs accounting for nearly 7.5 per cent of national vehicle sales in our latest estimates, even as new manufacturing plants and aggressive EV line-ups are being flagged off across the country. As the Union Budget approaches amid tightening fuel-efficiency norms and debate around compliance costs, policymakers and industry alike are focused on accelerating clean mobility.

Union Road Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari has already highlighted that electric cars are nearing cost parity with petrol models, reinforcing confidence in the demand-side transition. Yet even as the spotlight stays firmly on tailpipes, a quiet challenge is emerging inside factory gates. Manufacturing emissions from steel, rubber, and electricity-intensive production lines remain largely untouched. If India's automakers are to stay competitive and meet their net-zero pledges as global markets move towards carbon-sensitive trade, decarbonising how vehicles are made must now move from the margins to the mainstream.

India's automobile industry contributes about 7.1 per cent to the national GDP and remains a key driver of the country's industrial growth and employment. While 65-80 per cent of a vehicle's emissions today come from direct use of the tailpipe, electrification is steadily reducing that share. Yet behind every vehicle lies a web of industrial emissions, from steel and rubber production to the source of the electricity used in factories. For instance, steel used in making just one car can add as much as 2.2 tonnes of CO₂ to the atmosphere. If India's net-zero goal is to be credible, vehicle manufacturing itself has to be decarbonised. How fast could manufacturing-related energy demand and emissions grow in a business-as-usual scenario? Will Scope 1 (direct), Scope 2 (electricity-related), and Scope 3 (supply chain) emissions rise at the same rate? And what strategy should OEMs adopt to address them?

SCALE OF PRODUCTION
The first question is largely about scale. Vehicle production is set to rise significantly in a business-as-usual scenario, with four-wheelers owned per 1,000 people in India increasing from around 34 currently to 201 in 2070, according to projections. Two-wheeler ownership shows an interesting trend: It rises to 108 in 2050 but drops to 85 in 2070, as people become wealthier and



GETTY IMAGES

Green auto industry must go beyond EVs

CLEAN MOBILITY. Emissions related to manufacturing process — the electricity and upstream products used — also need to be curbed

assumed to shift to cars. Freight demand will also rise, leading to higher truck production. Consequently, energy demand for vehicle manufacturing is expected to more than triple between 2020 and 2050. Associated emissions across all categories are projected to more than double from 30.3 million tonnes of CO₂ in 2020 to 64 million tonnes by 2050.

The second question relates to the sources of these emissions. In 2020, direct factory emissions (scope 1) constituted only around 1 per cent of the total. Indirect emissions from purchased electricity — Scope 2 — emissions accounted for 16 per cent. But the vast majority, 83 per cent, came from scope 3 emissions: the upstream supply chain, especially steel and rubber production. Decarbonising vehicle manufacturing, therefore, requires tackling all three scopes — cleaning up factory operations, switching to renewable electricity, and decarbonising material inputs.

The third question relates to mitigation strategy. Leading automakers such as Mahindra & Mahindra, Tata Motors, TVS, and Ford among others are setting ambitious targets to cut their Scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions by 2030-2050, aligning with global net-zero

As global markets move towards carbon border taxes, only those with low-emission supply chains will remain competitive

goals. A recent study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) found that switching to green electricity and low-carbon steel could cut India's automobile industry emissions by up to 87 per cent.

Mitigating Scope 3 emissions is particularly complex, given that many suppliers — especially those in the MSME segment — operate with limited resources. To get there, decision-makers must act voluntarily and decisively on three fronts.

Electricity procurement: By 2050, the auto industry's annual electricity demand will reach around 54 TWh. Reducing Scope 2 emissions will require sourcing all of this from renewable energy. To put it in context, around 34 GW of renewable electricity capacity would be needed just to power auto OEM factories by 2050. Companies will need to plan early and work with regulators and renewable developers to achieve 100 per cent renewable procurement.

Steel: Green steel is the toughest but most crucial link in decarbonising the supply chain. It is expensive today, but demand can drive scale and cost reduction.

OEMs should enter into Advance Market Commitments (AMCs) to secure green steel and progressively increase its share to 100 per cent by 2050. Steel could be produced either using hydrogen-based processes or through greater use of recycled scrap.

Other materials, particularly rubber for tyres: Here, electrifying the production process — provided the electricity itself is renewable — can

substantially cut emissions. OEMs must work closely with their suppliers to help them access clean electricity and finance low-carbon technologies. Components like engines and batteries are already electrified; the next step is ensuring that the electricity used is green.

The main concern regarding the 2050 net-zero target is cost. India's auto sector is highly price-sensitive. Our estimates suggest that under such a net zero scenario, price of green steel for automakers could be about 35 per cent more, thereby raising vehicle prices by 2.5 per cent (in inflation-adjusted terms) depending on the segment. The combined impact of the price rise due to other components will be fairly small. Yet this should be seen in context, as India's per capita income is also projected to quadruple between 2020 and 2050. As purchasing power rises, the modest price increase will have a negligible impact on demand. The long-term benefits — cleaner air, resilient supply chains, and export competitiveness — will far outweigh short-term costs.

As global markets move towards carbon border taxes and green procurement standards, only those with low-emission supply chains will remain competitive. Beyond clean mobility, if the journey begins on the factory floor, India's auto industry can become the engine driving the country's low-carbon transition.

Arora is Programme Associate and Chaturvedi is Senior Fellow at the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW). Views are personal

Why Trump softened push for Greenland takeover

He steps back from threat of using force and additional tariffs as EU nations say 'trade bazooka' will be used against the US

Sridhar Krishnaswami

For now all the talk of taking Greenland "the easy way or the hard way" is on the back-burner, perhaps even off the table. And as for the threat to slap several European countries with 10 per cent tariff effective February 1 — that could be capped to 25 per cent on June 1 — for supporting the notion that Greenland is an autonomous territory under Denmark, President Donald Trump has changed track.

Maintaining that a "framework" for a future deal on the Arctic island's status is a possibility after discussions with Mark Rutte, the Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), tariffs are no longer in place

President Trump has said.

At Davos President Trump backed away from the use of military force to take Greenland. "We want a piece of ice for world protection, and they won't give it. We've never asked for anything else," the President maintained going on to defend his tariffs.

"You're all party to them — in some cases victims to them. But in the end, it's a fair thing, and most of you realise

that". But the European Union who were already on the edge at some of Washington's policies made it known that it was ready for the "trade bazooka", an anti-coercion instrument that would allow a trade response by way of sanctions against the US if President Trump were ahead with his tariffs plan.

DETAILS NOT SPILT OUT

Details of the "deal" or "framework" on Greenland are yet to be spelt out. Or as President Trump said, "We have a concept of a deal. I think it's going to be a very good deal for the United States, also for them. It's a little bit complex, but we'll explain it down the line". A media report has suggested that the framework would in part re-open for new negotiations of an agreement signed in 1951 with Denmark on American military presence in Greenland. There is apparently also a thinking that the US could build new military bases in Greenland which would be considered sovereign American territory.

The fact that President Trump has stepped back from the threat of using force and additional tariffs on European nations for refusing to fall in line has generally been welcomed. "Trump said



CHANGING TACK. Europe gets on the offensive on Greenland. REUTERS

he will pause the trade war. He says "I will not attack Greenland". These are positive messages", Denmark's Foreign Minister Lars Rasmussen has said. "If this deal goes through, and President Trump is very hopeful it will, the United States will be achieving all of its strategic goals with respect to Greenland, at very little cost, forever," White House has said in a statement. And President Trump who took credit for recent record highs in the markets admitted of a dip because of Greenland as Wall Street took a hammering before recovering.

Prior to leaving for Davos and even

before the final words on Greenland have been said, President Trump opened another front some ten thousand miles away from Washington DC. "Shockingly, our brilliant NATO ally, the United Kingdom, is currently planning to give away the island of Diego Garcia, the site of a vital US military base, to Mauritius. It is an act of great stupidity, and is another in a very long line of national security decisions that Greenland has to be acquired," President Trump posted on his social media site.

The Trump administration had earlier welcomed the May 2024 agreement between Britain and Mauritius on the hand over of the Chagos Islands with Diego Garcia retained for 99 years at an annual rent of \$10 million.

President Trump is on the mark when he talks of the strategic and economic importance of Diego Garcia; and the potential of Washington's adversaries fishing in troubled waters. Any impression of Washington setting its sights on Chagos Islands *per se* would rattle Asian allies and Indian Ocean states.

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

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

Revamp insurance sector

Apropos 'Errors of commission' (January 22), for decades, India's insurance industry has thrived on opaque, high commissions even as mutual funds and the NPS embraced transparency and low costs. IRDAI's move to question insurers breaching expense caps is therefore welcome, though overdue. That commissions rose nearly 20 per cent in 2025 while premiums grew barely 7 per cent highlights deep distortions. Excessive, front-loaded payouts fuel mis-selling, customer churn and poor insurance penetration, a concern even flagged by the RBI. Protection products perversely pay more than investments, even though promises to seniors and

low-income households. IRDAI must go beyond explanations: cap commissions, curb front-loading, mandate clear disclosures and penalise violations. With new statutory powers, delay would only entrench mistrust.

K Chidambaram Kumar

Bengaluru

Mobilising revenues
With reference to 'Merits of user tax on infra services' (January 22), the suggestive measures to impose additional cess or surcharge on select goods and services towards improving tax buoyancy appear to be feasible, thanks to the robust demand for these essentials. However, with specific reference to

vehicles, in realistic terms, States are already collecting a humongous amount by way of road taxes, apart from GST on vehicles, in spite of poor road infrastructure and maintenance. While it is the primary duty of every taxpayer to support the government towards enhanced revenue generation and economic growth, it would be equally incumbent on the States to ensure welfare of the citizen, and avoid diversion of resources towards freebies to gain political mileage.

Sitaram Popuri
Bengaluru

Smarter power policy
This refers to 'Proposed electricity policy targets global quality supply to

cities' (January 22). The draft NEP 2026 can be improved through better use of technology. Automatic compensation should depend on smart meters using AI and IoT. This will detect power cuts in real time and give direct bill credits. SERCs need funding and support from technology companies. This will strengthen the policy and ensure simple public dashboards. Renewable efforts should go beyond generation by promoting EV-to-grid systems, decentralised solar, and battery storage with incentives. Educating consumers will help build a strong, consumer-focused power system.

S Balasubramanyan
Villupuram, TN

Carney's call at Davos
The advocacy of a Third Path by Canadian PM Mark Carney is a welcome, though not entirely new, idea. The coming together of post-'World War' 'newly independent' countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America against the bi-polar construct of US vs USSR was made a reality through Non-Aligned Movement, which had a modicum of value-addition in acting as a check against not only economic and military hegemony of the US, but also against aggressive ideological push of the communist regimes of the USSR and China.

Angara Venkata Girija Kumar
Chennai

Dollar dynamics

US currency is set to fall in 2026 amidst volatility

Jamal Mecklai

As Trump is having more and more angry fun, the world is getting more and more nervous. De-dollarization stories abound, as do concerns of US yields soaring triggering an equity collapse. Of course, equity markets generally only collapse when no one is looking, but bond markets are another story. And the dollar, of course, is its own animal. There's no gainsaying that the dollar is still the big daddy in global markets, but it has been losing credibility steadily, even before the US sanctions on Russia.

Now, concern about the dollar is everywhere – you can't turn around without bumping into someone with irrefutable credentials explaining that Trump attacked Venezuela because they were selling oil in yuan, or that Brazil has started using the BRICS bridge in earnest as a route for quick safe intra-BRICS transactions by-passing the dollar, or that gold and cryptocurrencies are the new safe haven, or that soon enough large holders will begin to start dumping US Treasuries.

The world is becoming more multi-polar and the dollar is in everyone's sights. But it's still a long way to that particular bank.

DOLLAR DOMINANCE

The dollar continues to hold the highest share in global reserves (57.4 per cent), even though it has been steadily but slowly declining. It also currently has a similar share of global trade invoicing; however, that number is likely to fall quite rapidly.

Of course, well over 85 per cent of foreign exchange transactions have the dollar as one leg (since investment flows are still primarily in dollars), but there is little doubt that there is a significant change festering the global currency environment.

Separately, the value of the dollar could – and should – begin to fall, and, perhaps, sharply.

It has already (in 2025) fallen quite steeply, losing nearly 12 per cent against the Euro and other currencies in Europe and in Latin America; and to a lesser extent in Asia. It only gained against eight currencies monitored by *The Economist*, including basket cases like Turkey and Argentina (and, sadly, the rupee).

With Trump's increasing belligerence, it is a virtual certainty that the diversification out of the dollar will continue, although to a limit.



DOLLAR. Volatile gyrations GETTY IMAGES

Nonetheless, this will serve to reduce several fundamental imbalances. Recent data show that the US makes up close to 50 per cent of global stock market value, while its share of global GDP is roughly 25 per cent; thus, US equities are valued at roughly twice its share of world economic output. Of course, these numbers are denominated in USD, so if – or when – the dollar starts to fall again, this ratio will automatically come down.

Again, it is widely acknowledged that the US has become extremely expensive relative to most other countries; and, again, that is also largely the result of an overvalued dollar. A shock reality: GDP per capita of Mississippi is more or less equal to that of Italy. Now, Mississippi is the poorest state in the US, and although it's a wonderful place, it's hardly a place that delivers a high-quality lifestyle, certainly when compared with Italy, which consistently ranks as one of the world's 4th (or 5th) top tourist destinations. This imbalance in the GDP numbers will also be corrected as the dollar declines.

The big question, of course, is how far will the dollar fall and when. Today, EUR/USD is at 1.1650, which means the dollar is about 1.5 per cent stronger than its all-time average of 1.1825. However, if we remove the first five years of the Euro's existence (1999 to 2004) as starting pains, the dollar is more than 5 per cent stronger than its average value of 1.2250; and, remarkably – does anyone remember – it is 37 per cent stronger than its all-time low of 1.60 EUR/USD. So, there's plenty of room for it to fall.

Of course, one of the cardinal rules of forecasting is you either give a level or a time frame – never both. My sense is that the dollar is going to fall this year, albeit with substantial volatility – thank you Mr. Trump – but where it reaches is impossible to call.

The writer is CEO for Mecklai Financial

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

January 23, 2006

Banks drop move to fix floor-level lending rates

With the heat on against what was being perceived as attempts at 'cartelisation', public sector banks seem to have abandoned their efforts to arrive at an industry-wide consensus on floor-level lending rates. Top bankers said there was no possibility of reaching such an arrangement at present.

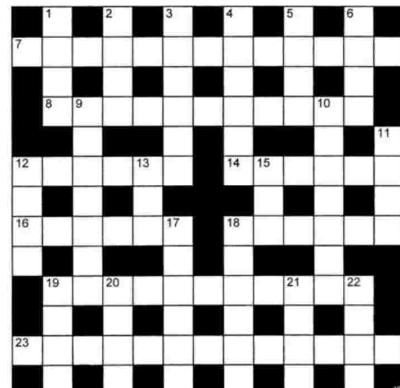
Social concerns, fiscal prudence to guide Budget*

Soundings upbeat on the economic growth rates achieved and the boom in investments, the Union Finance Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, categorically stated that social concerns and fiscal prudence and responsibility would guide the coming Budget.

Maharashtra Scooters: 'WMDC interests will be protected'

The Government of Maharashtra does not consider the proposed divestment of majority holding in Maharashtra Scooters Ltd (MSL) a deal yet and has resolved to protect the interests of Western Maharashtra Development Corporation (WMDC) on the stake issue. The State Government owns 27 per cent stake in MSL through WMDC. The arbitration award on the dispute with Bajaj Auto over pricing of the divestment is expected to be announced on January 31.

• BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2603



AI AGENDA. The India AI Impact Summit 2026 gives us the chance to shape the AI race on our terms



SANCHIT VIR GOGIA

India's Global AI Summit is here. The headlines will call it ambitious. The optics will be impressive. But beneath the banners and plenaries, a quieter question looms: Is this just another global AI event, or is it India's bid to take seriously as the world's most deployable, trustworthy AI partner?

At Greyhound Research, we've spent the past few weeks tracking the run-up to this summit. What's emerging is less about spectacle and more about signal. Not a show of strength. A declaration of intent. If trust is the defining currency of AI adoption, and it is increasingly, then India is placing a calculated bet. That in a fragmented world, our chaos, our complexity, and our governance-first model may be our greatest competitive advantage.

Let's start with the most important piece. The agenda.

AI CHAKRAS

India has resisted the temptation to mimic the West's AI paranoia or China's techno-nationalism. Instead, it has laid out a seven-pillar framework, AI chakras as the government calls them, that includes safe and trusted AI, democratized access, and inclusion by design. There's very little hype. No grandstanding. But there is substance. And that matters.

Because if AI is to succeed at population scale, the policy that governs it must be as inclusive as the technology itself. India seems to get this. Unlike regulatory regimes that default to restriction, this summit leans on enablement. An implicit message that safety and scale can, and must, coexist.

Next, the deployment reality.

India is not experimenting with AI in controlled labs. We are deploying it in the wild. In agriculture, AI-powered advisories are being used by millions of farmers. In healthcare, diagnostic tools are being used to screen for TB and stroke in resource-starved clinics. In governance, the Supreme Court is using AI for multilingual translation of court records. These aren't moonshots. They are working systems, quietly proving that AI can serve public infrastructure

without overwhelming it.

This is important. Because most countries are still stuck at the pilot stage. India is at rollout. And in doing so, we are making a different kind of case. Not just that AI can work, but that it can work for the many, not just the few.

This brings us to the real differentiator: trust.

While other AI superpowers wrestle with credibility, India has something rare. A governance surplus. We legislate openly. Our courts function independently. Our platforms are built in public and are designed to interoperate. Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, and DEPA. Together they form a stack that is not just technically sound, but politically legitimate. That legitimacy is hard to replicate. And it's becoming our sharpest edge.

Contrast that with China. Its AI stack may be more mature. Its models may be faster. But its trust deficit is now structural. From telecom bans in Europe to regulatory blockades in the US, the message is clear. Great models don't scale without trust. And trust doesn't scale without transparency.

India doesn't have to beat China on compute. It has to outpace it on credibility. This summit moves the needle in that direction.

But we also need to be clear-eyed. Trust alone is not a substitute for capability. If India is to make this moment count, we need to back the message with infrastructure.

AIRAWAT must move from concept to access. The model development efforts under Bharat GenAI must scale beyond pilots. Safety research needs institutional funding. And public datasets, especially in low-resource languages and regulated sectors, must be made open, usable, and audit-ready. The summit gets some of this right. But follow-through will determine whether this is a turning point or just a well-executed press cycle.

What's more encouraging is the alignment with the Global South.

If India can now offer not just infrastructure but AI governance that is adaptable and affordable, we won't just be exporting tech. We'll be exporting capacity.

But one angle remains under-discussed, and it may be the most strategic of all.

In that sense, this isn't just about winning markets. It's about shaping ecosystems. It's about replacing dependency with mutual capacity. That's soft power in motion, with AI as its vehicle.

Because if AI works in India, it works anywhere.

This matters. Not just for domestic resilience, but for global portability. When we stress-test AI in India's chaos, we produce systems that generalize better, adapt faster, and require less tuning for export. Our chaos is becoming a capability.

And yet, this very strength hides a silent risk. Our institutional guardrails are still playing catch-up.

The India AI Safety Institute is promising. The regulatory posture is pragmatic. But at the scale we're aiming

for, intent alone won't suffice. Without accelerated resourcing, clearer liability norms, transparent compute access, and stronger coordination, we risk sending a message the world is eager to believe, but not yet ready to back.

Trust is not static. It has to be reinforced. Especially when you're exporting it.

ACCOUNTABILITY FACTOR

We need clarity on liability. If an AI system goes wrong, who is accountable? The developer, the deployer, the data custodian? The summit touches on this but punts the question to future frameworks. That's a risk, especially for startups and regulated industries.

We need to accelerate compute availability. AIRAWAT has potential, but the process to access it remains opaque. If academic labs and start-ups can't get easy access to national compute, the promise of democratized AI remains a slogan.

We need sandboxes. Structured, sector-specific, regulator-backed zones where AI developers can test high-risk models without waiting for formal laws. These sandboxes must be real, backed by legal cover and operational guidance, not just pilot zones with fancy logos.

And finally, we need export discipline. If India is to offer its AI model to the world, we must maintain the very things that make us credible.

Transparency, inclusion, and institutional stability. That's not a tech challenge. That's a governance commitment.

The good news? None of this requires reinvention. It requires coordination.

The AI Summit has done its job in placing India at the centre of the global trust conversation. Now, we need to earn that trust at home. By building for the edge, governing in the open, and enabling developers at scale.

Because this is not just about India's AI moment. This is about showing that democratic AI at scale is not a contradiction. It's a model. One the world desperately needs.

The question is no longer whether India can be part of the AI race. We're already in it. The question is whether we will shape it on our terms or inherit the terms of others.

This summit is our first real answer. Let's make sure it's not our last.

The writer is Chief Analyst, Founder & CEO, Greyhound Research

On businessline.in

Will VB-G Ram G score over MGNREGS?

Creating productive assets and curbing payment leakages appear doubtful under the new scheme. Also, it reduces flexibility in local planning, point out PC Mohanan and Amitabh Kundu

Budget should spell out roadmap to enhance quality of human capital

It should signal a concerted governance reform based on decentralised community action and collaborative governance to secure the much-needed demographic dividend, says Amarjeet Sinha

US economy expanded at revised 4.4% pace in Q3

Molly Smith

Bureau of Economic Analysis data on Thursday.

The report showed one of the strongest back-to-back quarters for growth since 2021, when the economy was still recovering from the pandemic. Companies dialed back the tempo of goods imports after a year-end rush to beat President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs. Consumer and business spending have also held up well despite erratic trade policies. Against a backdrop of robust

growth, along with a steadier job market and inflation that remains above the Federal Reserve's target, policymakers are expected to leave interest rates steady at next week's meeting. Separate data on Thursday showed initial applications for US unemployment benefits remained low. The GDP report showed the central bank's preferred inflation metric rose an unrevised 2.9 per cent in the third quarter. BLOOMBERG

EASY

ACROSS

- 07. State of a person's affairs (13)
- 08. Period of intellectual darkness in Europe (3,4,4)
- 10. Band supporting stocking (6)
- 11. Disorderly crowd (6)
- 12. Injustices (6)
- 13. Object of dread (6)
- 14. Malleable metal used decoratively (7-4)
- 15. One in cards (3)
- 16. Punctual, on schedule (2,4)
- 17. Twisted threads in lamp etc (4)
- 18. Allows to be true (4)
- 19. Give metallic sound (4)
- 20. Reports are defamatory among dancers of about fifty (13)
- 21. Variant of 3. 11. Screen 14. Stick of rock 18. Riding 20. Flair 22. Oval 23. Deleted 24. Undertaking 25. Variant 3. Loll 4. Nurse 5. Scrap 6. Shone 8. Medicine 10. Scornful 13. Box 15. Chasten 16. Brook 17. Trade 19. Drawn 21. Edit

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2602

ACROSS 1. Overflowing 7. Caramel 9. Arch 11. Award 12. Screen 14. Stick of rock 18. Riding 20. Flair 22. Oval 23. Deleted 24. Undertaking

DOWN 2. Variant 3. Loll 4. Nurse 5. Scrap 6. Shone 8. Medicine 10. Scornful 13. Box 15. Chasten 16. Brook 17. Trade 19. Drawn 21. Edit

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 07. A thousand take position in Piccadilly to show state of affairs (13)
- 08. From the 5th century gate, ask herd to scatter (3,4,4)
- 12. Order rate to be adjusted in the King George (6)
- 14. The mob grab top off table part-time soldiers left (6)
- 16. Deprives one of right? That's not right, so halve it (6)
- 18. He makes himself a nuisance taking leader by mistake (6)
- 19. Decorative metal-work throwing our characters about (7-4)
- 23. His reports are defamatory among dancers of about fifty (13)
- 24. Have occasion for (4)



Opinion

FRIDAY, JANUARY 23, 2026

Davos without delusions

Trump speech and rebuttals showed how trans-Atlantic tensions dominated the ongoing 56th annual meeting

THE THEME of the 56th World Economic Forum (WEF) Annual Meeting in snowbound Davos-Klosters—attended by A-listers in the world of global business and top policymakers—was the spirit of dialogue. But this spirit was severely tested by the worsening trans-Atlantic tensions that were in full display at the week-long summit. At stake is the rapidly fraying rules-based international order as the most powerful economy in the world, the US, ruthlessly pursues its drive for hemispheric dominance by taking over Venezuela and has trained its sights on Greenland which is sovereign Danish territory. US President Donald Trump's speech in Davos ruled out force but sought immediate negotiations. He ominously hinted "you can say, and we will be very appreciative, or you can say no, and we will remember". The good news is that the threat of Trump imposing Greenland tariffs on the Europeans has receded with a framework of a future deal for Greenland and the Arctic region. The US's bullying led the European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, to comment that the shift in the international order is not seismic but permanent as "we now live in a world defined by raw power".

A world described by Thucydides in which the stronger powers do what they can and the weak must suffer what they must surely would have provoked shock and awe in Davos. Although the WEF's summits are a paean to starry-eyed globalisation and technocratic governance, the regular participants must surely have known that the rules-based international order was indeed fraying over the years. Trump was consistently arguing that globalisation offered no benefits as the US was taken advantage of by the world. This has been a recurring theme of his four Davos speeches since 2018 although he has been more brazen about his agenda in his second term. There is no warrant to pretend the world was otherwise as has been sharply underscored by a forceful speech in Davos by the Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney. Citing from a famous essay by Czech dissident Vaclav Havel, he noted that the communist system survived as people were willing to lie to each other about its realities. Accordingly, it was time now to call the system what it is and "stop invoking the rules-based international order as though it still functions as advertised".

India must heed these thoughts as it navigates through a world in which the most powerful ruthlessly pursue their interests through coercion. Look no further than the limited progress in clinching a bilateral trade deal with the US despite Trump's profession of friendship with India's Prime Minister and statements that a deal is imminent. India must form alliances with other middle powers "because if we are not at the table, we are on the menu", as Carney warns. India has rightly not yet taken a call on joining Trump's Board of Peace to bring lasting peace to Gaza and resolve other global conflicts. Although we welcomed the Gaza peace plan and adoption of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2803 last November as a step forward to end the conflict, Trump's latest proposal is more of a poisoned chalice as it has a much broader mandate that allows it to potentially rival the United Nations. Why should India be a part of the most powerful economy's drive to undermine this multilateral body?

India's coal revival looks impossible to achieve

ALMOST EVERYWHERE ON the planet, the great surge of coal power that fuelled two centuries of industrialisation is receding.

In rich countries, consumption peaked two decades ago, and has since fallen by about half. China managed to suck up every metric ton the developed world spurned since then, but that tide is now turning, too. Coal-fired power there fell about 1% last year, despite a 5% jump in electricity usage. Even freezing weather in December was unable to shift the picture. Fossil generation was the lowest since 2012, in a month when demand is typically strong.

As recently as 2024, the International Energy Agency predicted Chinese coal demand would keep breaking records for the next three years. It now reckons it's heading into decline, and will lose 180 million tons through 2030—similar to closing all the coal power stations and blast furnaces in Japan.

There's one remaining bright spot—India. But even there, coal's defences are crumbling. Consumption will rise by about 200 million tons through 2030, according to the IEA, offsetting all the decline from China, much as China once offset the decline from rich countries. The government is promising to build 97 gigawatts of additional coal power by 2035, nearly 500% more than is currently in place. Expansions might keep going as late as 2047 under proposals currently being discussed.

There's just one problem with all this. One of the strongest arguments for coal's continued relevance in India in the face of cheaper, cleaner renewables—the relative ease with which it can be built—is looking badly out of date.

Take that proposed 97 Gw that needs to get built over the next nine years. Just 35.5 Gw of the total has received financial sign-off so far, and of that only 16.3 Gw has actually broken ground. The remainder is stuck in regulatory, political, or financing red tape. Some 2.2 Gw has been abandoned.

It's a similar picture with non-power users, such as producing chemicals—a sector the government is trying to support with nearly \$10 billion in subsidies. Taleria in Odisha was expected to be the country's first coal-gasification plant when completed in 2024. Instead, 11 years after it was announced, it's still only about two-thirds built.

How long does it take to construct a coal power plant in India? Based on the 24 facilities that have broken ground and have scheduled connection dates, it's about seven years between financial close and first power to the grid. To hit the government's 97 Gw target, that means another 60 Gw must get signed off in the next two years—equivalent to approving one new plant every 10 days.

That seems a stretch. Private capital is already growing wary of investing in an Indian economy that's heavily dependent on stimulus from a debt-laden state sector. Some 80% of coal plants under construction are government-owned.

It's unlikely the government will hit its targets on new coal, SBI Capital Markets wrote this month. Solar, by contrast, should easily install 50 Gw this year, SBI noted. That should put the country on track to meet Prime Minister Narendra Modi's promise that 500 Gw of clean power will be operating by 2030. An India generating that much renewables won't even need additional coal plants. Current rates of clean power build-out on their own should be sufficient to cover about 97% of demand growth between now and 2030. Anything else can be met by increasing the operating rates of existing fossil generators, which are underutilised and unprofitable as a result.

We are already seeing what this will look like. Coal power fell by about 3% in India last year. The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, a pro-energy transition group, wrote earlier this month. Some 44% of this decline was caused by growing clean generation, with 36% attributed to unusually cool, wet weather and 20% from an economic slowdown. Last year represents the first time in half a century that coal generation in both China and India dropped simultaneously.

When you're trying to hit a peak in fossil-fuel consumption, each year is a fresh race. Power consumption in emerging economies is growing at a headlong pace, so renewables have to move at breakneck speed just to keep up. Eating into the market share of fossil fuels is even harder. Still, renewables are proving to be more nimble than the fossil-fuel incumbents at actually getting new electrons flowing.

Almost all of the increase in global emissions over the past decade came from the power grids of Asia's two biggest economies. Look past the cascade of headlines coming out of Washington, and you can glimpse that mega-trend heading into reverse.



NO RESERVATIONS

Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw

Be it semiconductor industry, AI, manufacturing, green energy or any other sector, we want to partner with the world everywhere

BUDGET FOCUS

NEXT PHASE OF INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT MUST BE CITIZEN-FIRST, WITH EMPLOYMENT AT ITS CORE

From \$4 trn to a jobs economy

BUDGET 2026 ARRIVES at an inflection point in India's economic journey. Over the past 12 years, India has undergone one of the most consequential developmental phases since Independence. Nominal GDP has expanded from roughly \$2 trillion to \$4 trillion, driven by sustained public investment, large-scale infrastructure creation, and the delivery of basic amenities to millions of citizens. Roads, railways, power, housing, water, sanitation, digital connectivity, and financial inclusion have transformed everyday life for the majority of Indians.

This phase of nation-building has also created the conditions for faster economic growth and formalisation. A large aspirational class has emerged, particularly among workers transitioning out of agriculture. The foundations have been laid. The next decisive challenge is clear—job creation must be the priority of Budget 2026.

The case for putting employment at the centre of fiscal policy is demographic. India is entering a prolonged phase of labour market pressure driven by a large youth bulge. Citizens born between 1990 and 2010, estimated at over 50 crore, are already either in the workforce or will enter it over the next decade. For the next 15-20 years, this cohort will demand stable, reasonably paid, and dignified jobs.

If this demand is met, India can convert its demographic profile into a sustained growth advantage. If not, the dividend risks becoming a structural constraint. Employment, therefore, is a macroeconomic and socio-political imperative.

Contrary to claims of "jobless growth", administrative employment data tells a more nuanced and encouraging story. India's formal employment base has expanded steadily over the past decade, with a sharp rebound after the pandemic.

Nominal GDP grew from \$1.25 lakh crore in FY15 to \$3.1 lakh crore in FY25, an absolute increase of \$206 lakh crore, translating into a nominal compound annual growth rate of 10.2%. Alongside this expansion, formal employment has grown through the Employees' Provident

TV MOHANDAS PAI NISHA HILLA

Respectively Chairman and Research Fellow, 3one4 Capital



Fund (EPF) and Employees' State Insurance (ESI) systems, which record Aadhaar-linked subscribers only after payroll remittances have been verified.

The EPF added 1.22 crore new subscribers in FY22, 1.38 crore in FY23, 1.31 crore in FY24, and 1.3 crore in FY25. From September 2017 to April 2025, the EPF recorded around 1.95 crore subscriber additions. ESI shows a similar pattern, with new additions of 1.49 crore in FY22, 1.67 crore in FY23, 1.67 crore in FY24, and 1.68 crore in FY25, taking cumulative additions since September 2017 to approximately 9.98 crore. There is some overlap between the two systems, but the scale and persistence of additions across both databases indicate sustained formal job creation.

The argument that these numbers merely reflect formalisation rather than new employment is not without merit. EPFO's Provident Fund Organisation (PFO) data separately tracks establishments that remit their first cheque in a given year, capturing existing workers being formalised. In FY24, 52,309 establishments remitted their first cheque. Enterprises which means 10.5 lakh workers were formalised through first-time remitting firms in FY25. Against total EPF additions of 1.3 crore, this still leaves roughly 1.19 crore net new jobs created during the year.

Annually, over 50% of new EPF subscribers and over 48% of new ESI subscribers fall in the 18-25 age group. It is implausible that such a concentration of young rural women has expanded sharply, supported by self-help groups. Female labour force participation has increased meaningfully, reflecting aspiration rather than distress. Yet, commuting constraints and relocation costs continue to limit access to formal employment. Job creation closer to home is essential.

India now needs to move beyond fragmented schemes and adopt a coherent, three-tier employment strategy, embedded in Budget 2026.

First, India should create special employment zones focused on the poorest 350 districts, explicitly targeting labour-intensive manufacturing and services. Employers must receive a direct incentive of ₹2,000 per month per new employee

for 24 months, conditional on verified EPF and ESI contributions. In addition, the government should bear the employer's EPF and ESI costs for the same period. This directly offsets training costs and initial productivity losses while ensuring accountability through payroll data. Locating such zones near labour supply reduces distress migration and anchors industrial activity in the heartlands.

Second, India must accelerate urbanisation through a focused push in around 5,000 census towns over the next five years. Urbanisation itself is a powerful job creator, particularly in construction, services, logistics, and small manufacturing. India is likely to move towards 40-45% urbanisation, a shift that will permanently alter economic geography and political incentives, especially after the 2027 delimitation. Investing in housing, mobility, and basic services in smaller towns can turn them into service hubs for surrounding districts, creating dense local labour markets and higher-quality employment.

Third, the top 10 Indian cities must be treated as national productivity engines. These cities account for a disproportionate share of GDP and tax revenues and are increasingly integrated into global value chains. A committed investment of ₹5,000-10,000 crore per city per year for five years, focused on transport, mobility, and liveability, would raise productivity, attract high-wage industries, and expand the tax base.

For too long, growth policy has been implicitly capital-first. That strategy has delivered results and must continue. But, the next phase of India's development must be citizen-first, with employment as the primary channel through which growth translates into prosperity. A jobs-led strategy also strengthens fiscal space by expanding the tax base, raising productivity, and sustaining social stability.

By explicitly organising policy around large-scale, high-quality job creation across districts, towns, and cities, India can ensure that the gains of the past 12 years translate into durable prosperity for the next generation.

The India-Europe connect



HARSH V PANT

Vice President, Observer Research Foundation

GERMANY'S CHANCELLOR FRIEDRICH MERZ's visit to India earlier this month underscored a quiet but consequential recalibration in bilateral ties. Timed to mark 25 years of the India-Germany Strategic Partnership and 75 years of diplomatic ties, the two-day engagement in Ahmedabad and New Delhi went beyond symbolism. It reflected a shared recognition that the relationship can no longer remain anchored primarily in trade and investment, but must evolve into a strategic partnership shaped by shifting geopolitical realities.

The most significant outcome of the visit was the joint Declaration of Intent on a Defence Industrial Cooperation Roadmap.

It marked a clear departure from the buyer-seller model that has long characterised India's defence engagement with Europe. By committing to co-development and co-production of military platforms, Berlin signalled its willingness to loosen export controls and facilitate the transfer of sensitive technologies—an issue that has historically constrained defence cooperation. Merz's optimism that the India-EU Free Trade Agreement could be concluded by early 2026 was politically significant, even if past experience counsels caution at timelines.

Sustainability emerged as another pillar of the evolving partnership. Germany's additional €1.24-billion commitment under the Green and Sustainable Development Partnership targets sectors critical to India's energy transition, including green hydrogen, electric mobility, and climate-resilient urban infrastructure.

The green ammonia offtake agreement between India's SAIL and Germany's Uniper demonstrated how India's submarine industry, also pointed to tangible progress on India's long-pending project to acquire six advanced conventional submarines, a deal with both commercial and strategic implications.

The visit also addressed the softer yet no less strategic dimensions. Visa-free airport transit for Indian passport holders and a new higher education road map—encouraging German universities to set up campuses in India and facilitating the eth-

ical recruitment of Indian professionals—reflect Germany's demographic and labour-market imperatives, while deepening societal linkages with India.

Taken together, these initiatives align India's "Visits Bharat" ambitions with Germany's broader quest for strategic resilience. In an Indo-Pacific increasingly shaped by great-power competition, Berlin appears to view New Delhi as a critical partner in sustaining a more balanced regional order.

The momentum in India-EU ties will continue in the coming months. French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to attend the India-AU Impact Summit highlights Europe's growing engagement with India on emerging technologies. Co-chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the summit

marks a deliberate shift in global AI discourse—from abstract safety concerns to questions of developmental impact—while reinforcing India's claim that the benefits of frontier technologies must extend beyond the West.

The state visit by European Council President Antonio Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen next week will be another inflection point. Their participation as chief guests at the Republic Day celebrations and co-chairing of the 16th India-EU Summit underscore the political salience Brussels

would ease the burden on smaller airlines and encourage new entrants.

—A Mylami, Coimbatore

Erratic Trump

President Donald Trump's latest claim, amplified in a combative address at Davos, has drawn condemnation and raised alarms across the North Atlantic alliance. Coming on the heels of the capture of the Venezuelan President, who broke from his generally non-

attaches to New Delhi. The accompanying India-EU Business Forum will emphasise the economic underpinnings of the ties.

India-EU relations are thus being shaped by a convergence of strategic anxieties and economic opportunity. Shared concerns about an increasingly unstable global order, China's assertiveness, and uncertainties associated with renewed American unilateralism have nudged both sides towards closer coordination, particularly in the Indo-Pacific. Negotiations on trade, investment protection, and supply-chain resilience reflect efforts to hedge against overdependence on any single market.

Technology and sustainability are emerging as central drivers of engagement, from digital-led infrastructure and semiconductors to green hydrogen and climate finance. Yet, frictions remain, mainly over regulatory instruments such as the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and differing approaches to standards and governance. Normative divergences on human rights and regulatory practices also surface periodically, even as expanding education, mobility, and research linkages lend durability to the relationship.

In a period of systemic turbulence, both India and the EU are seeking a multipolar order that preserves their strategic autonomy amid intensifying great-power rivalry. It is this shared impulse that has brought India and Europe closer together. Given the structural forces at play, this convergence is unlikely to be transient and is set to deepen in the years ahead.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

IndiGo lessons

Apropos of "Regulating better" (FE, January 22), the IndiGo episode exposed serious gaps in oversight and the risks of heavy concentration in Indian aviation. With one airline holding over 60% market share, any operational failure disrupts lakhs of passengers and threatens the entire network. The modest ₹22.2-crore penalty is inadequate given the scale of hardship

caused. The regulator must move beyond advisories. It should release full the inquiry findings, enforce stricter monitoring of crew scheduling and buffer margins in real time, and impose meaningful penalties for repeated flight duty time limitations violations. Regular independent audits of rostering systems at major carriers would help pre-empt problems. On the competition front, rationalising aviation turbine fuel taxes

interventionist record, there is growing concern that the erratic Trump has no end game in mind. And while the US is no stranger to foreign misadventures, regime change, and violations of international law, past presidents have made it a point to at least partially align with American laws. Trump's rhetoric is now threatening to kill NATO.

—Gregory Fernandes, Mumbai

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com



A piece of board

India must eschew temptation to be a part of Trump's peace board

India, on Thursday, skipped the U.S. President Donald Trump-led "Board of Peace (BoP)" charter announcement held in Davos, although the government is said to be still discussing the invitation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi to join it. The BoP is part of the Trump administration's Phase 2 of the Gaza Peace Proposal, which is also meant to help resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict through talks on a two-state solution. This was cleared unanimously by the UN Security Council (Russia and China abstained) in November 2025 after an Israel-Hamas ceasefire. There are some reasons for India to seriously consider joining the BoP, as about 20 countries already have. India has been a principled supporter of the Palestinian cause, and a consistent provider of humanitarian assistance, and this could be an opportunity to help the brutalised Palestinian population. The decision by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Türkiye, to join may put pressure on the Modi government. The rupture in U.S.-India ties and fragility of trade negotiations maybe another cause not to rebuff Mr. Trump's invitation now, as it may invoke his ire.

Neither pragmatism nor principle dictates taking such a decision in haste, however, and a country of India's standing cannot act based on the fear of missing out on a position of influence, or punishment by the U.S. Even though the UN has backed the U.S.'s original plans, the BoP's latest structure and mandate appear to have been unilaterally altered – it does not actually mention Gaza, according to leaked versions of the charter. Mr. Trump has appointed himself as chairman, with friends and family on the executive board, and the charter proposes to extend the BoP to other conflict-resolution ventures, suggesting that it would seek to supplant the UN. Second, while the board will appoint Palestinian technical experts, it does not include the Palestinian leadership, an affront to countries that have recognised Palestine. That Mr. Netanyahu, accused of genocide by UN agencies should be included, but not the Palestinian President, adds to that injustice. For India, Pakistan's decision to join the board is a red flag, particularly if Mr. Trump decides to include the Kashmir dispute to the BoP's peace plans. The BoP's 2-tier membership, offering "permanent" membership for a "fee" of one billion dollars is another red flag. It would also be difficult for India to cavil at its troops joining the International Stabilization Force, a non-UN initiative. Without clarity, members will only be rubber stamps to Mr. Trump's arbitrary and often illegitimate diktats on the future of Palestine. New Delhi must continue to consult partners on the best way forward, particularly the Palestinians, even as it keeps its own independent counsel. Above all, India must listen to its own conscience.

Welcome deescalation

Europe and rest of the world should still be wary of U.S. moves

In a move that brings a sense of relief to European nations and NATO members, U.S. President Donald Trump, in a speech at the World Economic Forum at Davos, appeared to back down from the possibility of the use of force to acquire Greenland, an autonomous Arctic territory administered by Denmark. Simultaneously, he hit out at world leaders, including from friendly countries such as Canada, France and Switzerland. His remarks came after weeks of rising tension over his earlier proposal to impose on eight European countries a 10% tariff on "any and all goods" beginning on February 1, which was then set to increase to 25% on June 1 until an agreement was reached for the U.S. to purchase or otherwise acquire Greenland. Given the broader context of the Trump administration using military force to kidnap Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro to the U.S. and it hinting publicly at similar interventions in the affairs of Colombia, Cuba, Iran and Mexico, European nations came close to retaliating with an anti-coercion instrument that is a counter-tariff facility targeting the business of major U.S. tech firms in the EU. After Mr. Trump's Davos comments, however, the focus has shifted to what he described as "the framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland and, in fact, the entire Arctic Region". Hinting that the time frame of such a deal would be "infinite", Mr. Trump also indicated that additional discussions on Greenland are ongoing, relating to the \$175 billion Golden Dome missile defense plan, to position U.S. weapons in space.

Troubling though the strident rhetoric out of Washington was on the subject of taking over Greenland, the deeper institutional malaise that the conversations at Davos hinted at relate to the gradual breakdown of the rules-based international order. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney poignantly alluded to this dysfunction in global trading and financial systems and trends in migration and climate change mitigation policies. He said that great powers were now using economic integration as weapons, tariffs as leverage, financial infrastructure as coercion, and supply chains as vulnerabilities to be exploited. He warned a vast swathe of "middle powers" of the world that contend with the complexities of this rivalry: "There is a strong tendency for countries to go along to get along... To accommodate. To avoid trouble. To hope that compliance will buy safety. It won't." Indeed, countries such as India, which have lingering concerns in bilateral ties with the U.S. despite overall positive trends in cooperation, would do well to consider whether his words on prioritising rule of law over the use of brute force as a modus operandi on the global stage ring true at home.

A dangerous march towards a Himalayan ecocide

In 2025, which saw nearly 331 days of near-continuous climate impacts, the human cost was staggering: over 4,000 deaths attributed to climate-induced disasters in 2025 alone, with Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand bearing the heaviest toll. Towns such as Dharali, Harsil, Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Kullu, Mandi and Kishanwar were ravaged by sudden cloudbursts, landslides, and avalanches that morphed into deadly flash floods, obliterating lives and livelihoods.

This onslaught of scorching heat, catastrophic floods and land subsidence appears to be the new normal. And yet, how does one explain the government's decision to endanger Dharali and Harsil – areas recently devastated by an avalanche-turned-flash-flood – by pushing forward a massive infrastructure project that would tell nearly 7,000 Devdar trees and countless native species?

Pushing infrastructure in a disaster zone
On November 12, the Uttarakhand Forest Department approved the felling of these trees, diverting 43 hectares of forest land for the Char Dham road-widening project, with 10 hectares meant for mud dumping. This decision again relies on the flawed DL-PS (double-lane with paved shoulder) standard that mandates a 12-metre paved surface in an area demonstrably prone to disasters.

The region, located north of the Main Central Thrust (MCT), is classified as a critical zone where major infrastructure is explicitly discouraged. There are also hanging glaciers and the area is fed by the Gangotri, one of the world's fastest receding glaciers, which sustains several unstable, moraine-laden glaciers in the valley. One of these glacier avalanches contributed to the disaster in Dharali.

This raises a pivotal and urgent question: what is the true value of these trees for this region?

The Devdar (Deodar) forests are crucial ecological assets in the delicate Himalayan landscape. Their extensive root systems stabilise slopes, prevent landslides and serve as natural barriers against avalanches and glacial debris flows, safeguarding downstream communities. These forests are also essential for the water quality of the Ganga. This is important as they are situated within the Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone, a nearly 4,000-square-kilometre buffer that was established in 2012 to protect the river's last pristine stretch.

The unique antimicrobial qualities of Devdar trees (from terpenoids, essential oils, and phenolic compounds found in the wood, bark and resin) fundamentally influence river ecology. As leaf litter and organic material enter mountain streams, they inhibit harmful bacteria while promoting the development of beneficial microbial communities, resulting in a naturally regulated, biologically active river system, especially in the upper reaches where industrial pollution remains limited.

These forests also maintain cooler microclimates, regulate water temperature in snowmelt-fed streams, and help sustain dissolved oxygen levels essential for aquatic life.



Malika Bhanot is a member of Ganga Ahvan, a citizen forum working for Himalaya-Ganga conservation, and Member of the Bhagirathi Eco-sensitive Zone Monitoring Committee



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Deforestation would trigger warmer air and water, reduced oxygen, diminished bacteriophage activity, and an irreversible shift in the river's ecological character. This is why the Supreme Court, in its judgment, discouraged the felling of precious deodar trees in the area.

However, recent proposals by forest departments suggest "translocating" these ancient trees – an ecologically flawed notion. Uprooting centuries-old Devdar is tantamount to cutting them down. Their complex, site-specific ecological functions cannot be replicated elsewhere, and no suitable alternative terrain exists. Their preservation is not a matter of convenience but of environmental necessity.

A project built on falsehoods

The Char Dham Road Widening Project has been built on falsehoods. Its execution is a case study in how not to build in the Himalayas. This is evident in the bypassing of a comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment, through project fragmentation, the adoption of an incorrect road-width standard contrary to its own mandate, the destabilising practice of vertical hill-cutting on fragile slopes, and the indiscriminate dumping of mud in vital water sources.

These are the consequences – along the nearly 700 kilometres of widened road, over 800 active landslide zones have emerged. Key border routes have been closed for extended periods, and the government's touted "all-weather road" is now derisively called an "all-paiddal (all-pedal) road" by locals.

To prevent such damage, the government needed only to regulate road width and prioritise stability over excessive widening, as warned by experts. Yet the Union Minister's recently proposed remedy, which is belated and inadequate – to retrofit slopes with Swiss fibreglass bolts and wire mesh – comes eight years after large-scale destabilisation.

The fundamental failure lies not in the absence of reinforcement, but in the original engineering decision to execute excessively steep hill cuts. Cutting slopes at angles that violate the natural "angle of repose" of Himalayan geology is a profound act of either ignorance or hubris. No amount of anchoring later can rectify this intrinsic flaw that was engineered into the landscape from the outset.

The Union Government's current developmental initiatives directly contradict a key policy framework: the National Mission for Sustaining the Himalayan Ecosystem (NMSHE). Approved in 2014 under the National Action Plan on Climate Change, the NMSHE was established to protect the fragile Himalayan ecology. Its mandate includes monitoring glaciers and biodiversity, mitigating natural hazards and securing sustainable livelihoods for Himalayan communities. It was designed to build scientific capacity and guide policymakers toward genuinely sustainable development.

The government, therefore, owes the nation a clear explanation on why its actions violate its own flagship environmental policy. When *Devbhoomi* (the land of the gods) is turned against

the *Devaar*, which are believed to be abodes of the deities, this is not development. It is a profound betrayal of traditional culture, ecology and scientific reason. Better sense must prevail, and those who enable these prejudiced, mindless, and disaster-prone projects must be held accountable.

The vulnerability of the Himalayan – one of the world's most climate-sensitive landscapes – is escalating. The current snowless winters and raging forest fires in this area resonate with the conclusion of a recent study, revealing that high-altitude areas have been warming 50% faster than the global average since 1950. This accelerated warming means extreme weather events such as the Dharali disaster will become increasingly frequent and severe.

If border security, connectivity and national interest are our true objectives, then disaster resilience must take precedence over disaster-prone infrastructure. This is not a matter of ideology; it is a scientific, ecological, and economic necessity.

The primary catalyst for disasters is unsafe land use: cutting into unstable slopes for wide highways, drilling massive tunnels without adequate geological surveys, and constructing large-scale hydropower projects. These activities have been repeatedly flagged by the National Green Tribunal and other bodies. Crucially, the clearance of deodar forests removes the natural anchors that bind fragile soils, directly accelerating erosion and amplifying the risk of landslides and floods.

While this development provides the fuse, climate change acts as a powerful "risk multiplier". It intensifies the threat by creating erratic rainfall patterns, supercharging weather events and accelerating glacial melt. This leads to a dangerous "water peak phase" of increased run-off and catastrophic flash floods, which, once the glaciers have fully retreated, inevitably gives way to a prolonged phase of water scarcity and drought.

These physical pressures are compounded by unsustainable human behaviours, including unregulated tourism, unchecked vehicular traffic in fragile zones, and the absence of carrying capacity assessments or functional solid waste management plans. These symptoms point to deeper, systemic governance failures: a persistent prioritisation of short-term, economic gains over long-term disaster resilience, and a chronic inability to plan and implement genuine, science-based sustainable development policies.

The subcontinent's foundation

This ground reality solidifies the axiom that "without the Himalayas, there is no India". The range is more than just a geographical entity; it is the very foundation of the subcontinent's existence. The Himalayas have shaped India into a fertile and habitable land, while also forging a syncretic cultural identity as enduring and majestic as the mountains themselves. The continuing sequence of disasters in the Himalayas is a non-negotiable lesson in earth system science and a loud reminder that India exists because of the Himalaya.

In the ecologically vulnerable Himalayas, disaster resilience must take precedence over disaster-prone projects and infrastructure

BRICS India summit needs a green and resilient agenda

The next BRICS Summit will be held in India this year. Having hosted the G-20 (2023), infrastructure and organisational processes are in place, but India must quickly hone in on the Summit's focus. This should obviously resonate with India and BRICS, but critically be an issue that is of vital importance for the Global South.

Given its vastly increased vulnerabilities to climate change, resilience is a top priority for the South, and also underscores India's and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's global leadership on an inclusive green agenda.

Need for a stabilising force

In the Trump polar world, collaborative multilateralism is under immense stress, with climate change being particularly singled out by the United States and being called a hoax along with a visible push for more fossil fuel use. The Donald Trump administration has said that it will withdraw the U.S. from 66 international organisations, which includes the India-led International Solar Alliance. In fact, the U.S. stayed away from the COP20 in Belém, Brazil, in November 2025 – something that possibly ensured a continuation of the COP process. With the Europeans, who for long positioned themselves as climate champions, facing domestic climate fatigue and external national security priorities, there is a certain space for a stabilising force for collaborative action on sustainability and resilience. BRICS can endeavour towards this.

The acrony, BRICS, however, raises the hackles of President Trump who thinks that it is anti-American and an attempt to dislodge the dollar. Given the vast gamut of India-U.S. ties, including the imperative of an acceptable trade deal, staying clear of massive tariffs relating to



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cooperation in the Arctic is understandable, given emerging security and climate challenges, any discourse that appears to treat Greenland as a negotiable asset risks undermining the foundational principles of territorial integrity. The Greenland debate serves as a reminder that global leadership must be exercised through lawful diplomacy and mutual respect.

C.R. Rajesh, Bengaluru

Russian oil imports and ensuring a certain presidential happiness in Washington DC will certainly need a certain adroitness on the part of India at the BRICS Summit. Such diplomatic capacity was on display during the G-20 Summit in Delhi that saw a successful balancing of global geopolitics with Indian interests, including protecting its strategic autonomy through multi-alignment and leadership of the Global South.

Climate change is a common concern
At the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the old group of BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, China) has been useful and will continue to have its role but a larger grouping of major developing country players may add greater heft. This was seen in Belém to ensure that the handling of fossil fuels did not stymie development imperatives of developing countries. Climate impacts, while varying in form and intensity, are a common concern across BRICS, ranging from risks to infrastructure, health, livelihoods and ecosystems arising from permafrost thaw, pressures on the Amazon and the Himalayas, and growing vulnerabilities in coastal and riverine regions. It is in their own interest to collectively advance a stronger international agenda on adaptation, resilience, equity and sustainable development.

This role is further reinforced by several BRICS members having shouldered responsibility for steering the global climate process after the Paris Agreement came into force. Brazil, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have presided over climate conferences in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, helping safeguard momentum on climate action. A BRICS act would also be useful on a unilateral side-stepping of UNFCCC principles such as the European Union's Carbon

Border Adjustment Mechanism. An opening of a broader climate debate, including trade, was initiated at Belém.

A major outcome of the July 2025 BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro was BRICS Leaders' Framework Declaration on Climate Finance, a matter where India has been strong in articulating the demands of the Global South.

With finance being the key enabler for climate action, there is a need to include the World Bank and International Monetary Fund chiefs in the BRICS Summit. It is not the time not to treat them as "theirs (G-7 or G-20)" and not just confine BRICS to the New Development Bank. Any global push on climate finance without them is hardly possible, given the U.S.'s antipathy to climate change – a fact also reflected in how their corporates and private monies are reacting, including pulling back from Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) requirements and even 'green' bonds and other funds.

BRICS is now about Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran, and the UAE, together comprising half of the global population, around 40% of global GDP, and around 26% of global trade. Its voice and heft are considerable.

A chance for Indian to drive change

As the helmsman of BRICS this year, India is in a pivotal position to push for collaborative global action, at least as among much of the world that will join on resilience and an inclusive green agenda. This will be in its interest as well as a critical imperative for the Global South.

Moreover, geopolitically for India, a BRICS push keeps Chinese ambitions on global leadership on a green agenda in check. India's Green agenda focusing on resilience at the BRICS Summit 2026 would also resonate with Ethiopia, the host of COP22 in 2027.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The signal from Greenland

The recent discussions surrounding a prospective "Greenland deal" have raised important questions about sovereignty, international law, and responsible global diplomacy. While strategic

territorial integrity. The Greenland debate serves as a reminder that global leadership must be exercised through lawful diplomacy and mutual respect. C.R. Rajesh, Bengaluru

Spotlight on the Governor
Tamil Nadu Governor R.N. Ravi's 'walk out' from the State Assembly is yet another case of his acrimony toward the Tamil Nadu government. Also, issuing a mere press release from the Lok

Bhavan cannot be a proven document to justify his claims of his charges against the government, warranting his walk-out. Mr. Ravi's actions show a growing pattern under the current BJP-led government that uses the Lok

Governor in the non-ruling BJP States as an instrument of interference.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

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Does Trump's Greenland plan signal the end of NATO?



C. Raja Mohan
Journalist, academic, and foreign policy analyst



T.G. Suresh
Associate Professor, Centre of Political Studies, JNU

PARLEY

Days after the U.S.'s military strike on Venezuela and its capture of sitting President Nicolas Maduro, U.S. President Donald Trump intensified his push for Greenland, calling it an "absolute necessity" for U.S. national security. On January 17, he said he would impose a 10% tariff on eight European countries opposing the U.S.'s stance; he has since cancelled it. Mr. Trump's proposal reflects imperial underpinnings and tests the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s Article 5 pledge (an armed attack against one NATO member shall be considered an attack against them all). Does Mr. Trump's Greenland plan signal the end of NATO? C. Raja Mohan and T.G. Suresh discuss the question in a conversation moderated by Smriti Sudesh. Edited excerpts:

Mr. Trump wants to acquire Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark, which is not a NATO member. How do we square this with NATO's foundational pledge?

C. Raja Mohan: I don't think Mr. Trump has time for niceties – that there is a 77-year-old alliance with a shared commitment. For him, this is the new unilateralism of the U.S. There is no real respect for international law. He is a president who is unconstrained at home and feels he can do whatever he likes abroad as well. And since the rest of the world depends on the U.S. for so much, barring China, no other major power has challenged his policies. There is some gap between his demand for Greenland and Denmark's rejection of the demand. In between these extremes, there are ways in which he could get his way and declare a victory, while also saving face for Denmark in some form.

Why does he want Greenland?

T.G. Suresh: Besides Mr. Trump's well-stated objective that Greenland is an absolute necessity for American security, other factors are often cited, including control over shipping routes and access to minerals in Greenland. The first is the Northern Sea Route, which connects the Atlantic and the Pacific via the Russian-Norwegian frontiers and runs along the Siberian coastline. The second is the Northwest Passage, a long-envisioned sea route running from the Atlantic through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. If influencing shipping routes is the real concern, the question is, why does the U.S. need Greenland at all, since the Northwest Passage runs through Canadian waters and ultimately connects to the Chukchi Sea?

There is already a well-developed political and institutional arrangement governing the Arctic geography. It is therefore not clear why Mr. Trump is focusing specifically on Greenland.

The bedrock of NATO is the U.S.'s security



Sunset at Nuuk, Greenland. AFP

guarantees. If the U.S. itself threatens to violate NATO's sovereignty, what message does it send to smaller NATO members which are suspicious of Russia's actions?

CRM: It sends a troubling message to most members of NATO. This is because they have long lived under the assumption that, whatever happens, the U.S. will remain their most reliable security partner. Despite all the problems over the last eight years, NATO has held together, largely because of the U.S.'s political commitment to European security.

However, over the last decade, especially during Mr. Trump's first term, this assumption has been questioned. He has openly challenged the relevance of NATO, arguing that the alliance is "ripping off" the U.S. and that European allies are a burden on American security. Still, during his first term, his administration was broader-based, and the traditional foreign policy establishment continued to shape policy.

This time, that constraint no longer exists. The rise of the MAGA (Make America Great Again) movement reflects a world view that sees alliances as largely useless and believes that the U.S. should look after itself. This camp also questions the long-held assumption that the U.S. must act as the gendarme of the global order, or that American leadership is essential for maintaining global security.

That also leads to the conclusion that the U.S.'s interests lie primarily in the western hemisphere, and that Washington must therefore focus on securing its own immediate strategic space. From Mr. Trump's perspective, gaining control over Greenland appears to be part of a broader effort to assert dominance over that hemisphere. But his position goes even further. He is not merely seeking influence or a security role; he wants sovereign control over Greenland. This is a wake-up call for Europeans.

At the same time, Mr. Trump has shown a willingness to negotiate directly with Russia on the Ukraine war, often without European leaders at the table. For him and his political base, the idea that NATO is a sacred obligation that the U.S. must bear no longer holds. The



The U.S. is needed not only because of its military capabilities, but also because Europe has had the luxury of neglecting its own defence for decades. Also, without the U.S., the divisions in Europe will sharpen further.

C. RAJA MOHAN

challenge for Europe, then, is on finding ways of coming to terms with this new reality.

With the U.S., Russia, and China all increasing their footprint, how do you view the Arctic's rising prominence?

TGS: Across the world, major powers are competing to secure access to resources because prevailing development models have become increasingly energy-intensive. The Arctic has therefore emerged as a region of growing interest not only for Arctic states, but also non-Arctic ones. Activity is increasing around both shipping routes and energy and resource extraction. Ideally, global discussions on the Arctic should focus on melting ice and environmental consequences. Instead, we are seeing intense competition among major powers to influence or gain access to the region. This raises an important question: what has the U.S. actually done in this regard? Russia has invested in Arctic development for centuries, building extensive port infrastructure along the Arctic coastline and maintaining a large fleet of icebreakers, many of them nuclear-powered.

But neither the White House nor major American firms, particularly energy companies, appear willing to make long-term fixed investments. This is why I do not foresee a major disruption of existing Arctic arrangements, which are largely led by Russia in partnership with Denmark, Canada, and other Arctic states. Russia is watching Mr. Trump's Arctic ambitions closely. While a U.S. move that weakens NATO would suit Moscow, stronger American presence in the Arctic would mean long-term strategic competition. How do you assess this Russian dilemma?

CRM: Russia is a major power in many ways. It is arguably the most important power in the Arctic Sea. What happens to Russia's position will depend to a great extent on the nature of the relationship between Russia and the U.S. In fact, in the conversations on Ukraine peace between the U.S. and Russia, one of the key points under discussion has been collaboration in the Arctic. Mr. Trump has repeatedly said that he wants a decent relationship with Russia and that both countries can jointly exploit natural resources. Much therefore depends on whether Russia and the U.S. can reach a deal on Ukraine and move towards a different kind of

relationship. If that happens, they could work together in the Arctic. But if they do not, and Mr. Trump gains control over Greenland, the contest between the two is likely to be quite vigorous.

From oil in Venezuela to rare earths in Greenland, is the U.S. turning to force and coercion as a tool for resource extraction?

TGS: Mr. Trump shows a preference for an economical approach to solving problems. Even when he talks about places like Venezuela, there is a visible aversion to putting boots on the ground or taking risks that come with major, disruptive interventions. Two things stand out clearly. First, his personal approach: he wants quick outcomes, what he calls a "deal", achieved even in an economical time frame. Second, even if the U.S. were to attempt to control or establish sovereign ownership over Greenland, it would be extremely difficult. History shows that in regions stretching from the North Atlantic to the coldest parts of the Arctic, it is very hard to override the will of the people. Mr. Trump's economical, deal-oriented approach is likely to remain the final determining factor.

As Europe boosts defence spending amid the Ukraine war and its ongoing reliance on the U.S., Mr. Trump appears to be distancing America from NATO. How do you assess this?

CRM: This is like a situation where your protector becomes your tormentor. Mr. Trump's threat of leaving NATO and its potential consequences have made Europe nervous. Faced with what Europe sees as grave existential risks, it is willing to please and accommodate Mr. Trump. This also explains Europe's approach to the Greenland issue: most of its leaders would prefer to persuade Denmark to find a way that allows Mr. Trump to gain control over Greenland, while at the same time urging the U.S. to leave Denmark a fig leaf – something that avoids an outcome that appears overtly humiliating.

Can NATO survive Mr. Trump's second term?

CRM: No. That is precisely why European leaders want to keep the Americans in. The U.S. is needed not only because of its military capabilities, but also because Europe has had the luxury of neglecting its own defence for decades. Even if European governments now follow through on their promises to spend massively on defence, it will take time. Also, Europe's history shows that it is internally divided. Without the U.S., there is a real danger that these divisions will sharpen further.



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NOTEBOOK

The mystery of Court 10

Court 10 in the Supreme Court is a pause — an oasis of silence which has nothing to offer to the scribe, and easily overlooked

Krishnadas Rajagopal

Deep in the recesses of the Supreme Court is Court 10. Unlike its sibling courtrooms, which are overflowing beehives of disputes settled, won, lost, or adjourned, Court 10 is empty and closed. It has not witnessed objects being flung at the Bench or people nodding off to scholarly arguments from the Bar. If Court 10 could speak, it may have quoted Pierre-Albert Birot's 'The world pulse beats beyond my door'.

As court reporters, our first task of the day — or the previous night, if one is conscientious — is to check the cause list or the list of cases for the day. There are long rows of cases to watch and mark — some of them high-stakes. But they are all listed before the Benches of the other 16 courts; Court 10 is a white space on the computer screen. For a reporter struggling to make decisions about which cases to sit through and cover, Court 10 provides a much-needed break in the flow.

I have made some attempt to solve the closed-door mystery of Court 10, but only managed to draw hemns and haws. A few looked at me blank-faced. Some gave me quizzical smiles. A few even turned combative: "Don't you have anything better to do today?" One of them dithered: "Never thought about it. Have to find out. Let you know". And off they all went, with not a moment to spare.

A kind soul invited me to come look inside Court 10. But I didn't make the appointment, having convinced myself that I was far too busy for trifles.

A "highly-placed source", as they are often called in reporting terms, said a pillar stands awkwardly inside the court room, making it difficult to function there.

Google, my next best source, informed me that Kerala High Court had "renamed" one of its court rooms 12A. Then, Google did a Shashi Tharoor on me, informing me that the fear of number 13 is called "triskadekaphobia".

Technology has changed our practice of court reporting. Hearings can be watched in isolation, in the comfort of personal spaces. Gone are the days when reporters would dash from one court room to another to catch the important bits of a hearing. I have outrun stalwarts in crowded court corridors, only to realize, once inside a courtroom, that the 'important case' was happening next door.

I would have probably cracked the Court 10 mystery in those days, pacing up and down before its closed doors. I might have played Sherlock, hunting for clues on my knees, or a Scout sneaking along the shuttered Radley home in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Even Mr. Satterthwaite's method in Agatha Christie's *The Man from the Sea* could have worked — opening the door, only to find a beautiful, sad woman dreamily gazing at the deep blue. But none of that is possible. For one, there are no windows in Court 10, shuttered or otherwise.

The Supreme Court generates news in rapid succession. Amid the frenzy, Court 10 is a pause — an oasis of silence which has nothing to offer to the scribe, and easily overlooked. There are other such spaces too. The right wing of the court has a broad balcony lined with neo-classical pillars overlooking a lawn. It is bordered with beds of flowers. Here, a lawyer can be seen munching a sandwich or a court staffer can be seen taking an afternoon stroll. Court reporters are now distanced from this balcony because of video conferencing.

Postscript: Yesterday's cause list showed that Justice Vipul M. Pancholi would preside in Court 10. "Great," I said to myself. "Just when I thought I had something. The Supreme Court has a way of doing this to you." Later in the day, I logged into the Court's display board and looked at Court 10. I was not surprised. It read: "Not in session".

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PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Taking the lead



Children who are part of road safety patrol take part in a Republic Day parade rehearsal at the Shivaji Park ground in Mumbai. EMMANUEL YOGINI

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 23, 1976

Centre studying take-over of foreign drug firms

New Delhi, Jan. 22: Take-over of multinational companies producing pharmaceuticals as recommended by the Hathi Commission report is "under the consideration of the Government", the Minister of Chemical and

Fertilizers, Mr. P.C. Sethi, told the Lok Sabha today. The question, he said, was a "complex" one. Mr. Sethi was replying to a discussion on the report raised by CPI members Ramavtar Shastri and Mr. Hiren Mukherjee.

A powerful plea for early implementation of the Hathi Commission report was made by several members.

Initiating the discussion on the report Mr. Ramavtar Shastri criticised the activities of multi-national firms in the industry and called for their takeover.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 23, 1926

Yet another "cure"

In "The Daily Herald" received by this mail we find: Dr. Smallpage, a young Sydney practitioner, claims to have found an effective serum for the cure of consumption.

He has offered to hand over to the Australian people the formula for the preparation of the serum and to instruct medical men in its use for the treatment of poor people free of charge.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Percentage plunge in IndiGo's quarter net profit

78 in per cent. India's largest airline, IndiGo, on Thursday reported a 78% decline in the December quarter net profit at ₹549.1 crore as flight disruptions and implementation of the new Labour Code took a toll on its earnings. It reported a net profit of ₹549.1 crore in October-December quarter, compared with ₹2,448.8 crore earnings in the year-ago period. REUTERS

Average congestion level in Bengaluru in 2025

74.4 in per cent. Bengaluru has been ranked the second most congested city globally in 2025, with an average congestion level of 74.4%, according to TomTom's 2025 Traffic Index. It placed Mexico City at the top, followed by Bengaluru and Dublin. In Bengaluru, the average congestion level rose 1.7% points compared to the previous year. PTI

Percentage increase in India's coffee exports in 2025

22.5 in per cent. India's coffee exports rose in value terms by 4.47% to ₹2,058.6 million in the 2025 calendar year, but declined in volume by 4.47% to 3.84 lakh tonnes, Coffee Board data showed. In volume terms, the shipments declined from 4.02 lakh tonnes in 2024. India ranks seventh globally in coffee production and fifth in coffee exports. PTI

Missing persons reunited with family by Haryana police

17,000 of the 17,000 missing persons, Haryana Police reunited 13,529 adults with their families over the last year. These included 4,130 men and 9,399 women who had been separated from their homes. Over the past year, Haryana Police traced and connected more than 17,000 missing persons with their families. PTI

People likely to experience severe hunger in Nigeria

35 million. The UN World Food Programme said on Tuesday that more than a million people in northeastern Nigeria could lose access to emergency food and nutrition aid within weeks unless funding is secured, as violence and hunger surge in the region. The food agency said in a statement it will sharply scale back assistance. PTI

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The limits of household stability

India's growth story rests on aggregate comfort, but a closer look shows households saving less, borrowing more, and absorbing risks once shared more broadly, beneath stable growth and steady consumption, a growing fragility builds in household finances

ECONOMIC NOTES

Deepanshu Mohan

With only a couple of weeks left before the Finance Minister tables the next Union Budget, the aggregate markers of macroeconomic comfort in India's growth story may appear to be in place, where average economic growth remains strong in relative comparison to global standards, even amid the heightened uncertainty afflicting most other nations.

Yet this story of projected confidence rests on a partial reading of the aggregate data, which veils a deeper, more unsettling reality in India's economic fundamentals and their governing dynamics. A closer look at recent household finances data suggests that India's growth is increasingly being underwritten by households that are, on average, saving much less and borrowing more, while quietly absorbing economic risks that were once shared more broadly. This can, of course, increase household debt, especially among vulnerable and low-income groups, who haven't really gained in employment opportunities or higher incomes over the last few years.

A misleading comfort
The Reserve Bank of India's Financial Stability Report (December 2025), read alongside its Annual Report 2024-25 and recent Budget documents, points to a shift that deserves attention precisely because it does not yet resemble a crisis, but exhibits enough to merit a red flag.

Chart 1.45 of the Financial Stability Report is frequently used to support the claim that India's household sector remains financially stable. Household debt stood at 41.3% of GDP as of March 2025, far lower than levels observed in many emerging market peers, including China, Malaysia, and Thailand. Additionally, the increase has been relatively gradual rather than abrupt, rising from roughly 36% of GDP in mid-2021 to slightly over 41% by early 2025. It proves that there is no household debt crisis in the traditional sense in India. Excessive leverage or an imminent threat to financial stability is not evident.

However, there are limits to this assurance. Debt-to-GDP ratios demonstrate the extent of household borrowing in relation to the economy, but they do not explain why households are taking on debt or whether they will be able to pay it off over time.

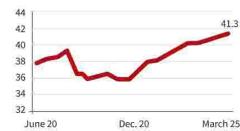
In the present situation, that distinction is important. According to the RBI's Annual Report 2024-25, real income growth has been uneven, especially outside formal employment and high-productivity sectors. In the meantime, overall consumption has held up well. Households must make other adjustments when consumption holds up despite weak or uneven income growth. Borrowing has become a more common way to make that adjustment.

Credit as a cushion
In this way, a change in the function of credit itself is reflected in the increase in household debt. Borrowing is being used more to close income and expense gaps than to finance the creation of assets. Even moderate debt levels can become a source of vulnerability when they substitute for income growth and



Chart 1.45 A*: Household debt has risen steadily, reflecting greater reliance on borrowing

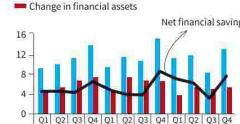
India's household debt (Per cent of GDP)



*The RBI's Financial Stability Report's Chart 1.45 is frequently used to support the claim that India's household sector is financially stable.

Chart 1.50 A: Savings have turned volatile as liabilities grow faster than assets

Change in financial liabilities
Change in financial assets



savings rather than complement them. That question depends not on how much households owe today, but on how debt, income, and savings are evolving together, an issue that becomes central to assessing the economy ahead of the Budget.

Both sides of the balance sheet are simultaneously captured in Chart 1.50. Financial liabilities accounted for 41.3% of GDP in March 2025, while gross household financial assets stood at 106.6% of GDP. There is no indication that liabilities have surpassed assets, and households continue to be net holders of financial wealth. It is simple to conclude that household finances are sound based only on this.

Examining the flow data is the only way to see the stress. In recent quarters, net financial savings have drastically fluctuated and decreased. Net financial savings recovered to 7.6% of GDP in the last quarter of 2024-25, but this came after a compression to about 3.4% of GDP in the preceding quarter. The quicker accumulation of financial liabilities compared to financial assets is the direct cause of this volatility, according to the RBI.

There are obvious ramifications to this pattern. It indicates a more concerning change in domestic behaviour. Although households continue to save, a growing portion of

Union Budget 2026 will be framed understandably as a continuation of macroeconomic stability achieved through fiscal discipline and investment-led growth. However, stability that depends on households taking out loans to maintain demand is not self-sustaining and merits a closer look at options which can enable disposable income for households

THE GIST

India's growth rests on aggregate comfort, but a closer look shows households saving less, borrowing more, and quietly absorbing economic risks once shared more broadly.

Household debt is not yet a crisis, but uneven income growth, rising liabilities, and volatile net financial savings point to a growing fragility beneath stable consumption.

As fiscal policy priorities investment and discipline, risk is being reallocated to households, making the balance between growth, demand, and household stability central before Budget 2026.

Chart B: India's debt remains low versus peers, but this comparison masks domestic stress

Household debt of EMEs (March 2025) (Per cent of GDP)

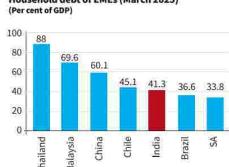
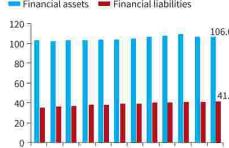


Chart C: Assets exceed liabilities, but household financial buffers are thinning

Financial assets
Financial liabilities



that savings is being offset by new borrowing.

As a result, headline financial wealth can continue growing while the buffer that shields households from job shocks, income losses, and rising interest rates gradually deteriorates. A growing fragility lies beneath what appears stable in aggregate.

Why households are borrowing more

A more comprehensive fiscal and policy configuration that systematically transfers risk from the State to households is the cause of the increase in household borrowing. According to the RBI's State Finances: A Study of Budgets 2024-25, State governments have prioritised capital expenditure while limiting revenue expenditure.

Committed expenditures – interest payments, pensions, and salaries – now account for between 30 and 32% of State revenue receipts, leaving little space for income support or countercyclical transfers. States have actually become less responsive to household income stress while also becoming fiscally leaner.

At the Union level, the Budget at a Glance 2025-26 shows a continued emphasis on public investment, with capital expenditure budgeted at ₹11.2 lakh crore and effective capital expenditure at ₹15.5 lakh crore. This

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BIBLIOGRAPHY



Art critic and writer John Berger. AFP

John Berger never stopped experimenting with form and voice

In the centenary year of the great English art critic and writer, a look at a career spent insisting that changing our perspectives could change the world; Berger's influential books, including the acclaimed *Ways of Seeing*, are about history, people, and revealing the illusion of objectivity

Vasudevan Mukund

There's a way to see yourself in the world, and write about it, without putting yourself at its centre. To write about history and place and people and in the course of that make yourself visible. It's an unselfish but also beautiful way. The English art critic and writer John Berger's famous book, *Ways of Seeing* – which he "made" with Peter Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb, and Richard Hollis – taught me this. (I'm obviously not such a good writer.)

Ways of Seeing dissects consumer culture like a surgeon explaining each incision as she makes it. Here's the oil painting that taught us to desire objects. Here's the advertisement that inherited this language. There's a woman in this frame because she is to be looked at (thus exposing the male gaze). The product in the catalogue exists to complete you.

However, Berger doesn't pretend to stand outside the book's own frame, using "we" to implicate himself in the looking. When he writes "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe", the gaze is turned inwards, to reveal the critic in his own viewfinder. *Ways of Seeing* reveals the visual machinery of persuasion by making Berger's own machinery visible. Each chapter strips away more layers of mystification, glamour, and, crucially, the myths of genius to reveal beneath it all the act of looking. It's Berger looking at paintings, looking at women looking at

themselves being looked at.

Radical gesture

Consumer culture thrives on invisibility – the advertisement wants you to forget it was made, forget someone chose this angle, this light, this juxtaposition – and Berger reverses it. It's a radical gesture for admitting that critique has a body and a location, much as the thing being critiqued.

The influence of *Ways of Seeing* extended far beyond art history to reshape how critics in many disciplines understood their own practice. The book allowed generations of writers to abandon the pretence of omniscient detachment. His prose is itself accessible and as an author he's willing to question established hierarchies of taste, features that together democratised criticism by showing that rigorous analysis doesn't demand jargon or 'objectivity'.

This is why the book's discourse can be applied to almost any endeavour. (That the title also recalls Raymond Williams's statement about the mass media helps: "There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.") For instance, the book was my gateway to traditional notions of scientific objectivity in science writing. The feminist scholar Sandra Harding among others has argued that scientists should openly acknowledge how their values and perspectives shape research, rather than claim their stance is completely neutral. Donna Haraway's concept of 'situated knowledges' rejects

what she called the "god trick" of seeing everything from nowhere, proposing instead that knowledge comes from specific, embodied positions.

Hidden frames

When we call something objective, we're really saying we believe we've managed rather than eliminated certain epistemic risks arising due to human imperfections. Observation changes what's observed and scientists pretending otherwise perform the same mystification Berger saw in art criticism: using authority to conceal. True objectivity, the kind that emerges regardless of who does the observing, exists only in vanishingly rare circumstances – when an observer's position, tools, assumptions, funding sources, career anxieties, and cultural moment genuinely don't matter.

How often does that happen in science? In medicine? In research on human behaviour, climate, ecosystems, and public health? The observer is always there yet the frames remain hidden, and to see them has been to become impertinent.

Berger applied this particular impertinence to the natural world in his 1980 essay 'Why Look at Animals?'. He argued that the way we view animals today, especially in zoos, is a monument to a relationship that capitalism has destroyed. Just as the art critic must acknowledge the gallery, the naturalist must acknowledge the cage. Berger observed that in the zoo the animal is

rendered marginal: it's there to be seen yet it can't return the look. We drift from cage to cage like consumers in a department store, observing creatures that have been, in his words, "immunised to encounter". It illustrates how a claim to educational or scientific visibility can actually serve to make the subject invisible, reducing a living being to a token of its species.

Spiritual orphan

Berger also used 'impertinence' later in his life as the title and substance of an essay in his last book, *Confabulations* (2016). He wrote about being a spiritual orphan as he learnt that hierarchies were theatre and authority was costume. In fact, "I propose a conspiracy of orphans," he wrote. "We exchange winks. We reject hierarchies. All hierarchies. We take the shit of the world for granted and we exchange stories about how we

nevertheless get by. We are impertinent."

It's the idea that honesty is the only kind of objectivity that matters.

Confabulations was published in the final year of Berger's life and is proof that he never stopped experimenting with form and voice. The book meditates on the artist's responsibility to witness with luminous and precise prose that moves effortlessly between the intimate and the universal. Reading it feels like spending time with a generous intelligence. And it's a fitting culmination to a career spent insisting that changing how we see could change the world.

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

Senegal won this year's African Cup of Nations, beating hosts Morocco last Sunday. Here is a quiz on Africa's prestigious tournament

Vighnesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION 1

How many countries participated in the first version of the tournament in 1957, and what is the current number of slots?

QUESTION 2

Which country was initially slated to host this year's tournament, but was stripped of its hosting rights due to concerns over readiness?

QUESTION 3

Name the most successful nation in the tournament, and the number of cups it has won.

QUESTION 4

What animal is the mascot of this year's tournament, and what is it called?

QUESTION 5

Name the three countries that have qualified for the coming World Cup but did not play in the AFCON?



Visual Question: Name this Moroccan player who won the golden boot at the tournament, but missed a penalty in the final? AFP

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz:

1. Who was Norma McCorvey? **Ans:** Norma McCorvey, also known by the pseudonym Jane Roe, was the plaintiff in the landmark 1973 American legal case *Roe v. Wade*.
2. Which U.S. state was the first one who ruled in Jane Roe's favour? **Ans:** Texas
3. In 1821, this U.S. state passed the first state statute legalising abortion in the United States. **Ans:** Connecticut
4. This was a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court in which the Court upheld the right to have an abortion as established by the "essential holding" of Roe v. Wade (1973). **Ans:** Planned Parenthood vs. Casey
5. In 2022, which decision ended the protection of abortion rights by the U.S. Constitution and allowed individual states to regulate any aspect of abortion not preempted by federal law? **Ans:** Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization

Visual: Identify this American lawyer who participated in two notable U.S. court cases of the 20th century. **Ans: Henry Wade**

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan | Sukdev Shet | Sunil Madhavan | Tito Shiladitya | Sadhan Panda



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

"You don't look happy. What's wrong?"

"Sujatha says that I am still tied to my mother's apron strings."

"What does she mean by that?"

"It means that he is controlled or influenced by her."

"In other words, this person does whatever his mother tells him to do."

"Exactly! The mother dominates him completely. Here's an example."

"Seetha refused to marry Suresh

because she felt he was still tied to his mother's apron strings."

"My cousin Gayathri claims that most Indian men are tied to their mother's apron strings."

"I know a man who is tied to his wife's apron strings."

"Meaning the man is controlled by his wife?"

"Right again!"

"My uncle spent the first twenty five years of his life tied to his mother's apron strings."

"He probably spent the next fifty years tied to his wife's apron strings."

"How did you know?"

"Just a guess!"

"Can I say, most Congressmen are tied to Sonia's apron strings?"

"Why don't you say Sujatha?"

"I don't want to talk about her. By the way, is it wrong to say off the lights?"

"We in India tend to say, on the lights and off the lights, but a native speaker of English would say turn on/turn off the lights."

"I see,..."

"...it is also possible to say switch on/switch off the lights."

"My mother switches off the lights at 10:30."

"My nephews always forget to turn off the fan."

"It's been ages since I turned the radio on."

"Will you be meeting Sujatha tomorrow?"

"Not if I can help it! But I will be seeing her father, though."

"He's coming to our school tomorrow. He's going to talk about how to become a pilot."

"He's been a pilot for a long time, hasn't he?"

"Yes, he has. He has flown different kinds of planes..."

"...aircraft."

"What?"

"He has flown different types of aircraft. You see, the plural of aircraft is aircraft."

"I see."

"Here's an example. There were ten aircraft waiting to take off."

"In the accident, both aircraft were damaged."

"Because of the heavy fog, the tower wasn't allowing any aircraft to land."

"Since the plural of aircraft is aircraft, I guess that's the reason why a ship which carries aircraft is called an aircraft carrier rather than aircraft carrier."

"That's right!"

"I wonder if Sujatha's father has ever been on an aircraft carrier."

"I only hope he doesn't bore us like the speaker we had last week. The man spoke about nuclear physics and it was full of jargons. It was...."

"...it was full of jargon, not jargons."

"Is jargon an uncountable noun?"

"Yes, that's right! People who like to impress others use a lot of jargon."

Published in The Hindu on May 25, 1999

Word of the day

Anodyne:

unlikely to offend anyone or cause them to disagree

Synonyms:

bland, neutral, harmless

Usage:

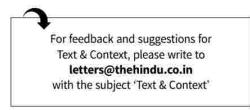
The minister issued an anodyne statement after the controversy.

Pronunciation:

newsth.wlive.anodynepro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/ænədæn/



♦ The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAM NATH GOENKA

IN 1932 ♦

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL.

Two big speeches, what got lost in between

AT THE World Economic Forum in Davos, leaders of two countries that have benefited from the so-called “rules-based order” gave the world starkly different frames of their demis. Mark Carney, Prime Minister of Canada, made an unflinching assessment of the current moment, which he described as one not of transition but of rupture. While recognising the hard realities presented by America’s unilateralism, Carney suggested a possible roadmap for middle powers. US President Donald Trump, speaking just hours after Carney, confirmed this crisis. He glorified colonialism and spoke of American interests and hegemony, especially in the Western Hemisphere, as paramount. He denigrated non-Western nationalities and people, even as he congratulated himself on ending hostilities. The Davos chattering class instantly framed the two speeches as this versus that. A few things got lost.

Carney’s “values-based realism” draws from a particular context. As the Canadian PM acknowledged, “For decades, countries like Canada prospered under what we called the rules-based international order. We joined its institutions, praised its principles, and benefited from its predictability. We could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection.” Long before the American-led order, “developed” countries benefited from centuries of imperialism at the expense of those that are still “developing”. This context forms the backdrop of Carney’s call for middle powers to, in essence, forge multilaterals to increase their negotiating power. Trump, for his part, was clear about turning back the clock. But parse through his bombastic rhetoric, and there was some pragmatism, too. He made it clear that the US would not use force to take over Greenland (before changing his mind was on the table hours later). He also sought to draw a line between the West and the rest, the people dying in Ukraine “who look like us” and the “criminal” migrants and those who made Europe “unrecognisable” (read: brown, black, non-Christian).

It is to Carney’s credit that he called the bully by his name. He is also right to leverage his country’s considerable resources—the Arctic economy, critical minerals, energy reserves, “the most educated population in the world”. But the burden on India, and other countries that have been at the receiving end of a “rules-based order” they had little role in shaping, is more complex. Pulling people out of poverty and ensuring they have opportunity is, for many in the Global South, the place where values and realism coincide and collide. Canada, and like-minded countries, must keep that perspective in mind as they build new solidarities. And perhaps, in Washington, the realisation may dawn that power that is sustainable is rarely belligerent.

News TV is racing to a bigoted bottom

ITS TELLING—and disquieting—that nearly 60 per cent of the orders passed in the last three years by the News Broadcasting & Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA) were against programmes that violated its ethics code on communal harmony. An analysis of the NBDSA orders since 2023 in this newspaper points to a brutal and cynical race to the bottom in a time of churn. Faced with intensifying competition in a far more crowded and fragmented media landscape than before, television channels and digital broadcasters have chosen the path of maximum shrillness and least resistance, becoming megaphones of the powerful—and the hateful. In the social media age, where no one needs a TV studio to broadcast to the world, they are trying to mimic its worst aspects. Because it rewards extremes, outrage and spectacle, channels and platforms are jostling each other to abandon responsibility and to frame news in ways that purvey divisive spectres and stereotypes.

There are high costs of this abdication. There is an unchecked sharpening of polarisation and shrinking spaces for deliberation and dialogue. In a plural and diverse democracy constitutionally committed to protecting the freedom of citizens to profess, practise and propagate their religion, this backsliding is worrying. But the price must be paid not just in terms of the fraying of the larger promise of democracy. It must be paid, too, in terms of an erosion of trust in every institution that these channels and platforms claim to be part of. Their pursuit of viewership at all costs erodes the “own” and the “mediac’s” credibility. This is visible, today, in the declining TV audiences and increasing irrelevance of these channels with clickbait images, gladiatorial contests and hate-filled screens. It is visible, too, in growing signs of the citizen’s disengagement with a public sphere of shared understandings.

It is welcome that the self-regulatory body has called out the targeting of the minority. It has done well to draw attention to these attempts to paint a community as the Other, as singular, aggressive and conservative. But, in the end, the NBDSA can only prod and nudge gently. The responsibility of calling a halt to this dismal noise that pretends to be news must be owned more widely—beginning with those who own these studios.

Japanese Ambassador uses hands, shows way

WHEN TRAVELLING is reduced to an item on a bucket list and #wanderlust serves as a mere stepping stone to greater social media clout, a simple act can be a reminder of what it really means to be in another land whose riches, to quote the writer Pico Iyer, are differently dispersed. One such act was the choice made by Japan’s Ambassador to India, on a recent visit with his team to Delhi’s Andhra Bhawan, to decline the use of a spoon to eat the canteen’s justly famous Biriyani. Seated before a fragrant plateful, he used his hands and emulated the Indian diners around him.

This is soft diplomacy done well, as the virality of the visit’s video has shown. Warmth responds to warmth, an understanding that is lost amidst the loud chest-beating of today’s global politics. And what better context for this than a meal? Long before McDonald’s, food was already a carrier of ideas and beliefs, trailing revolutions and reinventions in its wake. If one outcome of this long history of chum is the global menu of the 21st century on which nothing—the other is the recognition that hierarchy has no room at the dining table.

In a world beset by growing provincialism, and a fortress mentality that narrows the vision to only that which can be seen through an arrow slit, a simple gesture from the representative of a country with its own elaborate dining etiquette becomes a call to widen the aperture and invite differences of every kind into the frame.

Trump is succeeding because of leaders who want to be little Trumps

THERE IS something extraordinarily myopic and energetic about the international community’s response to Donald Trump’s transformation of world politics from an imperfect but relatively restrained set of power relations into a wager on his imperious personal judgement. One year into his presidency, the surprise is not that Trump is imperial or authoritarian. The disappointment is the absence of a serious global pushback. Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney has thrown down the gauntlet, describing this as a moment of rupture. Europe may finally be stirred after Trump’s threat to Greenland; Countries like India exhibit a sulky but ineffectual resistance. But by and large, capitulation has triumphed over meaningful resistance. This failure demands explanation.

The usual explanations do not hold much water. One claim is, as Carney suggested, no one is willing to defend the old liberal international order because no such order ever truly existed. Great-power exceptionalism destroyed it. The world’s acquiescence to the horrors in Gaza decisively buried any remaining moral authority it might have had. But the charge of liberal hypocrisy would be serious only if there was concerted global action to replace it with something fairer and equitable. Instead, what we are getting is greater comfort with international nihilism.

Even if one has no attachment to liberal internationalism, there are compelling moral reasons to resist Trump far more forcefully. His wrecking-ball approach has infected international strategic stability into the global order. We might not care about norms or decaying interna-

tional institutions. But Trump’s actions have significantly eroded the prospects for stable great-power relations.

The most damaging aspect of Trump’s coveting of Greenland is not merely the threat of territorial annexation or resource exploitation. One might dismiss that, cynically, as Denmark’s problem. Nor is it only the further weakening of international law. The greater danger is that Trump is placing great-power competition on an escalation ladder that will be exceedingly difficult to dismount. In both Venezuela and Greenland, the ostensible rationale is to deny China and Russia strategic space. But this is not a signal about spheres of influence; it is a signal of escalating confrontation.

Even if such moves marginally strengthen the United States’ positional advantage in specific areas in the short run, they raise escalation risks everywhere else. They communicate not merely that the United States will resist China’s rise, but that it will not even seek a *modus vivendi* of managed rivalry. Trump’s actions do not reduce the risks of great-power conflict; they intensify them. The annexation of Greenland would not be a territorial grab from Europe alone; it would amount to something closer to a declaration of hot war on the existing world order. For these reasons, there are strong realist grounds for a robust international pushback, even for those to whom the liberal international order holds no appeal.

Trump is redefining the rules of the international system by normalising unilateral territorial revisionism under the banner of strategic denial. It is an escalation signal that lowers the threshold for confrontation everywhere

strategic denial. The justification is the same: Preventing China or Russia from gaining influence. But this is not a classic balance-of-power manoeuvre; it is an escalation signal that lowers the threshold for confrontation everywhere. It reduces the incentives for every kind of cooperation, including arms control and the collective governance of the Arctic. Global wars rarely begin with grand designs. They begin when misunderstandings multiply, and leaders gamble that escalation can be controlled. We are in that situation now.

Perhaps we have been lulled by Trump’s own climbdowns. He does not really mean to play this game of exclusion and encirclement; after all, China forced him to retreat, and a *modus vivendi* may yet be possible. But this explanation does not hold water. We should remember that even if Trump retreats, the pattern of his behaviour still projects a willingness to test limits through maximalist threats. This is a recipe for volatility. Countries cannot afford to assume future climbdowns. Global stability depends on shared understandings of red lines. Trump’s episodic retreats do not reaffirm those understandings; they corrode them. They are tactical reversals compelled by resistance. That distinction explains why it is foolish to think that a *modus vivendi* with Trump is possible.

Perhaps there is another explanation. The lack of state capacity, Europe, as it is discovering, cannot realistically confront the United States. Building the institutions and power necessary to do so will take years. India faces a similar reality. But this only explains part of the story. It

does not account for the near-total absence of effort to forge an international coalition against Trump.

In the early months of Trump’s presidency, it was not irrational to hope that bilateral deals rather than collective action might better manage risk. Many countries assumed that the greater threat was not American overreach but abandonment. Europe feared it in Ukraine; Southeast Asia feared losing a balancer against China. But two truths are now unavoidable. First, the dangers of abandonment are eclipsed by the systemic risks the United States now poses to global peace and stability. Second, the United States can no longer be counted on as a trustworthy partner.

The world had become too psychologically dependent on the United States. Trump can act as a patriarch because we have put the US in that position. Much of the world, even in the face of Trump’s perfidy, is behaving like errant children, seeking their father’s good graces. The United Kingdom’s responses to Trump are a perfect example of this. But there might be another explanation. You look at risks of war increasing everywhere, in Africa, in West Asia now, given rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and between India and Pakistan. Perhaps Trump is succeeding because the world is full of leaders wanting to be little Trumps. We are not resisting him because we relish the permissions he is putting in place. The universalisation of narcissism and freedom from norms may be the newest form of American internationalism. All risks are damned.

The writer is contributing editor, The Indian Express

Behind the shiny facade, the cracks in the city



ASHOK
LAVASA

Grief, rage and despair are the usual responses to a tragedy. Personal loss often gives way to collective outrage against systemic lapses, and this emotion often turns into despair and cynicism. The establishment response, too, is formulaic.

Do we remember the bizarre deaths of civil service aspirants when floodwaters gushed into a coaching centre in Delhi? Ironically, the victims were preparing to be part of a system that failed them and then failed to many like them. Haven’t we almost forgotten the unfortunate deaths in Indore of people who had complained of their drinking water being contaminated? They had trusted the system to take remedial steps. But, by all accounts, their complaints fell on deaf ears. Many died after drinking water that came from pipes meant to supply fresh water.

Now, a young man has drowned in a pool of water in a city touted as a modern urban settlement. There was no reason for the water to have accumulated at the site of the tragedy. On a foggy night, his car went out of control and fell into the pool because a railing was broken. There was no reason for him to drown in the swamp except that a crude, ill-prepared system did not know how to save a person crying desperately for help. He had shown the courage to climb out of the car after being mired in the cesspool, reached out to his father, shared his location, and his father had asked for help. That help arrived several hours later.

The fog that day seems symbolic of a system that refuses to see people’s desperation. A gig worker mustered the courage to jump into the water in the dead of night. He tried in vain to rescue the drowning car driver. It stands in contrast to the system’s incapacity. A few days earlier, this delivery person had reportedly helped a truck driver involved in a similar mishap at the same spot. He had shown the courage to climb out of the car after being mired in the cesspool, reached out to his father, shared his location, and his father had asked for help. That help arrived several hours later.

The fog that day seems symbolic of a system that refuses to see people’s desperation. A gig worker mustered the courage to jump into the water in the dead of night.

He tried in vain to rescue the drowning car driver. It stands in contrast to the system’s incapacity.

A familiar thread runs through the tragedies at the Delhi coaching centre, Indore and Noida—the lack of responsive

ness and accountability. The system, it seems, is a mute witness to its own culpability. When officials say they will “fix” responsibility, they only mean they will “shift” accountability as they did in the coaching centre case, where an SUV driver was arrested for causing water to flood the basement.

Unresponsiveness and lack of accountability are not the only problems. A large part of the shortcomings is structural. Scant regard for routine administration is a feature of governance today. The focus on development and “concrete” achievements has become an important part of assessing the performance of administrators. As a result, they tend to neglect routine work. Proper maintenance of records, time-bound disposal of files and periodic inspection of subordinate offices by supervisory officers receive low priority from an administration obsessed with “showcasing” achievements.

Engineers today are engrossed in constructing more buildings and roads. There is nothing wrong with that, except that the old roads are not properly maintained. An increase in capital expenditure allows governments to build infrastructure. But once buildings, roads and other facilities are built, they have to be maintained. Today, focusing on maintenance, service delivery and the functional efficiency of what has been built is not considered proof of administrative “dynamism”.

Hunting for headlines is understandable for the political executive. But anotherity should be the hallmark of civil servants. Sadly, today, the commitment to serve people seems to have been overtaken by the urge to gain recognition.

This culture might continue if the glitz and “modernity” of new structures exert an inordinate pull on administrators, and they are not bothered about the quality of service they are mandated to deliver. If political parties are allowed to remain wedded to their election-winning formula and administrators forget their mandate, the system is unlikely to improve.

The writer is a former election commissioner

Art that bears witness to a tragedy is not enough



SHAYMA S

THE VOICE of *Hind Rajab* (2025), directed by the Tunisian filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania, makes for difficult watching. The viewer knows what’s going to happen. There are happy endings amidst genocides, especially when the violence hasn’t ended. The film interposes the actual voice recordings of Hind with dramatisation of the frantic attempts to rescue her via an ambulance. On January 29, 2024, Palestinian Red Crescent received an emergency call from Gaza. Members of the Hammada family were trapped in a car, having been hit by an IDF tank while trying to evacuate Gaza City’s Tel-al-Hawa neighbourhood. All others had died in the relentless firing; six-year-old Hind pleaded to be rescued. As we know, none of the passengers survived. Israeli forces also attacked and killed the ambulance medics sent for rescue.

Hind’s death, and the killing of the medics, underscore the futility of procedure in the face of impunity. Co-produced by Tunisia and France, the film is backed by Hollywood figures including Brad Pitt and Joaquin Phoenix. While American distributors initially avoided the project, its award-season success—notably a prolonged standing ovation at the Venice International Film Festival—has propelled it to global prominence.

Ben Hania has described the film as an act of witnessing—an attempt to ensure Hind’s voice is heard and not erased. The question that lingers is whether a film can function as witness while a genocide is ongoing. If the logic is that such films bring about awareness and that there is a need for Hind’s story to be preserved and circulated, then the question that emerges is: What is left to hear? Awareness about? This genocide has been livestreamed, yet global impunity has continued. Even as we watch, celebrate and discuss the film, millions continue to starve in a man-made famine. Hind’s story—like many of her Palestinian men, women and children—is not frozen in history but something ongoing, which needs concrete solidarity in the form of boycotts, protests and political pressure hand-in-hand with artistic enterprise.

This unease is sharpened by the political economy of the film. Its celebrated reception coexists with continued American military, diplomatic, and financial support for Israel’s occupation and assault. The contradiction is difficult to ignore. A film mourning Palestinian death circulating through structures entangled with ideological and material support for the conditions that enable that death. What do standings for a beautifully shot, heart-wrenching project do to Palestinian life and survival?

This is not to say art is useless. Art has always been a significant vehicle in the cause of justice; recent Indian films on police violence (*Santosh*) or caste discrimination (*Homebound; Bison Ka Laamdaan*) are cases in point. But bearing witness must not collapse into a form of self-congratulation and complacency—that by participating in this artistic process, we have done our part or absolved ourselves. Instead, creators must reflect on whether this can go beyond symbolic condemnation and towards changing conditions of inequality and violence.

The writer is a freelance writer and PhD scholar

Art has always been a significant vehicle in the cause of justice. But bearing witness must not collapse into a form of complacency—that by participating, we have done our part

part

40 YEARS AGO

January 23, 1986



Indira assassins sentenced

ALL THREE accused—Satwant Singh, Balbir Singh, and Kehar Singh, in the Indira Gandhi murder case were sentenced to death by additional district and sessions judge Mahesh Chandra. The sentence was pronounced in a makeshift courtroom in Tihar Jail. Satwant Singh, the 22-year-old Delhi Armed Police constable on duty at the PM’s house, who had fired on Indira Gandhi, was in addition sentenced to seven years’ rigorous imprisonment for causing grievous hurt (attempt to murder) to ASI Rameshwar Dayal. Ahmedabad violence COMMUNAL VIOLENCE erupted anew in Ahmedabad after a lull of over 10 days, leav-

ing at least four persons dead and 10 injured in a spate of stabbing and arson in far-removed places in the city. An indefinite curfew was reimposed in the community sensitive areas of Kalupur and Dariapur. The trouble sparked off following the murder of a person who was coming out of the metropolitan court complex in Gheekanta.

Devi Lal arrested

THE FOUR-PARTY Haryana Sangharsh Samiti chief, Devi Lal, was among about 500 opposition workers and leaders arrested on the eve of the “tasta roko” stir and the one-day bandh in Chandigarh. The call for agitation has been jointly given by the Lok Dal, the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Congress (S)

and the Janata Party, to protest against the alleged injustice done to Haryana under the Punjab accord.

Assam ex-CM’s relatives killed

IN ONE of the worst incidents of post-election violence, a mother and daughter described as relatives of former chief minister Hiteshwar Saikia were killed in an armed attack in Guwahati. The leader of the Congress-Legislative party, Golak Rajbanshi, said that there had been a series of attacks on party supporters and workers since the election. He said that he had received written complaints that Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) supporters were involved in many cases.



DIS/AGREE
THE BEST OF BOTH SIDES

A weekly column, which offers not this-versus-that, but the best of both sides, to inform the debate



ILLUSTRATION: CR SASIKUMAR

Should PM Narendra Modi accept President Donald Trump's invitation to join the Board of Peace?

To have a say, India must be on board



SUJAN CHINOV

DONALD TRUMP's invitation to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on January 16 to join the Board of Peace for Gaza is a continuation of the US President's 20-point roadmap for Gaza, which Modi had earlier welcomed as a comprehensive plan to end the conflict and as a viable pathway to long-term peace, security and development for Palestinians, Israelis and West Asia. India remains committed to peace based on a two-state solution, the unconditional release of prisoners, and enhanced humanitarian assistance.

The Indian Prime Minister is among 50-60 world leaders reportedly invited to join the Board of Peace, an idea endorsed in principle by the UN Security Council. All 55 members were invited; so far, French President Emmanuel Macron has declined, while Russia and China are still examining the proposal, despite Trump claiming that Russian President Vladimir Putin has accepted.

Norway, Slovenia and Sweden are reported to have declined. Most West Asian countries, including GCC nations like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar and Bahrain, have accepted, as have some Central Asian republics. Pakistan, Turkey and Azerbaijan are on board. Interestingly, Belarus was among the first, suggesting Putin's tacit approval.

Among the striking features of the board is that Trump will serve as the inaugural chairman, possibly holding the post beyond his presidential term. Another eye-catching provision is the call for a club-like contribution of US\$1 billion to secure "permanent membership" beyond the initial three-year term. Putin is reportedly considering contributing \$1 billion from frozen assets for a permanent seat — a condition that may shape the term.

Trump's invitation to Modi reflects recognition of India's traditional influence in West Asia and credible voice on the global stage. Declining the invitation could be seen as reluctance to engage on a major international issue and may affect future engagement with Trump.

Participation in the board would allow India a greater say in determining Gaza's future, including potential contracts for Indian companies in reconstruction, while underscoring India's commitment to Palestinians and regional stability.

Notably, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has agreed to join the board after initially objecting to its governance, particularly the inclusion of Turkey and Qatar, which Israel views as hostile or supportive of Hamas. Netanyahu had earlier asserted that the executive committee plan contradicted Israeli policy.

The board appears multi-tiered, with an inner "founding executive council" chaired by Trump. PM Modi has been invited to the main board, distinct from this inner circle and the Gaza executive board. The board is a US-led enterprise, unlike the UN-led processes preferred by Russia, China, and India. When the UNSC approved the board in November 2025, China and Russia abstained. Beijing is likely to view initiatives outside the US as weakening the UN-led multilateral order and China's own four global initiatives, including the latest Global Governance Initiative. Abstention on a resolution was no doubt an easier choice than deciding to join.

Self-appointment by a single power of selected countries to manage international disputes sets a troubling precedent, even considering the US's exceptional military and economic power. India's past roles, such as chairing the UN-backed Neutral Nations Reparations Commission (Korea) and the International Commission for Supervision and Control (Vietnam), were embedded in UN-backed frameworks. As for the G20, BRICS and the SCO, they focus on strategic and economic issues, not resolving major disputes such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In taking a decision on participation, Indian policymakers will have to keep in mind what such a Board of Peace implies for other disputes.

Concerns arise from reports that Chairman Trump will wield veto powers as well as the lack of clarity on the fate of the \$1 billion contributions. It is a moot question whether a successor US administration would support the board. Its internal dynamics and a disparate membership might add a layer of complexity.

The invitation coincides with the 50 per cent tariffs imposed by the US over India's energy trade with Russia and threats of further penalties related to Iran. While Trump's invitation is significant, acceptance does not guarantee either a bilateral trade deal or protection from future geopolitical shocks involving core interests.

India will not doubt respond after careful evaluation. The provisions for representation at the level of a high-ranking official, as well as the exit clause, are welcome attributes.

The writer is director general, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Views are personal

Four reasons Delhi should decline



MANAV SACHDEVA

HERE ARE moments in a nation's life when the question is not what we gain, but who we become. The reported invitation for India to join a US-backed "Gaza Board of Peace", accompanied by a promised \$1 billion in assistance, is one such moment. India, out of deep respect and solidarity with the Palestinian people and its own history, moral standing, and Global South leadership, should decline — clearly, publicly, and without equivocation.

This is not a question of money for Gaza, nor even of geopolitics in the narrow sense. It is a question of India's constitutional morality, our Independence struggle's memory, strategic autonomy, and moral credibility. India's refusal must be rooted not in anti-Americanism as we are not anti-American per se, nor in ideological but, in four hard, defensible reasons that go to the core of what India claims to stand for in the world.

First, any governance or "peace" mechanism for Gaza that is designed without the explicit, sovereign consent of the Palestinian people is not a mechanism for peace. It is an externally imposed trusteeship. History has a name for such arrangements: Colonial administration in humanitarian clothing. India knows this story intimately. The colonial state always justified itself as a stabiliser, a civiliser, a guarantor of order. It spoke of roads, schools, development funds, and security. It never spoke of consent.

To join a Gaza board structured primarily by external powers, especially in the immediate aftermath of mass civilian destruction, would place India on the wrong side of its own anti-colonial inheritance. India cannot be a signatory to a process that treats Palestinians as subjects to be managed rather than a people entitled to self-determination.

Secondly, India's strategic autonomy allows India to engage with all major powers without being an instrument of any. Accepting a \$1 billion inducement to participate in a geopolitically loaded governance mechanism would erode that autonomy in practice, even if it remains intact in rhetoric. Let us be clear: \$1 billion is hardly a problem for India to invest but this is not a Marshall Plan for Gaza. It is not even decisive development finance. What it buys is not economic leverage but political position-

ing on a colonial board. Once India sits on such a board, it inherits the consequences of decisions it does not control. It becomes associated with outcomes it cannot shape. It risks being blamed by one side for occupation by proxy, and by the other for insufficient obedience. Strategic autonomy means knowing when not to sit on the table.

Third, India has spent decades cultivating trust across the Global South, as a country that understands occupation, displacement, and the long shadow of imperial arrangements. That credibility is not theoretical. It translates into diplomatic capital, coalition leadership, and moral authority in multilateral forums. Joining a Gaza peace board perceived — rightly or wrongly — as legitimising past-conflict order without justice would fracture that trust. From Africa to South Asia, from Latin America to West Asia, many countries are watching not what India says but what it does. India cannot afford to be seen as a stabiliser of injustice.

Fourth, there is a deeper, more uncomfortable truth: Peace imposed immediately after devastation without accountability is rarely peace. It is pacification. And papering over of injustice, but in four hard, defensible reasons that go to the core of what India claims to stand for in the world.

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Netaji's parakram lives on, illuminates a nation's path



C P RADHAKRISHNAN

ON NETAJI Subhas Chandra Bose's birth anniversary, the nation pays tribute to his courage, sacrifice, and unyielding passion for freedom. From a young age, Netaji displayed rare moral intensity — renouncing personal comfort, worldly ambition and even a prestigious career in the Indian Civil Service to dedicate himself to India's liberation. For him, freedom was a sacred duty.

A profound insight into Netaji's personality comes from a remarkable tribute by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore in 1939. He hailed Subhas Chandra Bose as *deshnaayak* — the leader of the nation. Gurudev observed that in troubled times, a country needs the strong hand of an inspired and valiant leader. In Netaji, he saw a rare fusion of courage, vision and moral force.

When conventional paths appeared inadequate to achieve Independence, Netaji charted his own course, transforming the freedom struggle into an international movement through the Indian National Army. He asserted, "There is no room on earth that can deprive us of our birth-right of liberty any longer." This belief found expression in the INA.

Netaji's clarion call — "Give me blood, and I will give you freedom" — resonated deeply across regions and communities of India, especially the people of the southern regions, the Tamils in particular. The deep emotional and ideological bond between Netaji and the Tamil people became one of the strongest pillars of support for the INA and the freedom movement. Netaji's popularity also resonated powerfully with Tamil communities in Malaya, Burma and Singapore.

From the early 1920s, Netaji recognised the political importance of the Madras Presidency in the Indian national movement. As a Congress organiser and national leader, he engaged closely with political workers in the region. Netaji visits to Madras (now Chennai) and other centres of the presidency were marked by large public meetings and enthusiastic receptions, particularly by students and the politically conscious youth.

On September 3, 1939, Netaji arrived at Madras Central Station, where he was received by supporters, including lawyer and freedom fighter S Srinivasa Iyengar and Pasuppon U Muthuramalingam Thevar, a close associate of Netaji, emerged as a key leader of the Forward Bloc in Tamil Nadu. Often remembered as the "Boss of the South", he played a significant role in mobilising Tamil support for the INA. He also founded a Tamil weekly magazine, *Netaji*.

Among the notable recruits was Ramu Thevar, originally from Rammam in the Madras Presidency. Inspired by Netaji at an early age, he joined the INA during this visit, Pasuppon U Muthuramalingam Thevar, a close associate of Netaji, emerged as a key leader of the Forward Bloc in Tamil Nadu. Often remembered as the "Boss of the South", he played a significant role in mobilising Tamil support for the INA. He also founded a Tamil weekly magazine, *Netaji*.

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and was later entrusted with intelligence duties in Penang. Arrested while attempting to reach India, he was imprisoned in Alipore Jail in Calcutta (now Kolkata). His letters to his mother speak of the immense hardship he had to undergo as well as his unwavering patriotism. Unaware of his execution in Madras Jail in 1944, his mother continued writing to him until 1948. Thevar was only 18 when he made the supreme sacrifice for the nation. The Tamil recruits for the INA also came from outside the country. Among them was Lieutenant R Madhavan Pillai. It was heartening to see Prime Minister Narendra Modi felicitate him at the Parakram Diwas celebrations in 2024.

In a stirring address at the Padang in Singapore in 1943, Netaji urged women to join the struggle, declaring that this must be a truly revolutionary army. His words deeply moved Tamil Indian women in Malaya, many of whom had endured hardship on rubber plantations. Despite having never seen India, nearly a thousand of them volunteered for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

While the bravery of Lakshmi Swaminathan (Captain Lakshmi Sahgal) is widely recognised, the contributions of Janaky Thevar, Anjalai Ponnusamy and Sarasammam Bhuparan are equally inspiring. Janaky Thevar, only 14 when she first heard Netaji speak, donned her diamond earring in the INA and later rose to a senior leadership position in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Saraswathi Rajamani, often regarded as one of India's youngest women intelligence operatives, joined the INA at 16 and served with distinction. In keeping with Netaji's egalitarian vision, women trained and served alongside men, and caste divisions were rejected.

Alongside these leaders stood countless unnamed Tamil soldiers and labourers from Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli, Madurai, Sivaganga, Tiruchirappalli and Cuddalore, who answered Netaji's call from Malaya, Burma and Singapore. Deeply moved by this overwhelming support, Netaji is believed to have remarked that if he were to be born again, he would wish to be born a Tamilian.

Netaji believed that political independence was only the beginning; the greater task was to build a strong, united and self-reliant India that ensured dignity and justice for all. His special bond with the Tamil people stands as a powerful reminder that India's freedom was forged through the shared sacrifice of regions, communities and countless unsung heroes.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has consistently emphasised the need to shed the colonial mindset, honour India's values and freedom fighters, and advance towards true freedom of the mind and spirit. This vision is reflected in the government's observance of Netaji's birth anniversary as Parakram Diwas, the renaming of historic islands in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in his honour, and the installation of his statue at Karttavaya Path.

As Netaji once observed, "One individual may die for an idea, but that idea will, after his death, incarnate itself in a thousand lives." His ideas continue to guide Bharat as the nation moves forward with a collective resolve to transform Parakram into progress.

The writer is Vice President of India



ILLUSTRATION: MITHUN CHAKRABORTY

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Price caps

THERE IS no doubt that airfares climb significantly during festive seasons and holiday seasons. But the Court should not interfere to fix a cap ("Court cap on airfares is the wrong answer," IE, January 22).

The dark patterns deployed by airlines on their websites during booking — such as enticing fliers with mediocre meals at inflated prices — need to be highlighted.

—Anany Mishra, Bhilai

Noise over nuance

PRIME-TIME debates today often prioritise noise over nuance and confrontation over clarity, leaving viewers exhausted rather than informed. (Amid cable newsfication, journalism must reclaim its role as a check on power," IE, January 22). This erosion of credibility is reflected in public trust. According to Reuters, fewer than four in ten Indians say they trust news most of the time.

—Khushi Jaiswal, Jammu

COMPONENTS OF ticket booking, such as convenience fees, need to be questioned ("Court cap on airfares is



VIKRAM HEGDE

A VIRAL video from the final day of the New Delhi World Book Fair shows a throng of people scrabbling to grab books from stalls. The scenes of people pulling books off shelves were decried on social media. Many, including this author, harked back to the adage from Baghdad: "Readers don't steal, and thieves don't read," which does not seem to have found any resonance in this incident. To read that proverb as an exhortation to pay for books would be to grossly misunderstand it.

Thinking about it, Why is it that people

Reading the melee at a book fair

looting a book fair raises our hackles, whereas a person downloading a pirated PDF of a book would not be in the same way? The answer lies in the context, effect, and intent.

The person downloading the PDF is still seeking knowledge and not causing any inconvenience to other readers. At a fair, we expect a sort of reverence for books as the vessels of knowledge. When people grab books without care, it feels like an insult to the store owners, to the publishers and writers who worked hard to produce those, and to fellow readers who queue up patiently. The upshot is clear: This chaos dishonours not just the books, but also the idea that we value learning itself. It flies in the face of the literary community.

If we get a little deeper into the collective psyche that drives such behaviour, we see that the problem goes far beyond a frenzy of covetous hands at Pragati Maidan. If a person hasn't internalised a respect for knowledge, one might ask, why go to a book fair at all?

Books have taken on new meanings in the age of lifestyle signalling on social media. The new generation of readers has imbued books with secondary values of prestige and aesthetic appeal. To the clout chaser, this secondary value may be of more significance than the primary one. So, when a raucous book-fair-goer makes a grab for any random book, without even bothering to pick one of their liking, it is this secondary value they are grasping.

This premiumisation of the appear-

ence of having read, rather than the enjoyment of reading itself, shows up in many other aspects of public life. Take, for instance, the desperation of our teenagers to get into elite educational institutions not for the education but for their brand value.

While we rightly chastised the unruly crowd at the book fair, it is perhaps time to introspect and attempt to address the deep-seated complexes we may all have that manifest themselves in such ugly forms. If we as a society can take note of this, we will be able to recognise the worth of books not by how many or what books got taken away, but by what they carry away from those books.

The writer is advocate on record,
Supreme Court of India

• SCIENCE

A head-scratcher: Meet Veronika, first cow known to use a tool



Veronika scratches itself with two sticks. ANTONIO JOSUÑA MASCARÓ

Yashie
New Delhi, January 22

TO BE called a cow is rarely a compliment to one's brains. While it is a pejorative in English, in Hindi, a *gau* is a person of innocence and virtue, hardly of scintillating assumptions.

Veronika, a 13-year-old Brown Swiss cow which lives in the village of Nötsch, has been found using a deck brush to scratch itself. Veronika holds the brush in its mouth, and depending on the body part it wants to scratch — whether the hard skin of its back or its soft underbelly — uses either the brush or the handle, also adjusting the pressure. Veronika, thus, is displaying sophisticated tool usage, not previously seen in cattle.

What is the study?

After coming across a video of Veronika, researchers Alice Auersperg and Antonio Ossuna-Mascaro, from the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, went to its home to observe it. Their findings were published Monday in the journal *Current Biology*. "We recorded 76 instances of self-directed tool use over seven sessions of 10 trials... Veronika's behavior... showed versatility, anticipation, and fine motor targeting."

The study adds, "Although flexible tool use has been reported in terrestrial ungulates (including a recent, well-documented case in Asian elephants) prior to our study it had not been experimentally verified in cattle." Ungulates are hooved mammals.

Is tool usage in animals uncommon?

This study defined tool usage as "the manipulation of an external object to achieve a goal via a mechanical interface".

In the 1960s, the renowned English primatologist Jane Goodall observed that chimpanzees could use blades of grass to spear out insects from termite mounds to eat. Over the years, crows, parrots, whales, elephants, and wolves have all shown varying levels of skills at manoeuvring objects to use as tools. But using one tool for multiple purposes is much rarer.

Importantly, the differential use of both broom ends constitutes the use of a multipurpose tool, exploiting distinct properties of a single object for different functions. Comparable behaviour has only been consistently documented in chimpanzees," the study says.

In India, primatologist Anindya Sinha of the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in Bengaluru has, along with his collaborators, documented several female and male bonnet macaque insightfully manufacturing and using tools in a variety of contexts — the only example of wild monkeys actively making tools anywhere in the world.

Is Veronika just super-smart?

The researchers say it is not the cow but the conditions in which it lives that are unusual. Veronika is being kept as a pet, not as a milch animal, by a family that reared its mother. It lives near a meadow where it roams free, and has been given opportunities to play and interact with loving humans. It is also 13 years old, a long and remarkably disease-free life for a cow.

The researchers say that because of the "persistent mendacious biases associated with meat consumption", there haven't been many research attempts that look at cows beyond their utility value and as intelligent, social animals.

They claim that if more cows were offered a life as rich as Veronika's, they could display similar behaviour.

Sinha told *The Indian Express*: "The case of Veronika is that of one individual. This is not a systematic study of a large number of animals over a long period of time. There are two possibilities here. One is that this is a case of associative learning, where through trial and error, the cow has learnt that the broom can be used to scratch herself. The second, more intriguing possibility, is Veronika has discovered that a tool can be manipulated in different ways for different goals. If that is true, it talk of a cow displaying insight, which would be much more remarkable."

The findings challenge assumptions about animals that are seen largely as utilitarian. The case can be used as a basis for studies about the intelligence of cattle.

• DONALD TRUMP AT DAVOS

Trump Greenland gambit is his signature playbook



SHUBHAJIT ROY

AFTER DAYS of threats of military intervention and tariffs, US President Donald Trump walked off the ledge by announcing that a framework had been reached for a deal with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) over Greenland's future.

The announcement followed his speech at the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) meeting in Davos, Switzerland, on Wednesday. Negotiators from the US and Europe will now hammer out the details of the deal.

The American President has argued that US control of Greenland would secure critical resources (the island is estimated to have enormous oil and gas reserves, as well as troves of rare-earth minerals such as cobalt, graphite, and lithium). Additionally, it would expand the US military's reach in the Arctic and would challenge and circumscribe Chinese and Russian influence in a region key to American national security.

But this entire episode has several important takeaways and sheds light on the behaviour of the Trump administration, which has just completed a year in power. These learnings could be useful for similar future episodes stemming from the US.

How Trump seeks to get his way, in 6 steps

FIRST, Trump always dialls up the rhetoric and makes a public spectacle of the matter at hand, even for sensitive international issues. His threats and bullying tactics on Greenland, through posts on Twitter and statements to the press, had stunned many around the world — most importantly, the Europeans.

He adopted a similar playbook for dealing with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky last year in the Oval Office, when he — along with Vice President JD Vance — had publicly berated the Ukrainian President. Many were struck by Trump's threatening behaviour, with statements such as "You don't have the cards".

For Trump, this was deliberately performative, and that is exactly what he raises



the stakes.

SECOND, the expected course of action follows, and those at the receiving end of Trump's threats and tirades huddle together. After the Zelensky episode, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer met with the Europeans and formed the "Coalition of the Willing", which included most NATO members and partners who had been supporting Ukraine against Russian aggression. They met several times in different European capitals to discuss a strategy.

In Greenland's case, as well, the Europeans started talking to each other to back Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, since Greenland is an autonomous region of the Danish Kingdom. And, be it French President Emmanuel Macron or German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, all of the leaders backed Denmark's sovereignty.

THIRD comes an attempt at standing up to the US President. In Greenland's case, the European allies, seven countries including France and Germany, sent a small contingent of troops to Greenland as a gesture of solidarity to defend Greenland against any military adventurism by the Americans.

Similarly, Europe stepped up their defence supplies to Ukraine last year — as the

US President Donald Trump with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte at Davos on Wednesday. AP

Eye on Greenland
The US President came up with the idea of purchasing Greenland during his first term in 2019.

He is now a step closer to securing the rights of military expansion and mining natural resources on the Danish territory.

US dithered and dilly-dallied over its support — and even paused defence and intelligence support to the US for a while.

Such actions have been matched by public statements. Just like the Danish PM had said that "Greenland is not for sale", Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's speech before Greenlanders never got the loud applause at Davos, and his frank remark of calling out the bully got him a standing ovation. This was seen by Trump, who wanted Trudeau publicly to watch out for his statements next time, since he said, "Canada lives, because of the US".

FOURTH, the most important step, is talking to Trump himself. The US President likes to be wowed and pursued by his adversaries, even if their framing such as may be largely imagined or perceived.

The Coalition of the Willing spoke to the US President repeatedly. The European leaders swallowed their pride, went to the Oval Office and sat across the table with the US President to back Zelensky.

In that vein, US Secretary General and former Dutch PM Mark Rutte played the role of the intermediary in Greenland's case. Earlier this week, Trump posted a screenshot of a text conversation with Rutte, who said he would highlight his

work on Ukraine and Gaza in Davos, and added that he was committed to finding a "way forward" on Gaza.

And, just like Finland's President Alexander Stubb had developed a rapport with Trump by playing golf for hours, Rutte had defended Trump's language against Iran and Israel last year, saying, "Daddy has to sometimes use strong language to get them to stop."

All of this resulted in Rutte being successful in talking to him, and Trump announced that both of them had "formed the framework of a future deal with respect to Greenland and, in fact, the entire Arctic Region," without offering any details. He added, "This solution, if consummated, will be a great one for the United States of America, and all NATO Nations."

FIFTH, Trump is now closer to acquiring the rights to Greenland, without having to use force. He first came up with the idea of purchasing Greenland during his first term in 2019, which was dismissed as a fantasy by many. At the time, Brussels, Copenhagen, or Greenland's capital, Nuuk, didn't take the threat seriously. But, now, after having threatened military intervention and tariffs, he has moved closer to securing the rights of military expansion and mining natural resources. In the case of Greenland, the US Office blow-up led to Europe stepping up its commitments and funding to Ukraine, which was an issue that Trump had frequently raised.

So, what Trump has now accomplished is the following: the Americans do not have to "take" Greenland by invading a NATO ally, by buying a sovereign territory or by a referendum in Greenland. Instead, he can get the rights to explore, mine and base his military through "essentially, a big real estate deal".

SIXTH, the impact of this saga on the world order is chilling. It has shown world leaders, especially those of the major powers — be it Chinese President Xi Jinping or Russian President Vladimir Putin — what is possible through coercion, that consent doesn't matter, and capitulation is the end goal. New Delhi will also be watching the turn of events.

Carney summed it up accurately when he said, "Every day we are reminded that we live in an era of great power rivalry. That the rules-based order is fading. That the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must."

Immigration, tariffs, territory: Key takeaways from his speech

Anagha Jayakumar
New Delhi, January 22

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump's speech at the World Economic Forum on Wednesday touched on a range of topics, from Greenland to Ukraine and the US economy to immigration. Featuring his characteristic bravado, and inaccurate claims, the 70-minute speech had a major theme — the world does not appreciate the US (and him) enough, and everything is in danger because of this.

"When America booms, the entire world booms... When it goes bad, you all follow us down," he said. Here are the major takeaways from his speech.

Greenland

Trump struck a seemingly conciliatory tone, saying the US "won't use force" to take Greenland. After Denmark fell to Nazi Germany during World War II and was unable to defend Greenland, the US stepped in and built military facilities. Trump recalled this, and credited the US's role in helping to win the war. "After the war, we gave Greenland back to Denmark. How stupid were we to do that," he said. The statement was a distortion of history. Denmark never handed Greenland to the US, though it did strike a defence agreement after its invasion by Nazi Germany.

The US economy

Head of his speech, the White House indicated that the US president would speak on the strength of the American economy. He would also introduce a plan to address the problem of housing costs and reiterate his intent to cap credit card interest rates.

The US president did all these, amid a flurry of wild claims. He said that he had secured \$18 trillion in investments within his first year of the current term. According to a CNA analysis, while the White House has claimed \$9.6 trillion in "major investment announcements", this figure is based on a misreading of several major deals concluded last year. On tariffs, he said that the US has made historic trade deals with partners amounting to 40% of all US trade. A think-tank's report this week showed that Americans were mostly the ones who were footing the bill for Trump's tariffs.

Trump ridiculed Fed chair Jerome Powell, calling him "late" to institute rate cuts. He said he had interviewed candidates for Powell's replacement once his term expires in May, but did not name them.

NATO

Since his first term (2017-21), Trump has insisted that the alliance has treated the US unfairly, with the US shouldering the majority of its defence spending. He repeated

'Peacemaker'

• Trump repeated his long-standing claim of having ended eight wars, including the conflict between India and Pakistan last May. However, his list includes diplomatic disputes (Egypt vs Ethiopia) and ongoing conflicts (DRC vs Rwanda).

• He acknowledged China as a major competitor in artificial intelligence. He said China makes lots of wind turbines, and erroneously claimed: "I haven't been able to find any windfarms in China."

Europe

The president alternated between expressing his love for Europe and criticising it for opposing his claim over Greenland. Faced with opposition from the other European members of NATO, he called for "immediate negotiations" towards a deal to acquire Greenland.

Trump argued at great length about what he called the "green new scan", referencing efforts by European nations to reduce emissions and switch to renewables. He claimed that electricity prices in Germany are now 54% higher, while the UK produces only a third of the energy it produced in 1999. He also claimed that the UK had refused to extract "500 years" of oil reserves in the Arctic, resulting in increased prices.

similar remarks at Davos. Trump claimed that until he came along, "most of the countries weren't paying anything" despite a stipulated target for each member to spend 2% of its GDP on defence. An analysis of NATO data showed that 18 of the 31 members met the target in 2024.

"I mean, we've helped them for so many years. We've never gotten anything," he said. This is incorrect, considering the long-time NATO's Article 5, the mutual defence treaty, was invoked was following the September 11 terror attack.

Ukraine

"I think Russia wants to make a deal, I think Ukraine wants to make a deal. I think we can say we are relatively close," Trump said at Davos, adding that he would meet Zelensky later on Wednesday. Zelensky, whose attendance was in question, arrived in Davos on Thursday.

Venezuela

"Venezuela's going to do fantastically well," Trump said, praising the administration of interim president Delcy Rodriguez. "Once the attack ended, the attack ended and they said, 'let's make a deal.'"

He claimed oil companies were lining up to invest in Venezuela, contrary to reports that these companies were apprehensive about doing so.

Immigration

Trump claimed Europe had become "unrecognisable and weak", and that his friends there don't recognise many of their cities anymore.

Taking credit for his sweeping immigration crackdown, he singled out the Somali diaspora in Minnesota in racist comments. "We're cracking down on \$19 billion in fraud that was stolen by Somalian bandits," he said. "Can you believe that Somalia — they turned out to be higher IQ than we thought."

• SPORT

Magical thinking: Behind towel tug-of-war in Africa Cup final, a whiff of *juju*

Sandip G
Mumbai, January 22

A WALK-OFF threat, a fluffed penalty, a thunderbolt winner and bitter accusations. The Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) final between Senegal and Morocco on Sunday was hardly devoid of drama. But the central point of intrigue during the match in Morocco's capital Rabat was an innocent piece of cloth — Senegal goalkeeper Edouard Mendy's blue towel. This was because of a sneaking suspicion among the opposition players, and ball boys, that something sinister may be afoot: woodoo, witchcraft, or, more precisely, what it is called in West Africa — *juju*. And Senegal would indeed go on to win the match. But this is not the first time such talk has come up — stories in African football have always brimmed with mischief and fantasy.

Rain or more?

It was pouring in Rabat. Naturally, the goalkeeper sought the towel frequently to

keep his gloves as dry as possible. As did his Moroccan counterpart, Bouno. But Mendy was insistent on one specific towel. He refused other towels the Moroccan ball boys offered him. This did not go unnoticed.

So, whenever Mendy's attention turned to the game, the ball boys tried to sneak in and steal the towel.

The intrusions caught the eye of Mendy's deputy, Yehvahn Diouf, who fiercely guarded it as though it were a piece of treasure. Soon, it turned into an open fight with some of the exuberant ball boys trying to snatch the towel from him.

But Diouf would ensure that the towel remained with him even after the match ended. These events were enough for some Moroccan supporters to sniff some *juju*.

Some snarled fans even claimed that the Senegal players, who walked off to the change room protesting a penalty, did so to perform *juju*. The subsequent missed penalty by Morocco's Brahim Diaz would have galvanised their suspicion.

Juju has been a recurrent protagonist in



A ball boy attempts to grab the blue towel from a Senegal player during the AFCON final. AP

African football and AFCON. Its paraphernalia would be straight out of a horror flick — white powder, "sacred" water, mystery shrubs, and oil (often smeared on goalposts). *Juju* has been a recurrent protagonist in

leagues. But rumours swirl of the dark arts' supposed sway on games.

In the 2002 AFCON edition, police arrested members of Cameroon's coaching staff, alleging they had placed a "charm" on the pitch. In the edition before that, a Nigerian official removed a "charm" from the back of Senegal's goal. Ghana's fans were denied entry to the stadium for carrying pots with leaves and liquids in the 2008 edition.

The most bizarre accusation was levelled against Zambia striker Christopher Katongo. His lone goal was the difference in most games, leading some opponents to claim that he had performed *juju* to "bolt" the goalpost after scoring.

Fans, players and coaches all appear to believe in these "supernatural" powers. Last week, a "healer" scammed 33,000 pounds from Mali fans for performing *juju* to guarantee victory in an AFCON match. Last November, Nigeria coach Ernesto Chevella claimed the Congo DPR beat his team by *juju*. Cameroonian legend Samuel Eto'o re-

members a story when their opponents Nigeria refused to enter the dressing room during half time. "They said weren't going in because we'd put a spell on their dressing room," he said.

Action by the CAF

The scuffles over alleged *juju* rituals became so frequent that the Confederation of African Football (CAF) began to impose hefty fines. "We are no more willing to see witch doctors on the pitch than cannibals at the concession stands. Such incidents propagate the image of Africa as a third-world continent," a CAF statement read.

Countries such as Zambia have outlawed the practice. That hasn't meant such claims have stopped, adding a layer of colour and intrigue to a game that is becoming increasingly scientific and structural.

A quote by former Senegalese coach Bruno Metsu sums it up: "Maybe two or three are susceptible to that kind of thing, but the rest just treat it as a joke. Otherwise, we'd have won the World Cup ages ago."

Don't Worry, Let ₹ Find Its Inner ओ

Trade deal, stable oil prices can limit damage

Call this an entreaty, to quote a Kubrick movie, to learn to stop worrying and love the depreciating rupee. The beleaguered currency is waltzing its way lower as foreign investors take money out of Indian stocks and RBI sells dollars with an eye on imports. Both situations could reverse if India and the US get a move on with their trade deal. Last year was grim for the rupee. Unless there's news to lift the gloom, expect a repeat performance. Of course, there's a level beyond which imports will start to pinch if RBI gets too protective about its reserves. That is still some way off, and the regulator will keep steady the descent. Hopefully, the trade deal will materialise in the early part of the year, and the rupee pain will be short-lived. Once the US lifts its tariff, the rupee should have a less bumpy ride.

The rupee has been knocked around by Trump's use of tariffs as an instrument of foreign policy. The US Supreme Court is expected to rule on whether the real estate developer-president can do what he has done. The US consumer, too, is watching her wallet shrink on account of Trump tariffs. Fed boss Jerome Powell is standing firm on interest rates, and Trump doesn't look like he will get the Fed to do his bidding. Creditors to the US are turning skittish about Trumponomics. A weakening dollar could trim some White House hubris.

India can ride out the rupee slide because the economy is powering ahead as inflation stays low. It can absorb higher energy prices if the rupee were to fall further from here. Trump's focus on minerals is likely to keep a lid on oil prices throughout his second term. This offers India an opportunity to speed up economic growth. It also lowers India's dependence on Russian oil, which makes it easier to deal with the Trump regime. The rupee reaching new lows does not cause grave concern in New Delhi. Washington will eventually have to ask itself whether tariffs hurt more at home than overseas. That realisation should set the rupee on the course it's meant to be. Both fiscally and spiritually.

R&Dy, Steady, Go, Let's Get Talent Here

The proposed Prime Minister Research Chairs (PMRC) in IITs are an effort to attract top Indian-origin researchers and scientists to the country. The plan to support 120 research fellows and chairs over 5 yrs acknowledges the central role that R&D and innovation play in driving economic growth. While the initiative is welcome, delivering results will require sustained commitment. This must include a drive to build and own fundamental R&D capabilities and a strong IP pipeline.

India has entered the global R&D and innovation race late and with a far smaller financial commitment than its competitors. A stagnant public expenditure of 0.64-0.66% of GDP on R&D is insufficient. The private sector's limited contribution — around 34% of R&D spending — reflects risk aversion and a focus on short-term returns. This must change. GoI has a critical role in shaping a supportive eco-system for R&D and innovation, but its emphasis should be on policy, governance, and articulating a long-term vision.

Public funding should be deployed toward foundational research, strengthening educational institutions, and enabling meaningful collaboration between academia and industry. Beyond a supply-side approach that funds research programmes, GoI must adopt demand-side, mission-driven, or 'moonshot' funding models. In such models, the state sets objectives, while industry, private capital and the research community deliver solutions.

Without a fundamental shift in approach to R&D investment, ownership of intellectual property, and mechanisms that leverage public funds to crowd in significantly larger volumes of private capital, initiatives such as PMRC risk falling short of their promise.



JUST IN JEST

Forget that man's description of Greenland (Iceland?) for a minute...

Yes, Quite Right, It's All About a Piece of Ice'

One chap recently described Greenland as 'a piece of ice' — 7 times in a speech at a crowded hoi polloi place desirous in need to be still seen as posh. Economists fainted, geologists groaned and bartenders quietly nodded in agreement. Because, let's face it, the true value of a piece of ice is not in geopolitics, it's in a tumbler of single malt. Consider the humble cube. Without it, whisky is just a warm puddle of Scottish melancholy that would make Wuthering Heights seem like a Barbie romcom. With 'a piece of ice' — it doesn't matter from Greenland or New Zealand — whisky becomes a chilled elixir of civilisation. That single cube is the difference between sipping aristocratic coolness and slurping lukewarm regret. If Greenland is a piece of ice, then Greenland is essentially the world's largest bar accessory. Forget Nato bases — think cocktail bases.

Ice is fleeing, melting, vanishing in these global warming times. Yet, it transforms everything it touches. Trump's Davos remark accidentally revealed the truth: nations fight over oil, gold and data. But the real treasure is that cold little block that makes whisky drinkable and geopolitics bearable. So, let us raise a glass, clink against the cube, and toast to the most undervalued commodity in history. Greenland may be a piece of ice. But in the right tumbler, ET friend...

Never mind Trump's global romps, strong India-US ties continue to matter very much to both sides

Uncle Sam Still Wants You



Tim Roemer

Washington: With the world in a swirl, it's easy to forget about critically important developments in US relations with India. Bilateral US-India relations to impact China's role in the region, Russia's role, oil to India and much more. With Ukraine stability with nuclear-weapons-equipped Pakistan, not to mention a trade with the fourth-biggest economy in the world. The relationship is global politics and helps determine geopolitical strategies.

Ongoing negotiations are tense. But they are of potential to address the world's most important and cornerstone pillar of the India-US partnership: trade. The economic relations are marked by a persistent US trade deficit, high Indian tariffs — specifically on agricultural markets — several non-tariff barriers, and deep disagreements over IP. India has successfully negotiated trade agreements with Australia, vastly improved trade with Israel, and recently, a deal with Thailand. Currently, India-US talks are being dubbed 'not of all the trade deals'.

Blueprints and trade maps are readily available for a successful future trade, roughly with the US while the US Supreme Court defers its ruling on the legitimacy of Trump tariffs on China. But India and the US would be wise to finalise these soon, or have a resident back-up plan in case of a deal not being done. These trade talks, while vitally important, shouldn't be on a single track of defining the entire bilateral relationship.

But there are weak points in the partnership and challenges in managing disagreements that demand attention and solutions. India received a majority of H-1B visas annually, and over 1 mn non-immigrant visas were issued to India in 2024. The US can issue more visas, but the US H-1B visas, and the process to approve visas is very bureaucratic and time-consuming. This skilled migration needs to be addressed.



MFIFA: Make fast food fast again

Failure here is not an option.

So, what's at stake? The US-India partnership is important to balance China's aggressive military strategy. It's a critical source of research for new technology, energy and space initiatives of the next 20 yrs.

India is a major defence partner, enabling the US to expedite arms sales and sensitive technology transfers. Defence trade since 2008 has reached \$24 bn, including aircraft, drones and helicopters. India conducts more joint military exercises with the US than any other country. It has signed defence agreements allowing for open intelligence sharing and increased interoperability. Tech transfers to India include co-production of GE F-414 jet engines.

There is creative cooperation on semiconductors, AI, quantum computing, and advanced telecommunications. NASA and Isro share data and coordinate space exploration. The US can, and does not, engage with China or Russia in any of these areas.

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The US has improved prior poor relations with Pakistan by providing a defence package for upgrades to rare earths, a proposal for rare earths business, and an incentive programme.

There are opportunities for energy alliances on gas, oil and nuclear infrastructure. Similarly, possibilities for defence, space and advanced electronics. This is a win-win proposition.

There are opportunities for energy alliances on gas, oil and nuclear infrastructure. Similarly, possibilities for defence, space and advanced electronics. This is a win-win proposition.

China is paying close attention to Trump's corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, that the US has no more room in its own backyard. If China ultimately decides to pull away from South America and focus more exclusively on Asia, India becomes even more vital to the US as a regional and global power.

The US cannot become isolated in this key area of the world, and push India closer to the US. China needs all the friends and partners it can get in an increasingly chaotic and fast-changing world. As does India.

The policies and recommendations outlined here require personal, presidential, comprehensive, innovative and effective ambassador to follow up on strategic implementation, and constant support and involvement from Congress and the US business community. We are at a crucial crossroads with an unresolved trade deficit and a volatile global situation side-tracking much attention in diplomatic and media circles. We must assiduously prioritise this partnership and clearly define the multiple benefits to all constituencies.

Proactive engagement and meticulous personal management are essential. Donald Trump and Narendra Modi must strongly assert their vision, direction and authority to this urgent national security goal for both countries.

The writer is former US Ambassador to India

India, which is expanding its footprint in West Asia through energy and infrastructure connectivity and diasporas, the loss of downgrading of Chabahar would be a strategic setback.

The US-India strategic partnership is closely under international strain, and the cancellation of a recent visit by Iran's foreign minister to India, where Chabahar was expected to be discussed, underscores the urgency. Meanwhile, West Asia remains volatile with fragile ceasefires and unresolved conflicts. A renewed US economic or military coercion and deterrence, and a rethinking and a recommitment for regional stabilisation, including progress on Gaza.

The latest US measure may not explicitly target India, but their indirect impact is unavoidable. Beyond lost economic opportunity, a diminished role at Chabahar would undercut India's maritime strength and its aspiration as a stabilising power across the Indo-Pacific and Asia. Perhaps most importantly, Chabahar may be in to fill any void that would be left by India's withdrawal.

As Trump heightens pressure on Iran, externalities will increasingly shape India's choices. To a hammer, everything may look like a nail. But for New Delhi, navigating this moment will require deft balancing and conversations with Washington.

The writer is with a New Delhi-based think tank

ment of the truth. But no layer connects them into a single, comprehensible narrative. That burden is on the user: India Stack today handles flows exceptionally well — people through digital identity, money through instant payments, and data through instant access. These networks are the foundational DPUs, the building blocks on which modern digital services run.

A second category of DPUs operates at the network level. Frameworks like Data Empowerment and Protection Architecture (DEPA), implemented through account aggregators, enable consent artefacts and data flows across multiple systems. These networks DPUs coordinate what foundational DPUs make possible.

Yet, there is a missing layer: No DPU is today responsible for journey continuity — the user's lived experience as

she moves across apps, systems and institutions. This is where a third kind of DPU can emerge: DPU at the edge. Seven out of 10 Indians use smartphones, and over 85% of households have access to at least one. These devices are where all signs converge: bank SMS notifications, e-commerce messages and customer support exchanges. While backend systems may take days to reconcile, the phone sees the complete picture. With an on-device DPU, combined with AI capabilities that can run even efficiently on modest hardware, a new possibility opens.

... Forgo for a DPU.

When Guruprasad's journey breaks, the device on the network does not merely surface three contradictory statuses. It constructs a coherent explanation: 'Your money left your bank at 10:12am, but the MF platform has not yet confirmed receipt.' This is likely a 'deemed successful' state at NPCI, two working days. If it does not resolve by Thursday, I can help you raise a complaint with the required evidence.'

When users encounter messages like 'authorisation failed' or 'Transaction deemed successful', the natural reaction is: 'What does this actually mean?'

This question is not a limitation to design — it is a limitation to health-care, government benefits and logistics tracking. Anywhere multiple systems must coordinate to serve a user, the user currently bears the burden of coordination. That burden needs to shift.

AI, combined with DPU, can make that shift possible. DPUs can watch, correlate, explain and measure — placing the full power of India Stack, quite literally, in the user's pocket.

The writer is principal adviser (design), UIDAI, Chennai



Harsh V Pant & Vivek Mishra

Trump's announcement of a 25% tariff on imports from China to India in October 2025 for 'Chabahar' is a welcome move — a much-needed and calibrated engagement with Tehran, especially its strategic involvement in Chabahar Port. Coming on top of existing trade tariffs, the move introduces another layer of uncertainty into New Delhi's relations with Iran.

The tariffs follow on a 6-month waiver India secured from the US in October 2025 for 'Chabahar' with which India is seeking a window to recalibrate its position at the port. But the new tariff threat undermines that exemption, injecting fresh uncertainty into a fragile regional environment and raising the risk of renewed escalation.

During Trump's visit, the US withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and launched a maximum pressure campaign to economically isolate Tehran through sanctions on oil exports, banking,



Stick to the horizon

Organisation, was intended to provide operational stability and signal India's intent to remain engaged despite geopolitical headwinds. Trump's return was viewed as the corrective edge of this strategy with tariffs deployed to deter third countries from sustaining economic ties with Iran — aimed at severing economic lifelines, isolating partners and cornering Tehran.

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Meaningful Attachment

KVRAGHATHI

Attachment is like natural soil, necessary for plants to grow along with water and sun. Even if balance between what is needed for each plant is different, the fact that each plant needs a good enough environment to live and grow is undeniable. Intrinsic interdependence, which we all — including animals and birds — need for survival and growth.

Attachment encompasses not just interdependence but also acceptance, communication, intimacy, warmth, closeness, time, patience, willingness, respect, love, and a sense of security.

— All of this, in different degrees, is needed at different times. We need to be seen and heard for who we are to foster a balanced relationship built on trust, respect and vulnerability.

Interdependence is a necessity for one's survival and growth, not misery. It should not be in the negative sense of competition, personal gain, or self-interest. It is a tragedy and a major impediment to one's holistic development. Maintaining individuality while connecting with the environment and biodiversity is an attachment that makes life meaningful.

When impermanence in things and relationships is recognised, detachment is a healthy sign for peaceful living. Attachment to a deity seen as a path to spiritual growth and liberation is an important aspect of Sagan bhakti. However, transcending it leads to detachment, resulting in Nirgun bhakti. Attachment as an overemphasised concept of suffering in certain faiths means emotional clinging.

ALGO OF BLISSTECH

The World from The Car Window

Dear reader, you must know the utter joy of sitting inside a car, letting the world outside rush past in a blur of colours, shapes and fleeting moments.

Yes, the utter noise tries to break through the window, the shifting scenery — other cars blurring the side-line grouping up and down with supposed purpose — the car becomes a cocoon, a private screen to see the chaos of life. Watching the world zip by

through the window is more than passive observation; it's confirmation of impermanence. Each literally fleeting moment reminds us that life is in motion. But next to the window you are still, shielded and safe. The blur of headlights at night, the golden glow of sunsets on highways, or the rain trailing delicate patterns on the glass — all of these create a micro-movie of fleeting beauty. In those moments, we feel small and time feels suspended. The ride becomes a gentle escape, offering perspective and peace. So, sit back, breathe deeply and let the world rush by. What you're essentially doing is rediscovering childhood.

Chat Room

Order is Dead — Long Live Disorder

Proposes the Edit: 'The Davos Special' — 'We'll never be the same again'

(dm 22), Mark Carney's blunt assessment at Davos — that the old rules-based order is now largely fiction under pressure from big-bang tactics — deserves serious attention. Middle powers, including India, risk self-delusion if they keep pretending the system is working as it should be, while tariffs, supply-chain coercion and bilateral arm-twisting become the norm. The practical way forward lies in Carney's call for values-based realism: defend core principles like sovereignty and fair trade without illusions, but build flexible, shared coalitions that can respond to changing circumstances. Diversifying economic ties, strengthening regional forums and speaking plainly when rules are bent creates sturdier arrangements.

For India, this means deeper engagement with the 'global south', Europe and ASEAN, while keeping options open — pragmatism, not confrontation, will serve us best in this shifting world.

Abhaya Barathi, Chennai



Sridhar Dhulipala

ment of the truth. But no layer connects them into a single, comprehensible narrative. That burden is on the user: India Stack today handles flows exceptionally well — people through digital identity, money through instant payments, and data through instant payments, and data through instant access. These networks are the foundational DPUs, the building blocks on which modern digital services run.

A second category of DPUs operates at the network level. Frameworks like Data Empowerment and Protection Architecture (DEPA), implemented through account aggregators, enable consent artefacts and data flows across multiple systems. These networks DPUs coordinate what foundational DPUs make possible.

Yet, there is a missing layer: No DPU is today responsible for journey continuity — the user's lived experience as

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CONTRAPUNTO

I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones

ALBERT EINSTEIN

Message From Markets

Wars hurt investors in short term, uncertainty is always bad. US is threatening one & creating the other

Two out of every three Americans are invested in the stock market, and the last thing they need is a president who plays fast and loose with it. But they've had one for a year, with three more to go. It's unlikely that Trump, who sent markets into a funk last April with his "reciprocal tariffs", and again on Tuesday with his bulldheaded manoeuvres over Greenland, will turn over a new leaf now. But he should, because none of this is working.

The tariff war was squarely aimed at China, which just ended the year with a record trillion-dollar surplus. Meanwhile, his deal with friend India is stuck, and now he's riled old allies in Europe over what he calls a "piece of ice". Tuesday's market slump resulted from a lot of uncertainty over his threats. Would he grab Greenland militarily, or would he price it out with more tariffs? America trades far more goods with EU than China, so the 10% tariff threat was bound to be damaging.

Luckily, Trump has retreated, and markets everywhere signalled relief on Thursday, but doubts will persist.

And that could mean less wealth creation for not only those millions of Americans, but also us. America's spending habits are closely tied to the wealth effect of stocks. When stocks shoot up, Americans feel richer and buy more cars, clothes, computers, crockery, and that's just the letter C. Which means work for factories in China, India, Slovakia, etc, higher earnings, GDP growth, and market indices. Friendly trade is good for all. Wars, whether with boats on the ground or tariffs at ports, are good for nobody.

But as history shows, uncertainty is even worse than war for business. Markets were on a rollercoaster last summer when Trump kept revising tariffs. Buyers didn't know how much their cargoes would cost by the time they completed the voyage from a foreign port. In a "clear war", say WWIII, markets baulk at first (-12.3% in the first three months) and rebound (16.9% annualised returns) when the picture becomes clear. Same thing happened in Iraq in 2003 - a 30% rally over 12 months. As pundits say, markets don't judge wars morally. They find new ways to make money, from weapons, energy, logistics... But uncertainty has a paralysing effect. And Trump's second term has been a masterclass in it, fuddling friends more than foes. He should stop for the sake of his voters at least.

Safety Training

Spain's railway tragedies have lessons for India's high-speed train dreams

Two accidents in Spain in a span of a few days - the first one the worst in Spanish records since 2013 - put the spotlight on railway safety. In the first crash on Sunday in southern Spain, the tail end of a train carrying 289 passengers derailed and crashed into an oncoming train, resulting in 43 fatalities. In the second accident, a Barcelona commuter train crashed after it hit a retaining wall that had fallen onto the tracks, leading to the death of a trainee driver and injuring 37.

This, even as Spain's railway network is considered one of the safest in Europe. According to EU statistics, in 2024 a total of 16 passengers died in accidents on Europe's railway networks, with only one fatality in Spain. Yet, in Aug last year the Spanish Union of Railway Drivers had asked Spain's rail operator to investigate flaws on high-speed train lines due to increased traffic - Spanish authorities should have taken heed. Spain has the longest high-speed rail network in Europe. In India - which is yet to start its maiden high-speed train - rail safety remains a persistent issue. Per GOI, rail safety in India has dramatically improved with consequential train accidents reducing from 135 in 2014-15 to 31 in 2024-25. But recall that the horrific 2023 Balasore train accident killed 296 people.

Thus, despite investment in trackmodernisation - Indian Railways completed track renewal over 6,851 km in 2024-25 fiscal - there's much room for improvement. For example, operationalisation of the automatic train protection system Kavach has missed several deadlines on the high-density Delhi-Mumbai and Delhi-Hourwah routes. Note also that average train speeds in India range between 80-90 kmph. The first Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed train will have a speed of more than 300 kmph, with the first section between Surat and Bhillora to be operationalised in Aug 2027. As Spain's tragedies show, you can never be too prepared when it comes to high-speed railway safety.

On the cards

Colourful stories behind playful Kings, Queens, Knaves

Jug Suraya

Though the country derecognised princes in 1971, millions of Indians continue to hobnob with royalty.

Chances are that you too have met King David of Israel, Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne.

You've also come across Pallas Athena, the ancient Greek goddess of learning, Judith, the biblical heroine, Rachel, another biblical notable, and Queen of Sheba, the queen for Regina, meaning Queen.

You are acquainted with Hector the Trojan warrior, Lancelot of King Arthur's Round Table, Le Hir, a French knight of legendary fame, and Ogier, one of Charlemagne's foremost soldiers.

If you play any game involving cards, you come across all these personages.

The King of Spades represents King David, the King of Hearts is Charlemagne, that of Diamonds is Caesar, and of Clubs, Alexander.

Similarly, the Queens of Spades, Hearts, Diamonds and Clubs respectively are Athena Judith, Rachel and Regina.

The Jacks or Knaves or Knights as they came to be called, are Lancelot (Clubs), Hector (Diamonds), Le Hir (hearts), and Ogier (spades).

Said to have originated in the 7th century in China, cards made their way along the trade routes to Persia and India before reaching Europe around the 14th century, when the picture cards were endowed with their biblical and topographical names.

Originally hand-painted, cards were very expensive and reserved only for the wealthy. With the invention of block printing in China in the 8th century, they could be cheaply produced and became affordable for common folks, which spread their popularity despite their being viewed censoriously by straitlaced authority, which banned card playing on working days as being an undesirable distraction from keeping one's nose to the industrious grindstone.

Card players, however, had the last laugh by the American invention of the Joker in 1868, the name being a mispronunciation of the game of euchre in which it was used and which could outrank even Kings and Queens.

And true to its innovative tradition, the US has now devised an all-powerful super Joker that truly could be called a Trump card.



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Smiley face icon.



MORE THE MUDDLE

Don't Get Onboarded

Two ex-envoys explain why India should be very wary of Trump's Board of Peace

Syed Akbaruddin

 Peacemaking initiatives usually arrive gift-wrapped in lofty language. Trump's Board of Peace (BoP) for Gaza has arrived with a bill - a \$1bn price tag for permanence, surpassing global leaders and seasoned diplomats. A far distance from UN Security Council Resolution 2803 of Nov 2025, where members had authorised a BoP to oversee Gaza's postwar transition.

The resolution had imposed clear limits - on a mandate by Dec 31, 2027, unless renewed, and requested regular reporting to UNSC. These restrictions were designed to ensure that an emergency tool did not become a self-sustaining global prototype. But what Trump announced is a permanent fixture, the BoP charter emerging as the core issue. It describes BoP as an "international organisation" seeking to promote stability, restore lawful governance and secure enduring peace in areas affected or threatened by conflict. It reads less like a Gaza mandate, more like a racing instrument, portable across theatres, unbound in time, and heavily dependent on US political whims.

The picture is corrosive. Especially the "pay-to-stay" provision that ties permanence beyond a single term to a \$1bn contribution. This risks turning a peace mechanism of burden-sharing into an entry fee. It begins to resemble a private club rather than a public international body. Its governance design - a tiered structure reinforces that impression: a top board of heads of state and govts under Trump's chairmanship and, at the bottom, a Gaza layer that includes a Palestinian technocratic committee tasked with the charter's implementation.

It offers no clear mandate, no clear purpose, no clear authority. What prevents BoP from taking on other themes by charter? Interpretation or chair decision? A mechanism that grows without fresh authorisation is mission creep by design.

● How personalised is power? What checks exist on the charter, and what can members override in practice? Institutions built on discretion may be fast, but they are fragile and politicised.

● What does \$1bn buy? Is it a reconstruction contribution with audited use, or a membership privilege? India cannot endorse a monetised model of legitimacy. India should not be drawn into a false choice between paralysis of UN peace-keeping institutions - and personalised power. If BoP can be made lawful, timely and effective, then India should support reconstruction without joining, and let its absence signal that speed is not licence to rewrite the rules of sovereign consent. India cannot allow itself to be reduced to a respectable name on someone else's letterhead.

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BoP is arriving at a moment when the grammar of diplomacy is changing. We are moving into an era where coalitions matter more than institutions. That can deliver results, but it also narrows who gets to decide and who merely adapts. India has a seat staked in West Asian stability, energy and disaster relief, welfare to shipping routes and investment flows. A credible path to reconstruction is in India's interest. But precedents travel, and the world is changing.

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and a peace deal built on invitation-only membership, pay-to-stay, permanence, and personalised authority is not in India's long-term interest.

For India, the question is simple. Can it shape the mandate, the guardrails, and the exit, or will it merely legitimise decisions made elsewhere? The answer turns on five tests.

● Is BoP bound by international law in practice? Will it commit explicitly to a Gaza-only mandate and a sunset on Dec 31, 2027 unless extended by UNSC?

● Where is Palestinian agency? Who decides priorities, budgets, oversight, and sequencing? Advisory roles do not equal legitimacy. Reconstruction without own-ends is a trap.

● Is expansion circumscribed? What prevents BoP from taking on other themes by charter? Interpretation or chair decision? A mechanism that grows without fresh authorisation is mission creep by design.

● How personalised is power? What checks exist on the charter, and what can members override in practice? Institutions built on discretion may be fast, but they are fragile and politicised.

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A deal on ice

US President dials back Greenland rhetoric in Davos

Global markets rallied in relief after US President Donald Trump dialled back threats of outright invasion of Greenland and punitive tariffs on European allies that opposed it. But his 70-minute speech at the World Economic Forum, in Davos, signalled a de-escalation and post-speech announcement of a framework for a "future deal" on Greenland, should not lull global misgivings about the United States' US President's ambitions regarding this "big piece of ice". Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney bluntly noted in his speech that the rule-based world order was fading under the might of great-power rivalry and the world was witnessing "the beginning of a brutal reality where geopolitics among the great powers is not subject to any constraints".

It is possible that the limited deployment of European military personnel in Nuuk, Greenland's capital, a week ahead of the Davos speech convinced Mr Trump of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (Nato's) capabilities, which he has frequently derided. It is also possible that the prospect of European nations selling the trillions of dollars they hold in US treasures and other assets encouraged a de-escalation of rhetoric. But the few details that have emerged of the compromise deal suggest that Europe would be getting the thin end of the wedge. Initial reports suggest that the US could be granted sovereignty over small pockets of Greenland, where it has military bases and could potentially mine for minerals without seeking Denmark's permission. Given Mr Trump's instincts, however, the threat of creeping acquisition reminiscent of the Sudeten crisis of 1938 (caused by Adolf Hitler) cannot be ruled out.

In making his case for Greenland, Mr Trump said the territory was a key strategic link between the US, Russia, and China and disingenuously argued that the US needed it for strategic national and international security. He is keen to build a missile defence system called the Golden Dome, for which he says Greenland is critical. But the US already has the Pitmevik airbase in northern Greenland under an agreement with Denmark, and under the North American Aerospace Defense Command (Norad) with Canada, it jointly defends threats to the homeland in the Arctic. Let us say is control of Greenland's enormous untapped mineral wealth, especially rare earths. With China controlling 70 per cent of the mining of these minerals, which power the world's electronics, and 90 per cent of its processing, the US is seeking sources that will offer strategic advantages in technology, energy, and security to stay ahead of the game. Chinese companies currently have mining projects in Greenland under the "Polar Silk Road" umbrella, which nevertheless remains constrained by Denmark and the US.

However explicit the US President's motives for resource security, wielding the blunt instrument of invasion as he has done in Venezuela, or punitive tariffs, with which he has threatened his Nato allies, marked a brazen abandonment of the rules-based global order by the nation that had championed its creation after World War II. In that sense, Europe's choice of sturdy pushback by suspending its trade deal with the US offers a reassurance well beyond the narrow bounds of transatlantic relations. Whether in eastern Europe, the South China Sea littoral, Taiwan, the mountain fastnesses of Ladakh, and the forests of Arunachal Pradesh, no country will be safe from ambitions of great powers if appeasement becomes the currency of negotiation over sovereignty.

Power reforms

New policy aims to address fault lines

India's power sector, once defined by shortages, blackouts, and access deficits, now has an installed capacity exceeding 500 gigawatts and shortages have fallen to negligible levels. Universal household electrification has been achieved, renewable capacity targets have been met well ahead of schedule, and grid reliability has improved steadily. Yet, the sector continues to grapple with financial fragility, distorted pricing, and institutional inefficiency, particularly in distribution. The Draft National Electricity Policy (NEP), 2026, released by the Union Ministry of Power, is designed to confront the challenges. This follows the Draft Electricity (Amendment) Bill, released late last year. Some of the issues raised by the policy paper will hopefully be addressed by the proposed electricity amendment Bill.

The policy rightly recognises that tariff dysfunction is at the heart of the sector's problems. Though distribution companies reported a net profit in 2024-25 after having suffered losses for several years, the outstanding debt exceeds ₹2.1 trillion, despite repeated bailouts. Tariffs embedded in politics, delayed regulatory orders, and the persistent use of electricity pricing as a welfare instrument have led to this fallout. Notably, the draft proposes indexed, automatic tariff revisions in an attempt to impose discipline. If state regulators fail to issue tariff orders before the start of a financial year, tariffs would be adjusted automatically, using a pre-specified cost index. This can prevent the cash-flow crises, which have forced utilities into arrears and debt cycles.

Equally significant is the effort to curb cross-subsidisation, which has made India's industrial electricity tariffs among the highest in the world. For decades, industry and commerce have been used to subsidise agriculture and households. This has weakened manufacturing competitiveness, raised logistics costs, and encouraged large consumers to exit the public grid through captive generation. In this regard, the policy proposes a gradual reduction in cross-subsidies, a minimum tariff floor of 50 per cent of the average cost of supply and exemptions from cross-subsidy and additional surcharges for large consumers such as manufacturing units, railways, and metro systems. It also suggests relaxing the universal service obligation for consumers above 1 megawatt who can procure power independently. The draft policy also talks about energy transition. With solar and wind now forming a large share of capacity, it is important to manage intermittency and ensure reliability. Thus, the policy calls for scenario planning at national, state, and distribution utility levels, recognising that variable renewables must be backed by storage, hydro, gas, coal flexibility, and grid services.

It proposes phasing out monopoly distribution by allowing multiple supply licensees in the same area, promoting public-private partnerships, and professionalising utility governance. However, implementation will be a challenge. The scale of investment required is immense, estimated at ₹50 trillion by 2032 and ₹200 trillion by 2047. Most state-owned discoms remain inherently inefficient, politically constrained, and financially dependent on state support. Regulatory capacity varies widely across states, and resistance to tariff changes remains strong. While the policy provides a sound economic blueprint, the political economy and electoral challenges associated with reforming the sector need to be addressed.

Living the exploratory life



SANJAY KUMAR SINGH

When author Anne-Laure Le Cunff, who grew up in Paris, landed a coveted job at Google in San Francisco, her parents were thrilled. It offered all the perks of working at a top tech firm — money, travel, and the approval of family and friends. She plunged in with energy and enthusiasm. Then, doubts surfaced. Her youth had been a quest for learning and growth. But now her life had been reduced to meeting KPIs (key result areas) and climbing a predefined corporate ladder. Soon she felt bored and burnt out. To her manager's surprise

and her mother's dismay, she quit.

Instead of pausing to reflect, she plunged into founding a tech startup in Europe. When that, too, failed, she felt unmoved. Soon, however, the disorientation gave way to an unexpected feeling of liberation. Not having a defined path opened up a world of possibilities. She reacquainted herself with an old ally — curiosity — paying attention to conversations that energised her and ideas that attracted her. She took online courses, attended workshops, read for pleasure, and freelanced to stay afloat.

Over time, a clear thread emerged: She wanted to understand the human brain. She went back to college to study neuroscience. Alongside her studies, she began running small experiments on her life, guided by a simple question: What might bring fulfilment, regardless of outcome? She loved writing, so she made a pact with herself to write and

share 100 articles in 100 workdays. She completed the challenge and kept going. Her newsletter — named Ness Labs — has a massive readership and has since evolved into a learning platform focused on helping knowledge workers think better and work and live more mindfully.

Ms Cunff's central point is that people pursue linear careers and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. This framework assumes that life is predictable with clear steps and known destinations. But modern careers rarely pan out that way. Companies restructure, and the ladders one planned to climb disappear. In such a world, rigid plans can become paralysing.

While linear paths can deliver

people ill-prepared to pivot when opportunities arise in new areas.

The alternative she suggests is to live the "experimental life". A deliberate commitment to engage with uncertainty rather than resist it. Small experiments, she suggests, can generate data about what energises you and what drains you. Over time, such feedback can help one align choices more closely with evolving values and interests. The payoff is fulfilment, lateral growth, and resilience. Foraying into fresh disciplines and developing new skills expands capacity and enables one to adapt more easily to a fast-changing world.

Ms Cunff outlines detailed steps to help readers embark on the experimental path. She suggests treating life as a field site, as anthropologists do. Observe yourself with curiosity rather than judgement, and capture insights in the moment. Note what intrigues, energises, or unsettles you. Track patterns of energy, mood, and emotional responses. From these notes, form a hypothesis: If I do X, will I feel more energised? Then

turn it into a pact — a clear, time-bound commitment to an action. Keep the format plain: "I will do [action] for [duration]". For example, "I will run two kilometres a day for the next 10 days". Success here is not hitting a target; it is showing up. Every outcome is data that informs the next experiment. The author suggests keeping pacts simple, repeatable, realistic, and binary — done or not done.

Have short timeframes for each pact. Avoid running multiple pacts at once. Share the pact with friends or colleagues to create accountability. When the pact ends, close the loop: Reflect on what worked, what should be modified, what should be explored from your life, and what should be explored next.

Ms Cunff readers to keep experiments tiny. Large commitments trigger fear, overthinking, and procrastination. Overestimating what

Three priorities for the govt

While many areas compete for resources, defence, education, and adaptation deserve focus for maximum impact

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



As I interact more with policymakers, it appears the question they are grappling with is not what to do, or even how to do it, but what to prioritise. I argue that defence, education, and adaptation should be the key expenditure priorities, with greater focus on deregulation in other areas so that the private sector can contribute more.

In a geopolitical situation that shows no sign of abating, significantly higher defence spending is important for many reasons, not just to protect the country but to also have a greater say in matters where it is economically affected. The geo-economic realities being what they are, greater defence preparedness requires India to invest in drones, other advanced pilotless attack platforms, recruit more engineers and technical personnel in the armed forces, and increase training budget across services.

But to add that the government also has to make welfare allocations. While such allocations need to be limited, it is also evident that some flow to the underprivileged is required as benefits of economic growth are not leading to a rapid enough trickle-down. The *revdi* versus *necessity* problem is real and India needs to find a mechanism to prevent wasteful welfare for short-sighted political ends.

Note that the top three — security, education and climate adaptation — are all areas where there are powerful externalities and markets don't work well. The biggest wins in all these three areas are consequently going to come from greater resource allocations by the government.

For the other areas, including agriculture, industry, and many forms of infrastructure, there is an alternative in the form of markets. They may need limited support and correction, there may be concern of China there as well, but a viable alternative to the government resources exists in the form of the private sector. In these areas, the government must focus its efforts at regulatory and policy reforms that enable markets to work better — but use public investment or subsidies only in a very limited way. Of the three major allocation focus areas, the one on climate adaptation is the least well understood and least written about. Adaptation has many components, but three deserve the greatest attention. First is electrification and its various dimensions, the second is a focus on innovation, and the third is government enhancing its own expertise and capacity.

First, consider electricity. Be it urban transport or

the rural areas, there is space for further easing if growth dips.

A combination of tight fiscal and easy monetary policy that creates a better economic balance should be positive for all asset classes as the year progresses, especially after a year of underperformance compared to other emerging markets. On bonds, higher state borrowing for 1Q26 is already in the price, India's central bank is buying bonds, and we expect fiscal prudence in the Budget. On equities, recent reform announcements, a gradual rise in nominal GDP growth, and more reasonable valuations should help. On the currency, a lot of the rupee depreciation has already happened, while the improved bonds and equities outlook could raise portfolio inflows.

All of this can get you a one-time fillip. For a sustained rise in the economy and markets, reforms are key. Some important reforms have started over the last year, and we hope to see them being pursued more aggressively over 2026. On the domestic front, these include the deregulation drive at the central and state government levels, respectively. On the external front, these include the lowering of Custom duties and non-tariff barriers like quality control orders (QCO) and signing trade deals with not just the West (US and European Union), but also the East (in order to better integrate with regional supply chains).

But this is not where it ends. The reforms discussed above, if implemented well, can raise returns. But we equally need to lower risks. And here, a focus on policy transparency, stability, and predictability is crucial. The rules of the game, or their interpretation, should not be suddenly changed. All of this can add to a more welcoming investment environment in this important policy season.

The author is chief India economist and macro strategist, Asean economist, HSBC

mechanised agriculture, or green steel for export, or producing hydrogen, electricity lies at the core of a well-adapted economy. Electricity creates a far more efficient and flexible energy backend and, therefore, contributes highly to a well-adapted economy. To enable this, we need to invest in improving India's electricity grid, which requires transmission- and distribution-related investments and smart metering.

It also requires critical reforms to improve the regulation and operations of largely state government-owned electricity utilities, which are currently running debts amounting to many trillions. Moreover, while large scale deployment of renewable energy (RE) has directly reduced India's dependence on fossil fuels, it is increasingly being constrained by the need for greater storage capacity, where government support will be critical. Another corollary to the electricity story is improving the energy efficiency of industrial processes, buildings, transport and even households. Since most of these are in private hands, the government needs to play a catalysing role in this space, but not necessarily one that requires large public resources.

Second, a range of innovations are required in agriculture, industry, and even business models for adaptation purposes. No doubt, left to itself, the market mechanism will eventually innovate and find solutions. But government intervention is needed since adaptation is a time-sensitive objective and change needs to be accelerated. In the case of agriculture, for instance, requirements include new seeds, new agro-processing technologies, and also different nutrients and additives. Industry needs to reduce energy costs while moving away from fossil fuels to clean fuels. In the case of transport, there is the challenge of speedy re-charging for electric vehicles. And, of course, the need to develop low-cost storage options is paramount. The agenda before the government is, therefore, clear — it needs to accelerate the process of research and development in both the public and private sector.

And third, undoubtedly the most important: The government has to invest in the capacity and expertise available to it. The government needs its rank and file to have the resources and capability to take quick action. Ideally, it should do so by investing in in-house expertise and capacity, but if it can't, it needs to hire expertise from other countries. Such capacity-related investments are required in many domains. Governments across the three tiers need to implement comprehensive climate adaptation action plans. Agriculture universities and departments need to develop advisory capacity and extension networks to enable changes in farming practices. Environment regulators need to ramp up their staff by many multiples, improve monitoring and enforcement capacity, regulators need to create global quality assessment and certification facilities, among other measures.

There will be many priorities for the government. But the more it is able to narrow them down, the greater its ability to focus, and the more impactful it will be.

The author heads CSE Research Foundation. The views are personal.

Neutral policy, predictable rules needed

The backdrop in which the Budget is presented tends to set the tone. But this year it all seems rather confusing. There are enough indicators to suggest that growth is both weak and strong.

Some argue that growth is on an upward path. Real gross domestic product (GDP) growth prints have been strong, and credit growth is rising across several sectors.

Others lament that the best is over. 2025 benefited from a series of one-time boosts — good rains, falling oil prices, moderating inflation — which were particularly beneficial for the informal sector. Significant policy easing — tax rate cuts helping consumption, as well as interest rate and regulatory easing — added to the mix. All of these may be largely behind us. This group points out that nominal GDP growth has been extremely weak, and foreign inflows have been insufficient to fund the trade deficit. Recent Purchasing Managers' Index prints, too, have started to slow after a strong run.

We believe the truth is in the middle, and that India is at an important crossroads. 2025 was largely about the informal sector rising back up. The opportunity now is for the formal sector to recover in 2026, on the back of the tailwinds from all the policy easing of 2025. We are seeing some green shoots in the form of credit growth and a capital expenditure (CAPEX) revival. Credit growth is picking up, but the challenge is to keep it going for a sustained period. CAPEX is rising in a few sectors, such as defence, electronics, power, and metals. But it is not broad-based. In the past, strong investment that lifted domestic growth only happened in years when exports were strong. A potential lowering of tariffs imposed by the United States on India's exports would play an important role here.

What role can policymakers play to ensure a

successful pivot from the informal to the formal sector, and from consumption to investment? Two things can help — a good balance between fiscal and monetary policy in the short run, and important reforms that raise returns and reduce risks in the medium term.

Let's start with the first. Can fiscal and monetary policy move to a stable equilibrium that provides stability and predictability? Can policy strike a good balance between the interests of the public and the private sector, as well as investors and savers? A better balance is often related to the concept of neutral policy. But what does it mean in practice?

On the fiscal front, deficit and debt ratios remain elevated. The central government aims to lower public debt ratios to pre-pandemic levels by FY26, which will require continued fiscal consolidation over the next five years. In the forthcoming Budget, we expect the government to show continued restraint, lowering the fiscal deficit target for FY27 (to 4.2 per cent of GDP from 4.4 per cent in FY26). To achieve this, we expect a consolidation in the number of schemes while holding on to infrastructure spend.

The problem instead is with state government finances, where public debt ratios will continue to rise for the next few years, due to a lack of fiscal consolidation. The silver lining is that the 3 per cent fiscal ceiling may begin to restrict the space for higher state deficits. All said, fiscal policy will likely remain tight through 2026.

We track neutral monetary policy in a Taylor rule framework, which has worked well for India over the last decade. Given our expectation that inflation will be just under the 4 per cent target next year (led partly by imported disinflation from China), our model suggests no pressure to raise

rates. In fact, there is space for further easing if growth dips.

A combination of tight fiscal and easy monetary policy that creates a better economic balance should be positive for all asset classes as the year progresses, especially after a year of underperformance compared to other emerging markets. On bonds, higher state borrowing for 1Q26 is already in the price, India's central bank is buying bonds, and we expect fiscal prudence in the Budget. On equities, recent reform announcements, a gradual rise in nominal GDP growth, and more reasonable valuations should help. On the currency, a lot of the rupee depreciation has already happened, while the improved bonds and equities outlook could raise portfolio inflows.

All of this can get you a one-time fillip. For a sustained rise in the economy and markets, reforms are key. Some important reforms have started over the last year, and we hope to see them being pursued more aggressively over 2026. On the domestic front, these include the deregulation drive at the central and state government levels, respectively. On the external front, these include the lowering of Custom duties and non-tariff barriers like quality control orders (QCO) and signing trade deals with not just the West (US and European Union), but also the East (in order to better integrate with regional supply chains).

But this is not where it ends. The reforms discussed above, if implemented well, can raise returns. But we equally need to lower risks. And here, a focus on policy transparency, stability, and predictability is crucial. The rules of the game, or their interpretation, should not be suddenly changed. All of this can add to a more welcoming investment environment in this important policy season.

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tiny experiments

Anne-Laure Le Cunff

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can be accomplished and underestimating the effort required are common pitfalls. Big experiments also create the same pressures as linear goals. Tiny experiments, by contrast, lower the barrier to starting. They can be done with limited resources and sustained even on days of low flow. Writing 300 words a day for a month, for instance, is far more doable than committing to writing a book in 2026. Small trials feel safer because they cost little, and even "failure" provides useful learning rather than becoming a source of discouragement.

The author does not suggest that everyone should quit stable jobs or take reckless leaps. After all, most people have families to support and bills to pay. Her point is more practicable: Conduct low-cost experiments to generate insights, open up new vistas, and grow into a richer, more variegated version of yourself.

Governors and their contentious conduct

It appears that no customary address by a Governor to the legislative assembly in an Opposition-ruled state is now complete without an act of impropriety—refusal to read out the address, skipping parts of it or adding some to the original text, even dramatic walkouts, like Karnataka Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot's, on Thursday. Gehlot chose not to read the full text prepared by the state government and limited his address to three lines from the draft. The governor's action conflicts with a constitutional convention and has been described by Chief Minister Siddaramaiah as an insult to the House. In Tamil Nadu, Governor RN Ravi, who has been a serial violator of gubernatorial norms, also declined to read out the drafted address and walked out of the Assembly on Tuesday. Rajendra Arlekar, the Governor of Kerala, skipped some sentences in his address and made additions of his own. The Assembly, opposing the changes, resolved that the address as prepared by the Cabinet would be on record.

Controversies around the customary address have added theatrics to the ongoing tussle between governors and state governments over issues such as assent to bills and appointment of university vice-chancellors. At the centre of this confrontation is the governors' tendency to undermine their functions as a constitutional link between the Centre and the states, and to act as political agents of the Central government. That these incidents occur only in states with non-BJP governments tells the story.

These annual shows of disruption present the governors and the constitutional office they hold in a poor light. They also deny the right of the legislative assembly to listen to the government. The Constitution does not provide a choice to the Governor in this regard. It has been asserted by several constitutional authorities that the Governor is required to read out the exact text of the speech that is prepared by the state government, spelling out its views and policies. The state government has the right to criticise the Central government, and the Governor has no authority to disapprove of this criticism. An obstructionist office that is guided by political interests and gets in the way of an elected state government has no place in a federal system. Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M K Stalin has suggested that a constitutional amendment be made to scrap the practice of the Governor addressing the first session of the state assembly. This may be considered favourably as it will spare the people of the unsavoury annual spectacle of governors breaking established conventions.

In the breaking of assembly address conventions, there is a troubling politicisation of a ceremonial duty

A call for reform in higher education

The Supreme Court's directions issued while considering a report on student distress and suicides in universities highlight serious concerns around mental health and the gaps in supporting infrastructure in India's higher education institutions (HEIs). Based on an interim report by a Court-constituted task force, these directions are aimed at establishing preventive institutional mechanisms for student well-being. The Court noted that rigid attendance policies, issues related to curricula and exam assessment, inadequate placement processes, faculty shortage, and other factors create mental stress for students that needs to be addressed to ensure a productive academic life.

The Court issued the directions by invoking its powers under Article 142 of the Constitution. Seven of its nine directions pertain to record-keeping, reporting, and tracking suicides, while the other two are about filling up vacancies. The Court directed that vacant faculty positions, in both public and private HEIs, should be filled within four months. Appointments of Vice-Chancellors and Registrars must be made within a month of the posts falling vacant, as a matter of practice. It was pointed out in the task force's report that, according to the National Education Policy (NEP), leadership positions in HEIs should not be kept vacant for long periods, and the tenures of outgoing and incoming vice-chancellors may overlap for some time. The backlog of scholarship disbursements should also be cleared in four months. The Court observed that the "massification" and "privatisation" of higher education have placed India second globally in student enrolment, but the rush has left behind a trail of deaths, distress, vacancies, and exploitation.

Half of the top positions in the HEIs are considered vacant. They should be filled without delay, but the question that follows the Court's intervention is whether the appointments can be made in the short period prescribed for them. Appointments to top positions, including Vice-Chancellors and Registrars, are caught in a face-off between governments and Governors in states ruled by the Opposition parties. They involve legal and political challenges. Appointments of faculty members have to be made in compliance with UGC guidelines, and that cannot be done in a hurry, violating established norms. Budgetary considerations also influence these appointments. Qualified candidates for both administrative and faculty positions are not always readily available, especially on short notice. These are challenges, but there is a strong intent in the Court's directions that, with prompt follow-through action, can be a first step towards comprehensive reform in the sector.

Student well-being is at the centre of the SC's intervention that prioritises filling vacant positions

Strategic drift deepens India's defence vulnerabilities

Gaps in policy and procurement must not be allowed to weaken deterrence in a volatile neighbourhood

RAJAT PANDIT

India's systemic inability to formulate and then execute long-term plans to assiduously build military capabilities to tackle its two-front collusive threat from China and Pakistan is evident once again. The defence ministry's ongoing move to finalise the acquisition of 14 French-origin Rafale fighters under the multi-role fighter aircraft (MRFA) project, with the bulk of them to be built domestically, is a stark reminder of the country's lack of strategic planning over the years.

A similar plan to induce 126 fighters under the medium multi-role combat aircraft (MMRCA) project was scrapped in 2015 after a long-drawn competition, in which the Rafale was eventually selected over the F/A-18 and F-16 (US), Gripen (Sweden), MiG-35 (Russia), and Eurofighter Typhoon jets.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) had first projected the requirement for 126 MMRCA way back in 2000, for which the global tender was finally floated in 2007 by the UPA-2 government. After the other contenders were ejected following technical evaluation, the Rafale had then edged out the Eurofighter in the ensuing commercial evaluation. The final negotiations, however, deadlocked over French aviation major Dassault's refusal to stand full guarantee for 108 of the 126 jets which were to be built by defence PSU Hindustan Aeronautics (HAL) as well as the huge production costs.

The NDA government, in office then, finally jilted the stalled MMRCA project and went in for the direct acquisition of 36 Rafales, without any transfer of technology or "Make in India" component, under the Rs 59,000 crore inter-governmental contract with France. Now, it is back to square one. Though the final contours of the MRFA project and price negotiations are still far from being finalised, it is estimated that it could now cost around Rs 3.25 lakh crore—this is almost double the MMR-

CA project. The IAF, meanwhile, is in a precarious position, down to just 29 fighter squadrons (each has 16-18 jets) against an authorised strength of 42.5. In contrast, Pakistan already has 25 squadrons and is looking to acquire 40 J-35A fifth-generation Chinese stealth fighters in the near future. With an air force more than four times the size of the IAF, China is now even developing sixth-generation fighters such as Chengdu J-36 and Shenyang J-50.

China continues to steadily arm Pakistan to keep India bogged down in South Asia, with Bangladesh also being wooed now as a potential ally in the grand design. During the cross-border



hostilities with India in May last year, Pakistan used a wide array of Chinese weapons and sensor-shooter networks, ranging from J-10 fighters armed with over 200-km range PL-15 air-to-air missiles to HQ-9 air defence missile batteries. Beijing even provided Islamabad with real-time satellite feeds on Indian military deployments.

Faced with this collusive challenge in the backdrop of India's persistent failure to build its own jet engines, the continuing huge delays in production of the fourth-generation Tejas jets and their advanced versions, and the indigenous fifth-generation jet called AMCA (advanced medium combat aircraft) not expected to enter production before 2035, the IAF contends that the 4.5-generation Rafale is the only viable option available to shore up its depleting numbers.

Preparedness is the casualty
The situation on other fronts is equally dismal. Take conventional or diesel-electric submarines. India's major

underwater combat edge over Pakistan also faces erosion now, with the latter slated to induct eight advanced Chinese Hangor-class submarines, with air-independent propulsion (AIP) for greater underwater endurance, from this year onwards.

While India's mega project to construct six new German-origin submarines with AIP at Mazagon Docks for around Rs 90,000 crore may finally be inked soon, the first boat will roll out only after seven to eight years. This project, incidentally, was granted the initial nod or "acceptance of necessity" way back in 2007.

This lack of proactive planning and execution across multiple fronts, ranging from fighters, submarines, and helicopters to anti-tank guided missiles, air defence weapons, and night-fighting capabilities, rudely jolts India whenever it faces a crisis. Be it the Chinese incursions into eastern Ladakh in April-May 2020 or Operation Suroor last year, India has to scramble for emergency procurements (EP) of even smaller weapons and arms to plug its critical operational gaps in a piecemeal manner.

The sixth EP tranche, approved after Operation Suroor, incidentally, ended on January 15. Under it, the armed forces were empowered to build and replenish their stockpiles, with an outer combined limit of around Rs 40,000 crore for capital and revenue procurements from the existing 2025-26 defence budget.

For larger projects, the defence ministry had promulgated the much-touted strategic partnership (SP) model in May 2017 to boost indigenous defence production through tie-ups with foreign armament majors. But this has not taken off due to some inherent problems, including the pricing methodology. The defence offset policy, too, has largely failed to deliver the goods.

India needs well-crafted concrete long-term capability development plans to ensure the domestic defence-industrial base becomes robust, with greater private sector participation, the armed forces get the requisite capabilities to deter threats, and the country gets the biggest bang for its buck. Amid the ongoing geopolitical volatility, being upended by US President Donald Trump in no small measure, it is a strategic necessity.

(The writer is a senior journalist who writes on strategic/defence issues)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

The great Indian art of cutting the line

The urge to slip ahead when no one is watching can be powerful

ASHOK B HERVANI

I have been observing this phenomenon for years, and it deserves to be called what it is: a national habit. I am, of course, talking about queue-jumping.

We, in India, have elevated queue-jumping to a fine art, practised with remarkable confidence and even a hint of pride. Bank queues, airport queues, cinema queues—no line is truly sacred. We excel at the casual side, the innocent glance, and the sudden display of urgency that propels us to the front.

I recall an incident at a bank that captures this perfectly. A gentleman, clearly in a hurry, walked straight up to the counter and began chatting

with the cashier, blissfully ignoring the dozen people waiting patiently in line. When someone gently pointed out the existence of a queue, he looked genuinely surprised—as though the rest of us were merely extras on a set, placed there for his convenience. The cashier smiled politely and began serving him. The queue, at that moment, ceased to exist entirely.

What drives this behaviour? A belief that rules apply only to others? Or a quiet conviction that one's own time is far more precious than anyone else's? Perhaps it is simply a habit—practised so often that it no longer feels wrong or even noticeable.

Over time, I have seen every tactic deployed. People argue, cajole, and even invent reasons to get ahead. Some suddenly discover senior-citizen status. Others feign injuries that disappear once their task is done. There are those who announce they have "just one quick question", which somehow requires full service. It is a never-ending

performance, rehearsed and refined.

The irony, of course, is that queue-jumping merely redistributes frustration. It does not save time; it wastes everyone else's. Instead of order, it creates irritation; instead of patience, suspicion. We end up watching one another closely, alert for the next violation.

In the interest of honesty, I must confess that I have been tempted too. Who hasn't? The urge to slip ahead when no one is watching can be powerful. But that is precisely why resisting it matters. Civil behaviour is not defined by what we do when we are watched, but by what we choose when we are not.

Imagine the chaos if everyone decided the queue did not apply to them. Now imagine the calm if everyone respected it, quietly and without exception.

So perhaps it's time for a small pact—with ourselves, if not with each other. Let's stand in line, wait our turn and prove that order is not beyond us.

Who's with me?

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Governor's duty, not discretion

I refer to "Guv refuses to address session..." (Jan 22). The Governor's refusal to address the session is blatantly unconstitutional. Article 176(0) mandates the Governor to address the joint session annually. The Governor is a titular head, functioning on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers. Refusal to address the Assembly, walkouts and altering the state-prepared speech set a bad precedent, and it is notable that this occurs only in

non-BJP-ruled states. Although governors are considered agents of the Union government, it only implies that they are a constitutional link between the state and the Union. They should function independently of the political heads of state and discharge their duties impartially. They will do well to remember that non-BJP governments are also democratically elected.

Prabhu Harle, Bengaluru

discrepancies" approach ("Roll clean up should not erase real voters", Jan 22) raises concerns. The EC must ensure accountability, transparency, and not exclude voters, avoiding adverse impact on India's electoral democracy.

Radhika Ananya, Bengaluru

Anything but peace

India has no reason to associate itself with this so-called Board of Peace or to share a platform with Pakistan, a country with a long and well-documented record of sponsoring and breeding terrorists who continue to attack our nation. A cursory look at the Board's stated purpose, its opaque management structure, and

the vesting of lifelong, unquestionable authority in Donald Trump as its self-appointed chairman is sufficient to deter any self-respecting country or leader from engaging with this bizarre creation. This Board stands either as a stark reflection of Trump's boundless arrogance and appetite for self-promotion, or as further evidence of a mental imbalance that professional psychiatrists have openly begun to suggest.

TC Narayan, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to letters@deccanherald.co.in (Only letters emailed—not handwritten—will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

RAFALES AGAIN

SPEAK OUT



You (Eknath Shinde) broke our party, someone else will break yours.
Anand Dubey,
Shiv Sena (UBT) leader

We have to distrust each other. It is our only defence against betrayal.

Tennessee Williams

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Credit unlocks minorities' potential

Limited access to credit impedes opportunity. India must prioritise inclusive lending as a public investment

G KUMAR NAIK

Across India, the promise of upward mobility still hinges on something as simple as access to timely and affordable credit. For many young people, this single barrier shapes the future course of their education, work, and overall lifestyle. And an absence of accessible credit often translates into stalled aspirations.

Whenever access, capital, and education have flourished, minority communities have been among the architects of the republic's economic and intellectual foundations. From the Tata Group to Azim Premji, from Kasturbhai Lalbhai's imprint on higher education to Yusuf Hamied's transformation of Indian pharmaceuticals, the institutions that anchor India bear the marks of a plural social fabric. Reading these achievements as exceptions obscures the larger point—that they are outcomes of opportunity, not anomalies of identity. Inclusion, then, is the condition under which talents is converted to national capacity.

A wide body of empirical research has consistently shown that several minority communities continue to face outcomes comparable to, or in some cases worse than, other historically disadvantaged groups. In such cases, broader and more equitable access to credit can expand enterprise, employment, and economic contribution. The National Minorities Development and Finance Corporation (NMDFC) was established in 1994, aimed at helping minority communities study further, start small businesses, and take up self-employment through State-Sponsored loans.

In response to my question in Parliament, data released by the Ministry of Minority Affairs shows the flow of credit to minority families has been quite limited on the ground. Of the Rs 8,800 crore released over the past three decades, more than 75% has gone to just three states—West Bengal, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. Most other states have received, on average, barely Rs 3 crore in micro-credit and Rs 63 crore in term loans. Even large states such as Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh, which together account for some of India's largest minority populations, have fewer than 30,000 beneficiaries under NMDFC schemes.

This limited reach is mirrored in education loans. Between 2019-20 and 2021-22, the NMDFC sanctioned only 513 concessionary loans for technical and professional courses. In contrast, the Padma Pardesh scheme, discontinued in 2022-23, supported over 3,500 students annually. The Government of India

met strong demand for loans while operating with the trust and confidence of their communities. Their experience exposes the gaps in formal credit delivery, offering lessons for the State on what is missing. Partnerships with colleges, universities, minority industry chambers, and insurance providers willing to share risk can help extend reach where government capacity is limited.

Moving a resolution on minority rights at the Haripura Congress session on February 20, 1938, Nehru had recognised a simple truth: economic hardship affects all people the same, and such material insecurity is what matters to them. For Nehru, India's progress depended on a genuine sense of belonging for all minorities. Today, with limited credit flows and shrinking government contributions leaving the promise of minority welfare largely on paper, his vision remains urgent. We must empower institutions to ensure that minority communities can participate fully and meaningfully as equal partners in the nation's progress.

(The writer is a retired IAS officer and Congress Lok Sabha member from Raichur)

I just want to relax and spend time with my dogs'

Fresh off the announcement of her retirement from NASA just a day ago, legendary astronaut Sunita Williams touched down at the ninth edition of the Kerala Literature Festival (KLJ) on Thursday. In an exclusive interaction with DH, the record-breaking space explorer reflected on her 27-year career, the heart-breaking transition to retirement, and her new-found status as a civilian who just wants to catch up on sleep and spend time with her pets. Excerpts:

Now that you have retired from NASA, will you be helping India in its human spaceflight programme (Gaganyaan) in any capacity? I don't know what I'm going to do next; I don't have any plans *per se*. Right now, I just want to relax for a little while and spend some time with my family, my friends, and my dogs. Hopefully, being here and talking to students will help promote STEM in this country. I don't have any major

Sunita Williams, former NASA astronaut and retired US Navy Captain, in conversation with Ashwin B M



objectives except to share my story and the story of space exploration.

What will you miss most about

space and the programme?

The view of our planet is incredible, and not having that opportunity again is a little heart-breaking. But really, it is the people. My husband always tells me I am lucky to work with such innovative, smart people who just want to get the job done. I actually retired on December 27, but I have been so busy it doesn't feel like it yet. Now, it is time to pass the torch to the next generation. I am looking forward to them becoming famous and doing big things.

Can you take us back to the exact moment you decided you wanted to go to space?

Honestly, I was surprised when I got into the programme. I thought it might have been a clerical error! My background was as a helicopter test pilot; I am operational. I studied engineering, but I never thought it was my forte. However, being a tester and knowing how to ask the right questions while developing spacecraft

turned out to be a good fit. I just tried to do my best, and it turned into an amazing opportunity to help build and operate the space station.

Given the skewed representation of non-binary and queer identities in STEM, how can we ensure more inclusivity in space programmes?

To be honest, that is a question I have never thought about. I have historically held jobs that were for males. My approach has always been to put the "blinders" on and just do the best job possible. I think the best way to open doors for any underrepresented group is to prove you can do the job; then there is no debate. Regarding physical inclusivity, we try to accommodate different sizes

in spacesuits, but it is an expensive business, and there are certain height criteria. But if people are the best for the job, I don't see any roadblocks.

How did you cope with the uncertainty of your last mission when the stay was extended unexpectedly?

The hardest part was the summer, when we didn't know if we were going back on our spacecraft or not. We were extra crewmates up there. We were eating a lot of food and using the bathroom a lot. You have to pitch in and do the non-glorious jobs, like fixing meals or stocking supplies, to be part of the team. The most precarious time was when our original spacecraft

left to free the docking port and we were waiting for SpaceX Crew-9. We had a plan, but it was a team sport. I felt lucky to get extra time in space.

What was it like being away from your dogs, and what is your take on the Supreme Court of India's directives regarding community dogs in public spaces?

My dogs are huge in my life. I lost my Gorby in 2017, but Gunner and Rotor are my little buddies. While I was up there, a cargo craft brought me 3D-printed miniatures of my dogs, which was wonderful. Regarding the legal issues with community dogs, I only read a snippet about it, but I understand the priority of human safety. However, it is partially our fault as humans for creating environments where animals can't live naturally. From space, you realise every person, animal, and plant lives on this one planet. We all need to give each other a little physical space.



The US president used a keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland to renounce the last vestiges of the liberal democratic order

PETER S GOODMAN

In a long, rambling address that was by turns bombastic, aggrieved and self-congratulatory, US President Donald Trump pronounced last rites on American leadership of the liberal democratic order forged by the United States and its allies after World War II.

Trump used a keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos on Wednesday—a pilgrimage site for adherents of globalisation—to assert that the United States was done offering its markets and its military protection to European allies he derided as freeloadeers. And he vowed to advance his trade war. He characterised tariffs as the price of admission to a land of 300 million consumers.

"The United States is keeping the whole world afloat," Trump said. "Everybody took advantage of the United States."

By evening, Trump had flip-flopped on Greenland. He said in a social media post that he would no longer use tariffs to try to wrest control of the Danish territory, at least while discussions between his top aides and Europeans carried on. The announcement spared the sovereignty of the island, but there was no taking back the significance of Trump's attack on the global economic order just hours earlier.

The American president appeared in the same auditorium where, nine years earlier, the Chinese president, Xi Jinping, gave a speech claiming credence as a champion of international cooperation. Xi captivated the village of Davos with his endorsement of what he described as "economic globalisation." His 2017 address, delivered days before Trump was inaugurated for his first term, resonated as a clear yet futile effort to stave off the trade war that soon unfolded.

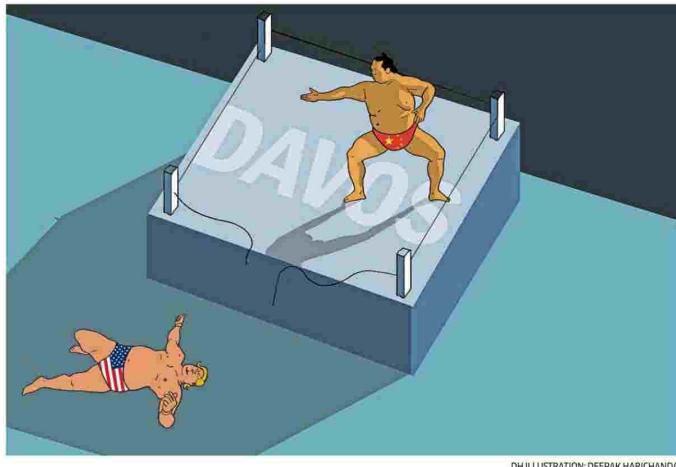
"Pursuing protectionism is just like locking oneself in a dark room," Xi said that day. "While wind and rain may be kept outside, that dark room will also block light and air. No one will emerge as a winner in a trade war."

Then as now, deep scepticism greeted China's bid for recognition as a responsible superpower in contrast to Trump's vision of "America First." China's government has long subsidised the making of factory goods that have threatened jobs from Indiana to Indonesia. China's surveillance state has jailed dissidents, labour organisers and journalists. Its military has menaced the self-governing island of Taiwan and neighbours in Southeast Asia. Not even its greatest allies would describe China as a paragon of fair dealing.

Yet in the near decade since, the sense has only been enhanced that China is—at least rhetorically—invested in economic values that Trump has renounced: engagement in multilateral institutions to advance its causes, faith in the wealth-enhancing powers of global trade and recognition that no country is large enough or powerful enough to go it alone.

Trump used his 90-minute turn before the global elite to underscore that contrast, even as fundamental doubts remain about the desirability of a world increasingly influenced by Beijing.

"China definitely wants to assume the mantle of being the adult in the room, while the United States continues capriciously



DH ILLUSTRATION: DEEPAK HARICHANDAN

China wins as Trump cedes leadership of the world economy

showing hostility," said Eswar Prasad, an international trade expert at Cornell University. "The question is whether the rest of the world is willing to accede. I don't think the world is ready to carry full on into the embrace of China."

Europe and China are, in some ways, natural allies in an era when the United States has opted for nationalist brio. Both remain officially committed to the concept of rules-based international trade, even as China is frequently accused of breaching the details. Both affirm the scientific reality of climate change, while mobilising investment and know-how to combat it.

China is the global leader in clean energy technology, designing and manufacturing solar cells, wind turbines, electric vehicles and batteries. Europe, despite recent step backs, has set ambitious targets to diminish carbon emissions—a fact that Trump singled out for derision during his speech, while thumping his chest for the American return to fossil fuels.

"The United States avoided the catastrophic energy collapse which befell every European nation that pursued the green new scam, perhaps the greatest hoax in history," Trump said.

He suggested that Chinese manufacturers were laughing while selling their wind turbines to European buyers. "They sell them to stupid people," Trump said. "Mostly, China goes with the coal."

In truth, the Chinese government has invested aggressively in a world-leading expansion of renewable energy while dimin-

ishing its still substantial reliance on coal.

Given that Europe's largest economies—especially Germany—contain large-scale auto industries, and given that China has become the dominant source of electric vehicles and batteries, the two economic powers are likely to remain major industrial rivals.

The biggest wedge between them is Ukraine, said Adam Tooze, an economic historian at Columbia University and author of *Chartbook*, a popular newsletter.

China's steadfast refusal to condemn Russian aggression is a non-starter in Europe, where Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, is feared and reviled.

"The Europeans would stand alongside China but for Ukraine," Tooze said. He called Russia's war a barrier to what might otherwise be a natural form of "Eurasian multilateralism."

Trump's arrival was highly anticipated in Davos, and across Europe, given his threats to seize Greenland from Denmark, a fellow member of NATO.

The mere possibility of a conflict between the United States and Denmark has threatened the credibility of NATO. In his speech, he repeated his lament that the North Atlantic alliance has functioned as a kind of American-furnished security charity.

"What I'm asking for is a piece of ice, cold and poorly stocked, that can play a vital role in world peace and world protection," Trump said. "It's a very small ask compared to what we have given them for

many, many decades."

A day before Trump's address, his commerce secretary, Howard Lutnick, declared during a panel discussion in Davos that the world trading system—constructed largely on American designs—was part of history. "Globalisation has failed the West and the United States of America," Lutnick said.

Trump offered a reminder of his willingness to impose tariffs on friends and enemies alike.

In what appeared to be an off-the-cuff departure from his scripted remarks, the president recounted the story of how, last year, he decided to impose steep tariffs on imports from Switzerland.

Initially, he opted for 30% levies in an effort to close an American trade deficit with Switzerland, he said.

Then he spoke with the country's president, Karin Keller-Sutter. "A woman," Trump said. "And she was very repetitive. She said: 'No, no, no, you cannot do that, 30%. You cannot do that. We are a small, small country'."

The call prompted Trump to increase the tariffs to 39%. "She just rubbed me the wrong way, I'll be honest with you," Trump said, adding later, "She was so aggressive."

Then he got a visit from Rolex, the Swiss watchmaker. And then he agreed to reduce the tariffs to 15%.

"We brought it down to a lower level," Trump said. "Doesn't mean it is not going up."

The New York Times

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 1976

Kuwait aid for Kali project

New Delhi, January 22

A credit agreement with the Kuwait Fund for financing the Kalindi hydel scheme and other projects is expected to be signed in Kuwait early next week. An Indian delegation, led by Mr. M. G. Kaul, Secretary, Department of Economic Affairs, is leaving for Kuwait to negotiate the credit agreement. The Kalindi project alone may be given a credit of Rs. 44 crore. The overall agreement, the first of its kind, will cover specific projects. The final amount of aid from the Kuwait Fund will be known only at the end of the negotiations.

25 YEARS AGO: JANUARY 2001

Lok Pal Bill ambit to cover PM, Union ministers

New Delhi, Jan 22

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who expressed serious concern over rampant corruption, today said that his government would soon enact the Lok Pal Bill with adequate powers to deal with charges of corruption against Union ministers, including the prime minister. Mr Vajpayee said the failure to catch the corrupt and then to deliver deterrent punishment to them has led to widespread cynicism among the people, resulting in degradation of moral values throughout the society.

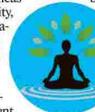
OASIS | ANITHA RAMACHANDER

The being that needs no title

In our daily conversations, we define ourselves by our profession. We respond by saying, "I am a director," "I am a CEO," or "I am a doctor." Though life itself calls for pauses. Sometimes, for various reasons, our careers slow down, change direction, or come to an end. Taking a break for family, health, caregiving, or reflection can feel unsettling. There is stillness when we have no job in our everyday routine. In that stillness, a deeper question arises: who am I when I have no job title to build

our self-esteem. When we have jobs, we often feel secure but vulnerable when things slow down. This external validation seeps inward, and we measure our worth by productivity, achievements, and social status. We see ourselves in the mirror of the world created by others' validation and applause. Anthropologist David Graeber, in his reflections on modern employment, warned of the inner cost of work stripped of meaning, noting that "the moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound."

Our lives extend beyond our



profession and the position we hold. When we set aside the positions we have and our daily routines, we remain beings of hope, fear, love, and the search for meaning in who we are. It teaches us that the self is consciousness experiencing the world through the various roles we play in our daily lives. We should understand that our profession is simply a way to express ourselves. It does not define who we are. Work is just a service, a way to share our talents with the world. Teachers nurture minds, leaders guide others, businesses create value, and so on. Through our

profession, we transform our identity into contribution.

Recognising our self-worth outside of our profession does not mean losing ambition. It is simply a matter of viewing them from the proper perspective. Jobs may reflect our character, but they do not define it. We are judged not by our achievements but by what we accomplish. Our positions are never permanent; our titles will change, our duties will evolve, and what is important today may not remain so for long. Through this, we will rediscover a more profound sense of ourselves, not in what we do but in the simple, profound fact that we are.

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Friday Focus

Provided you are faithful

Mastery of situations, and of events is promised. Being true in faith is however a precondition. Down the historical trail the promise has been held, as seen in different situations, in different events that passed by. The Holy Verses hold the promise:

"Many were the ways of life that have passed before you; travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected faith. Here is a plain statement to men, a guidance and instruction to those who fear Allah" (4:137, 138)

Indeed many were the way of life, as is borne by the pharaonic tale and before that the tale of Nimrod. Pharos and Nimrod traversed the earth, holding the temporal power and claiming the spiritual power as well. They rejected faith; however they had to contend with men of faith. While as Syedna Ibrahim (A.S) contended Nimrod, Syedna Musa (A.S) challenged the ways of pharaonic system. The trial of these eminent prophets held a witness that the divine typists of Nimrod and others that extended to the divine spiritual prowess did not last. Tennyson in *In Memoriam* makes a telling statement: "Our little systems have their day. They have had their day and cease to be. They are but broken lights of Thee, And Thou, O Lord! art more than they."

The Holy verses hold a lesson for men of faith, the lesson that needs to be followed, as is enshrined in the Holy Verse that follows:

"So lose not heart, nor fall into despair, for ye must gain mastery if you are true in faith" (4:139)

However tough the conditions might be, however fearsome the adversary might pose to be, steadfastness should remember the rule—lose not your heart, nor fall into despair, as mastery over situations, over events that might unfold is promised, provided you are true in faith.

REFLECTIONS

Why it's confusing?

Policy-makers must revisit the current evaluation practices



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and act with empathy and responsibility. Loose marking may give a temporary sense of joy, but it does not necessarily produce a long term value. The fundamental aim of education should be to create professionals who are skilled as well as humane. Policy-makers must therefore reflect on whether current evaluation practices are nurturing values or simply generating scores.

In JKBOSE, education turning into a race now, the essence of real learning is lost. Such concern was portrayed in the film *3 Idiots* where Aamir Khan's character reminds us that education is about excellence, not competition. The film repeatedly emphasizes that learning should bring joy, curiosity, and purpose, not fear and comparison. One of its central messages is that success should follow passion and understanding, not blind pressure to outperform others. This idea resonates deeply in today's context, where marks have become more important than meaning.

So, it is important to think over loose and accurate evaluation, because evaluation has its own impact on students. Fair and transparent evaluation can encourage discipline and effort, while excessive leniency risks diluting the credibility of the system. As shown in *3 Idiots*, students crushed under unrealistic expectations lose creativity, confidence, and sometimes even their sense of morality. While it is not so? Since no one can be perfect, the idea of students scoring full marks, especially in language subjects, continues to raise confusion and debate.

Now the debate over loose evaluation and strict evaluation is becoming prominent. It may be a policy choice, we have to determine whether lenient marking boosts students' confidence and reduces examination stress, or whether strict marking pushes students to work harder and become more disciplined.

The latest pattern of evaluation also raises concerns about reputation and credibility, of the entire system also. The challenge lies in finding a balance that rewards genuine understanding without inflating performance beyond realistic limits.

What we need from education is not merely a professional degree, but a good human being, someone who can differentiate between right and wrong

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The trouble with too much certainty

Artificial intelligence holds the potential to concentrate power in ways that delink consciousness from action, intention from responsibility, and agency from accountability



Paradox
Prof. Ashok Kaul
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struggle, and moral choice. If technology were to predict or disclose what lies beyond death, belief would cease to be an existential commitment and become a matter of informational certainty. Such certainty would not deepen faith; it would erode it. Faith deprived of mystery tends to collapse into fear, resentment, or instrumental obedience rather than ethical self-restraint.

Ignorance is often described as bliss, yet only within limits. When ignorance is deliberately preserved or technologically managed to sustain belief, it mutates into vulnerability. The disclosure of ultimate truths through technical means would not liberate humanity but expose it to new forms of domination.

The contemporary world already offers a warning. Despite unprecedented technological expansion and globalization, religions have not grown more humane or pluralistic. Many have instead become rigid, defensive, and intolerant. This suggests that technology does not dissolve existential anxiety; it amplifies it. When consciousness is reduced to performance, efficiency, and algorithmic output, moral imagination withers. What follows is not the enrichment of life but its thinning.

Yet history also offers a countervailing force. The erosion of consciousness is neither total nor irreversible so long as creativity remains alive. Fundamental sciences may continue to generate powerful technologies, but it is the creative and liberal arts that have historically mitigated human anxiety by restoring irony, ambiguity, and moral distance. Literature, particularly traditions such as Urdu poetry, has long insisted that certificates by rote, the preacher, the judge, and the custodian of faith, through art, metaphor, and irony, it has rendered dogmatic accountability fragile, preserving a space for conscience beyond doctrine and calculation.

Sensing this unease, my brother gently suggested that I try writing a series of pieces on the theme of artificial intelligence. I agreed out of curiosity rather than conviction, my scepticism intact. When the edited version arrived, I was struck by its clarity: The argument remained unchanged, the ideas unimakably mine, yet the language moved with an ease that surprised me. Sentences no longer obstructed the thought they carried; they appeared to serve it. The experience was undeniably pleasing. Yet it also produced a deeper unease.

That unease lies not in the technology itself, but in what it may foreshadow. Artificial intelligence has the potential to concentrate power in ways that delink consciousness from action, intention from responsibility, and agency from accountability. If such a trajectory unfolds, one must ask what would remain of human life half a century from now, particularly if accountability itself risks becoming obsolete. A world in which decisions are executed without moral authority may be technologically sophisticated, but it would be ethically hollowed out.

This anxiety acquires a more disturbing dimension when placed alongside religious assurances of life after death, which has historically been rendered safe through faith, but life has drawn its meaning from uncertainty, that is to say, from the unknown.

The contemporary human condition differs sharply from that of earlier epochs. People no longer live primarily for the promise of the next world. They struggle for dignity, recognition, and security in this one. What sustains them is not certainty, but a fragile hope of solidarity. Confessional religion still offers a shared moral language and a sense of belonging. Yet as technology relentlessly obscures rationality, metrics, outcomes, and efficiency, the language of public life shifts. Account-

time settles. It does not rush years. It absorbs them. Aging here is not something to fear. It is something to carry. Each season leaves a mark, and none of them are hidden.

Death, too, feels different when you have stood long enough to see its rhythm. The chinar has seen death many times, but it always has, and for a moment I wondered how many generations have passed beneath it, without realising it was watching.

That thought stayed.

We walk past these trees every day, often without lifting our eyes, forgetting that they have been here longer than ourselves, longer than the chinar. The chinar does not demand attention. It waits. And perhaps that is why, when it finally speaks to us, it does so quietly.

This tree has seen people grow from children into adults and from adults into memories. It has watched laughter spill into afternoons and grief arrive unannounced. It has seen weddings move past in colour and funerals move past in silence. It has witnessed moments we celebrate and moments we do not know how to name. Through it all, it has remained. Not untouched, but steady.

We often describe Kashmir as fragile, as if it survives by chance. But standing there, looking up at the chinar, that idea felt incomplete. This land is not fragile. It is patient. It has learned how to stay.

The chinar understands time in a way we do not. For us, time presses forward, constantly reminding us of what we are losing. For the chinar, time

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The disclosure of ultimate truths through technical means would not liberate humanity but expose it to new forms of domination.

ability risks becoming procedural rather than moral, enforced through systems rather than conscience.

What unsettles me most, then, is not artificial intelligence as a tool, but what it reveals. It exposes a longstanding gap between thinking and expression, between intellectual labour and its uncertain public afterlife. For years, I assumed this gap was personal and inevitable. Technology suggests otherwise. Ideas do not travel on their own. They require language, structure, and confidence. When these are absent, even careful thought remains confined.

The ethical challenge before us, therefore, is not to resist such technologies outright, but to learn how to inhabit them without surrendering depth, responsibility, and judgment. What is at stake is not authenticity, as is often claimed, but our discomfort with uncertainty. Uncertainty unsettles authority, belief, and knowledge. It demands responsibility without guarantees.

Urdu poetry arrived at this recognition long before algorithms.

GHALIB writes:

*Paake jata hain farishton ke likhe par
nā-haq*

Adm koi hamārī dam-e-taib-r bhi thi

He questions the very idea of a flawless moral ledger. His concern is not merely guilt, but representation. Who speaks for the human when judgment is written elsewhere? Accountability becomes text without presence, record without consent.

Iqbal echoes a similar suspicion:

*Purishe-e halā kya magad thā ruswā i
meri*

*Wara woh jante kyā hua, kaise
hua*

Here, questioning turns into spectacle. Inquiry is not meant to understand, but to expose. Moral consciousness dissolves into moral performance.

Raz offers a gentler resolution:

Harsh hal rāmat-e-bār aur khulā

dafr-e-āmat

Divine mercy overcomes meticulous accounting. The ledger fades before lived human excess and vulnerability. The mad lover's transgressions are few, uncalculated, born not of intent but of overflow.

Fuz compresses irony into two lines:

Ik fursat-e-gāmā mili vo bhi char-din

Dehke hāin ham ne hause

parvardigār ke

Even sin, Fuz suggests, is fleeting. Endurance belongs elsewhere. Moral absolutism quietly dissolves.

Taken together, these verses converge on a single insight: accountability is uncertain, mediated, and profoundly human. Judgment often masks power; certainty often conceals fear. What remains is responsibility, fragile yet unavoidable.

In this sense, artificial intelligence and poetry arrive at the same unsettling recognition. The real burden is not being judged, but being human in a world that insists judgment is final. Where we are heading remains unclear. For the moment, ignorance may still offer comfort. The far truth, however, continues to wait.

Prof. Ashok Kaul, Retired Emeritus Professor

of Sociology at Banaras Hindu University

What the Chinar Knows

We walk past these trees every day, often without lifting our eyes

Witness
Baiza Mushtaq
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time settles. It does not rush years. It absorbs them. Aging here is not something to fear. It is something to carry. Each season leaves a mark, and none of them are hidden.

Death, too, feels different when you have stood long enough to see its rhythm. The chinar has seen death many times, but it always has, and for a moment I wondered how many generations have passed beneath it, without realising it was watching.

That thought stayed.

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erations. People leave and come back. Traditions soften but survive. Homes empty and fill again. We often mistake absence for disappearance. The chinar never does.

Standing there today, I realised something both unsettling and calming. We believe we are watching Kashmir change, but Kashmir has been watching us. Watching us struggle with time, fear, aging, resistance, shedding, and still, inevitably, return.

The chinar has seen us hopeful and broken. It has seen us invent new ways to live, to move, to come to terms with loss. It has seen us grow smaller inside our anxieties and larger inside our endurance. It does not judge. Witnesses with it.

As I walked away, I did not feel inspired in the land of the word. I felt staled. As if something older than me had quietly reminded me that survival does not have to be noisy, and meaning does not have to be urgent.

Long after our names are forgotten, something here will still know when it is time to let go, and when it is time to return.

And maybe that is what the chinar has been teaching us all along. Not how to endure endlessly, but how to endure with grace.

Baiza Mushtaq, GKSC Bootcamp participant

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Oped

Reopen these destinations for tourists

Tourism generated livelihood opportunities for women in Doodhpatheri, Yusmarg



Governor
Dr Raja Muzaffar Bhat
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After remaining closed for tourists on account of security-related issues post Pahalgam massacre, the J&K Government in September last year reopened several popular tourist destinations. These included Aru valley in Pahalgam, Yasser rafting point Pahalgam, Akkash Park Pahalgam road, Kaman post Uri, Dhaggar Kathua, Shiv cave Sialkot etc. Before these places were reopened the Govt threw open tourist destinations like Verinag, Kokernag, Betab Valley, Achabal etc., in June last year. Along with many tourist destinations that were closed down for tourists, Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri & Tosamidan in district Budgam were also declared out of bounds for tourists. Initially it was believed that both Yusmarg and Doodhpatheri would be re-opened in June 2025 when Kokernag, Veering, Betab Valley Pahalgam etc., were reopened but that didn't happen? When the Govt again threw open places like Aru Pahalgam and other tourist destinations in September last year, it was for sure Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri and even Tosamidan would be

reopened, but this didn't happen?

Peaceful destinations

By keeping destinations like Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri and Tosamidan closed for tourists for the last 10 months, this is having a severe impact on local livelihoods. I understand that there will be security concerns which prompted the Govt to keep these destinations closed, but keeping these destinations closed for 10 long months is a matter of concern? Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri and Tosamidan in district Budgam are beautiful tourist destinations in Kashmir which are easily accessible through roads. These places have always remained peaceful and the whimsicaloward incident with tourists in post Doodhpatheri especially had witnessed huge tourist inflow in the last 3 to 4 years. Even during the winters of 2023, 2024 and 2025 the area witnessed a huge rush of people. Yusmarg and Tosamidan were also getting a good number of tourists and people were struggling to get a better inflow of non-Kashmiri visitors, but the April 2025 Pahalgam terror attack smashed the dreams of local people associated with tourist trade?

Women's livelihood snatched

It makes my eyes wet when I see Yusmarg and Doodhpatheri closed down and the local population struggling? Few days back the aggrieved people associated with the tourism trade in Yusmarg had assembled at Nilnag to protest. It is unfortunate that they can't even assemble to protest in Yus-



mar which is like their Karan Bhopuri? I remember how happily women from Rayar and adjoining villages near Doodhpatheri began selling fresh *makki rotis* and noon chai, Kohwa etc., on the roadside from the last 3 to 4 years? This was further upgraded and within one or two years post COVID 19 2022 to 2025, almost 200 such women made shift dhabas had been set up on both sides of the road right from Rayar to Doodhpatheri. It was looking so fascinating and women were earning a decent livelihood along with their male members of the families. Infact by 2024-2025 this was replicated in Yusmarg and Tosamidan as well. The women

especially around Doodhpatheri further upgraded these makeshift samovar chai centres into small dhabas selling matki rotis, Kashmiri haak (collard greens), salbi, achaar, omelette, maggi and many things. This work had been flourishing even in winter in the last 2 years & financially empowered these women who otherwise would hardly earn even a penny before 2021? The dreams of these poor women were also shattered post Pahalgam attack. Their husbands, sons, brothers who worked with them or as horse-handlers in local areas are also jobless for 10 months and Govt has not compensated even a single family till date?

Bank Loans

We understand the security concerns of the Government, but closing these destinations for such a long time is a matter of concern. For the last 10 months people have cooperated and this is the time now to reopen Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri, Tosamidan and other closed tourism destinations. Authorities can provide enough security in these areas, plus use modern gadgets like drones to keep the security grid intact. Not only are poneywals or horse handlers suffering in Yusmarg and Doodhpatheri especially but the people who had invested in building guest houses, home-stays, dhabas, restaurants, camping agen-

cies etc are frustrated. They have taken huge bank loans and are in serious debt as they are unable to pay the monthly instalments for the last 10 months? Conclusion

I am sure the tourism players in Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri and Tosamidan are even in other places which are closed like Bungum will fully cooperate with government and security agencies to ensure safety and security of tourists, if tourists were attacked in Pahalgam and that place has been reopened again many months back why shall people in Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri or Tosamidan continue to suffer? We live in a welfare state but our elected Govt hasn't even thought about the small business these workers are set up in Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri, Tosamidan? Has the Govt ever spoken to these aggrieved women? Did authorities ever make contact with the Poneywals of Yusmarg or Doodhpatheri and provide them some kind of support, like ration, feed for horses etc? These poor horse-handlers have to not only feed their families but they have to feed these animals as well? It is the duty of all MLAs from Budgam to jointly meet the Union Home Minister, Hon'ble LG and Union Home Secretary to ensure Yusmarg, Doodhpatheri and Tosamidan are thrown open for tourists without any delay. The J&K Assembly must also pass a resolution in this regard in the upcoming session of assembly.

Dr Raja Muzaffar Bhat is Chairman Jammu & Kashmir RTI Movement and Founder of JK Climate Action Group -JKCAG

Toppers within toppers

Why are we obsessed with exams at a time when some countries have abolished exams at primary and secondary levels?



Examination
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to memorize text books and reproduce the information in exams. This method has several drawbacks. Firstly, it stifles creativity and critical thinking. Students are rarely encouraged to develop spirit of inquiry, analyze, or interpret information; instead they are compelled to focus on recalling facts. This approach in the long run fails to prepare students for real-world challenges where problem solving and critical thinking are essential. Why are we obsessed with exams at a time when some countries have abolished exams at primary and secondary levels? Aren't there better ways of testing students' knowledge and skills?

The primary goals of school education are to imbibe grit, perseverance, out of box thinking skills and learning abilities. Subjecting students to unhealthy competitions, celebrating rankers and making other students feel dejected are for sure not the purposes of school education.

In the post-dissertation discussion usually revolved around the pass and fail scenario. However, in the current context, the core of the discussion is who made it to the rankers' club: toppers within toppers? Is there anyone who truly talks and cares for the those who have not transitioned into the next grade or the ones who have performed average. Will they face the fate of silent exclusion? Who will own them? Not performing on the expected lines in a three hour pen-paper test is what actually defines them? Is this the sole criterion to evaluate their inherent potential or it just assesses the level of hard memorization or rote learning? Isn't social media glorification of rankers and toppers rendering the other lot vulnerable to increased psychological disturbance? The immediate consequence of this psychological fragility has been the suicide of a 12th class aspirant from Doda.

We need to start exploring better ways of evaluating the competencies and the larger emphasis given to pen-paper test needs to be scaled down. This is in sync with the NEP 2020 which envisages 360 degree development of the child.

The obsolete rote-learning driven examination system: Rote learning has been the defining feature of Indian examination system for decades. Students are often encouraged

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The immediate outcome of this psychological fragility has been the suicide of a 12th class aspirant from Doda.

Glorification of rankers on Social media: Every other social media account is abuzz with glorifying the results of the toppers. This adds to the woes of those who are already being compared, judged, and humiliated who could not fetch marks as expected by the family and the society. Even the social media glorification of the toppers can derail them from their career progression as there are ample chances they might get carried away by this untimely attention.

Dr. Mushtaq Rather is an Educator and writes on issues related to education

Senior Citizens Lounge

Cholesterol report that opened a bigger conversation

Lower LDL cholesterol = lower risk of heart attack, stroke and sudden death



Cholesterol
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It began with a simple WhatsApp message from one of my senior patients. A photograph of his lipid profile. Total cholesterol: 237 mg/dL. The lab's reference range flashed red. "Doctor saab, do I need more treatment?" he asked.

It was a fair question. Most people fixate on that single bold number, total cholesterol, much like focusing on the final score of a match without knowing how each player performed. But cholesterol, like health, is never a single-number story.

He has given his real life example that a student who secured just 55% marks in class 12th can go and secure 52% rank in UPSC exam. Thus it is quite evident that securing good marks is not the sole criterion to guarantee career progression. It is high time to design assessment in such a way that it assesses multiple competencies of the child rather than merely relying on rote memorization.

Initiative in the right direction

The Union Education Ministry has constituted a panel recently headed by Higher Education Secretary Vineet Joshi, to suggest measures to reduce dependency of students on coaching centres and assess the effectiveness and fairness of existing examination system.

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THE GOAN EVERYDAY

Our work is the presentation of our capabilities.
Edward Gibbon

Paltry fines render PCA law toothless

Two people were fined Rs 200 each for organising a bullfight in Pilar. A car driver, owner of a Mercedes no less, was fined Rs 150 for 'involuntarily' driving over a dog at Dona Paula. These two headlines over the past few days in Goa reveal, more than anything, how, despite assurances being made time and again by successive governments that they are committed towards streamlining and updating laws, updating penalties under the laws and enhancing punishments under these laws, some of which were enacted decades ago, gaps persist.

The fine amount has made a mockery of the entire process. Even assuming that having a conviction against your name is to be treated as a punishment enough, how does one justify imposing a fine that will not even cover the costs of a single day's hearing?

Both these fines have been imposed under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, a law that was enacted back in 1960. Society has evolved since then. Today, offences involving cruelty towards animals generate far more outrage than they once did. This is especially true in the case of social media, CCTVs and online lynch mobs baying for the blood of those who inadvertently or inadvertently are cruel towards animals.

In the Dona Paula case, where the Mercedes driver 'involuntarily' ran over the dog, and later pleaded guilty to the offence, the incident was recorded only because it was captured by a CCTV camera, after which it was shared online and later went 'viral'. This prompted the North Goa district society for the prevention of cruelty to animals to file a complaint.

Such paltry fines are an incentive for the offenders to wilfully break the law, because the punishment is procedural rather than anything else. The fine amount is not even worth the paper it is written on, while the offenders will probably hold up the challan as some kind of trophy they have achieved

for the offenders to wilfully break the law, because the punishment is procedural rather than anything else. The fine amount is not even worth the paper it is written on, while the offenders will probably hold up the challan as some kind of trophy they have achieved.

At the same time, one needs to keep in mind that if the government does agree to enhance the fines, the law needs to be flexible to differentiate between those acts that are committed as a result of an accident, or in self-defence, lest the law throw people defending themselves against dog and cattle attacks under the bus.

In this online age, when mobile video footage or CCTV footage does not tell the whole story, and where the animal lovers are quick to gang up against those seemingly cruel towards animals, while acting out of bona fide good intention, could be the real casualty.

The law needs to be kind where necessary, and stern where necessary. And when it comes to the latter, imposing fines of Rs 150 and 200 can't even be called a penal provision anymore, thereby rendering the whole law 'toothless.'

OPEN SPACE >>

Chimbel locals have nothing to lose but mall

Chimbel villagers on Wednesday have reportedly warned of intensifying their agitation against the Unity Mall project after Chief Minister Pramod Sawant told their delegation that the project could not be scrapped as it was a centrally sanctioned national project and had reached an advanced stage of implementation and around Rs 25 crore had also been already spent over the same. The issue is that had the government should have taken the Chimbel villagers into confidence before deciding to bring this so-called 'centrally sanctioned national project' at Chimbel. Then how can CM Sawant say that his government cannot scrap the said controversial project despite of seeing the ongoing strong protests from the villagers of Chimbel? Or does CM Sawant think that just because his government has a majority in the house, it can bring any project on the quiet against the wishes of Goans? And lastly that Rs 25 crore that has already been spent is CM talking about putting up iron sheets and cutting trees around the proposed Unity Mall project site at Chimbel? I think that Goans need to stand up and counter this imposed project.

JERRY FERNANDES, Saligao



We don't truly understand secularism

Inconsistent enforcement, identity-based exceptions, and symbolic gestures without clarity have diluted true secularism



The writer is a brand and marketing consultant, writer, coach and mentor

SANJEEV KOTNALA

As constitutionally aligned, civically educated, and politically unaffiliated ordinary citizens, we find ourselves asking an increasingly uncomfortable question: do we, as a nation, actually understand what secularism means? Or have we reduced it to a ritual that is recited loudly, interpreted selectively, and practised inconsistently?

The Constitution of India is not ambiguous. The Preamble declares India a "Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic", committed to justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. These are not ornamental words. They are binding promises. In our school civics classes, we were clearly taught that India is not a Hindu state, not a Muslim state, and not a state aligned to any faith. That choice, debated intensely during Partition, was consciously made. History may argue alternatives; the Constitution settled the matter.

We accepted that contract. It entailed an understanding that secularism, as envisaged by the framers of the Constitution, was never about hostility to religion. It was about neutrality. Equal distance. Equal respect. Equal restraint.

Article 14 guarantees equality before the law. Article 15(1) prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 25 assures freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practise, and propagate religion—subject to public order, morality, and health.

That final qualifier matters. Rights were never absolute; they were balanced.

And yet, the imbalance around us is hard to miss. We live in a secular republic where laws are not uniform across citizens. Personal laws vary by religion. Religious institutions are regulated differently. The right to publicly demonstrate one's faith appears uneven. It is guided more by constitutional principle and more by perceived sensitivity.

In practice, equality often yields to expectation: how strongly might a group react, how disruptive could it become, and how inconvenient would enforcement be? This is not neutrality; it is negotiation.

Even equality before the law seems elastic. Similar statements by different citizens attract wildly different consequences—blasphemy in one case, free expression in another. Some misrepresentations invite swift condemnation;



others are met with studied silence. Over time, the perception of uneven protection takes root, eroding trust not only in institutions but also in the idea of fairness itself.

A secular state cannot allow fear of disorder to determine the scope of rights. That quietly shifts power from law to threat. Perhaps that is what has been happening in neighbouring countries, and may be the next step for us. It weakens institutions and eventually harms every citizen, including those monetarily protected by silence.

In recent times, we have witnessed symbolic acts. Some individuals publicly carry the Constitution, holding it aloft and invoking it as a moral authority. Symbols matter. They remind us of the Republic's conscience. But symbolism must eventually be matched by clarity.

It may help if those who raise the Constitution also stand up and state, unambiguously, that, every action, speech, process, and policy they support respects the Constitution, if not always literally, then at least morally and in spirit. That reassurance matters. For the average citizen watching from the sidelines, the lines are increasingly blurred.

Reservations present another unresolved contradiction. Reservation was an affirmative action that was both morally necessary and constitutionally sanctioned in the early years of the Republic. Article 15(4) allows the state to make special provisions, and Article 16(4) allows reservations for backward classes of citizens not adequately represented in public services. These were corrective tools, meant to address historic exclusion and enable mobility, not to fossilise identity. So the questions today are practical, not ideological.

How does backwardness remain unchanged across generations? How does the child of a senior civil servant continue to article under criteria meant to offset deprivation? At what point does empowerment require reassessment? If secularism implies equal opportunity, should reservations, at least in ed-

ucation, not be aligned primarily with economic vulnerability across caste, religion, and region? And once education is enabled, should professional responsibility not be merit-based?

A secular republic must aspire to competence without prejudice, not competence with permanent qualifiers.

The discomfort deepens when free expression enters the room. Democracy thrives on debate, dissent, and critique, including the questioning of belief systems. But when the same expression is defended for one and penalised for another, not by principle but by anticipated outrage or political leverage, freedom becomes conditional. It does not build or manage harmony.

Perhaps the confusion we experience as citizens stems from a more basic gap.

We demand constitutional behaviour without ensuring constitutional understanding. Perhaps it is time to insist that foundational knowledge of the Constitution and fundamental civil and criminal law become a graduate-level requirement across disciplines—engineering, medicine, commerce, and the arts—not as ideology, but as civic literacy. Passing this understanding should involve no quotas, no grace marks.

One could even argue, uncomfortably, that such literacy should precede full participation in the formal system—salaried employment, public loans, passport—not as punishment, but as preparation. Rights carry weight only when understood.

The Constitution has not failed to define secularism. What we suffer from is selective understanding. We remember secularism when it reassures us and misinterpret it when it challenges us.

A secular republic is not one where no one is offended. It is one in which laws, rights, and responsibilities apply equally, even when enforcement is uncomfortable.

Until we accept that discipline, secularism will remain something we recite fluently, admire selectively, and practise imperfectly.

- FPJ

India's Constitution defines secularism as neutrality and equal application of law, not selective tolerance

THE INBOX >>

Government shows wilful disregard for CAG audits

The CAG audit report highlighted various extensive financial irregularities across departments for the period ended March 2023 which was tabled in the State Legislature. This highlights widespread, recurring, and significant financial irregularities across departments indicating systemic failures in accountability, procurement, and financial management. The Goa government shows wilful disregard for CAG audits by pushing state towards a Sri Lanka type of economic collapse with no ideas for revenue. Since corrective action is often delayed, such misuse is becoming routine, and CAG reports are sometimes ignored. The consistent reporting of these issues highlights a chronic failure in the internal control and audit mechanisms within government departments. The report exposes alarming instances of financial irregularities, gross mismanagement in government departments that handled money of the people. And these are not minor procedural lapses but a systematic breakdown of accountability and raises serious questions about who had benefited from these irregularities and why timely action was not taken.

KG VILOP, Chorao

Govt must reduce casino pollution of Mandovi river

This illegality of offshore permitted operations inside Mandovi river and people's demand for removing them due to pollution and contaminating Goa in more ways than one is not new. Every government has given assurance but been unable to do it. One of the 10 points in the citizen's charter of demands submitted to the CM is that all casinos from the river should be removed within 6 months. Though desirable, this is obviously not

Is State prepared for deposit refund scheme?

Goa is all set to roll out a state-wide Deposit Refund Scheme (DRS) from April 2, 2026. Under this programme, consumers who buy products in non-biodegradable packaging such as plastic, glass, and aluminium will pay a small extra deposit of Rs 5 to 10 on the item purchased, which is fully refundable when the packaging is returned to designated collection points. Several collection points, including automated machines, will reportedly be set up across Goa to receive returning containers. A central system operator will oversee collection, refund processing, and logistics. The scheme has several advantages. Less litter makes streets, beaches, and public spaces cleaner which is vital for Goa's image as a tourist destination. Less waste also reduces municipal cleanup costs. On the flip side consumers have to pay more at the time of purchase, which could be a burden for some households. Setting up collection machines and monitoring mechanisms requires investment and robust management. Awareness campaigns and ease of returning items are crucial for high participation. And what about products bought online? More importantly, is Goa ready for the scheme?

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

practical for the government to achieve, but in the meantime what is practical is to minimize pollution of the river and regulate the casino operations traffic and customer discipline with enforceable rules and laws drawn up in mutual consultations. The government must set up an authority as suggested by CM who introduced the Bill for non-biodegradable waste to put into practice infrastructure with strict monitoring by NIO/agencies under penalty of noncompliance. If the government has the will this will be immediately achievable.

JOHN ERIC GOMES, Porvorim

Cut cables from electric poles must be cleared

I wish to bring to your attention to the serious public safety issue in Margao city concerning the cut-off cables hang-



Send your letters to us at editor@thegoan.net. Letters must be 150-200 words and mention the writer's name and location

ing from electric poles and carelessly thrown on the roadside. These discarded cables not only pose a danger to pedestrians and motorcyclists but also create hazardous working conditions for linemen who maintain high-tension wires. It is unclear who holds the responsibility for clearing these cables—whether it is the electricity department, cable owners, or the municipal authorities. The tangled mass of WiFi and private cables obstructs linemen, increasing the risk of accidents and electric shocks during routine operations. I urge the government, the electricity department, the municipality, and all concerned stakeholders to collaborate and devise a clear, effective plan to manage and remove these cut cables promptly.

RONNIE DOSOUZA, Chandor

Proposing solution to Unity Mall opposition

As expected, the Goa government has late-said that the Unity mall in Chimbel can't be cancelled because about Rs 25 crores has already been spent and it is a Central government directed project; to which my reply is: What was the Rs 25 crores spent on and what was it spent on, when the villagers of Chimbel were against this project from the very beginning; much before any thing could have been done? Is Goa a colony of the Central Government in Delhi to blindly accept whatever "Delhi" says? Anyway, I would like to propose a solution with regards to the opposition to the Unity Mall. The BJP senior ministers pushing for this project have very good/large support in Sattari, Poim, Sanquelim and Porvorim. Can the Goa BJP Govt propose to the constituents of these specified constituencies, to shift/have the Unity mall in their areas instead. Surely these voters must have a lot of confidence and trust in the BJP, so that there should not be any major opposition to the Unity Mall there.

ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

OPEN SPACE >>

Chimbel locals have nothing to lose but mall

Chimbel villagers on Wednesday have reportedly warned of intensifying their agitation against the Unity Mall project after Chief Minister Pramod Sawant told their delegation that the project could not be scrapped as it was a centrally sanctioned national project and had reached an advanced stage of implementation and around Rs 25 crore had also been already spent over the same. The issue is that had the government should have taken the Chimbel villagers into confidence before deciding to bring this so-called 'centrally sanctioned national project' at Chimbel. Then how can CM Sawant say that his government cannot scrap the said controversial project despite of seeing the ongoing strong protests from the villagers of Chimbel? Or does CM Sawant think that just because his government has a majority in the house, it can bring any project on the quiet against the wishes of Goans? And lastly that Rs 25 crore that has already been spent is CM talking about putting up iron sheets and cutting trees around the proposed Unity Mall project site at Chimbel? I think that Goans need to stand up and counter this imposed project.

JERRY FERNANDES, Saligao





“ First TN. Then Kerala. Now K'taka. The pattern is clear and deliberate. Governors refusing to read the speech prepared by State govts and behaving like party agents

M K STALIN
Tamil Nadu Chief Minister



Our approach to the issues of Palestine and the Middle East settlement is principled, not opportunistic. Only proper functioning of the Palestinian state can lead to a final settlement of the Mid East conflict

VLADIMIR PUTIN
Russian President



Security in the Arctic is a matter for all of NATO. Anything political can be negotiated on — security, investment and economic issue — but we cannot negotiate on our sovereignty

”

Trump's Gaza Board undermines UN

United States President Donald Trump is bent upon resetting the world order to establish America's hegemony and replacing multilateralism with transactional deal-making. Bullying, weaponising tariff systems, and coercive diplomacy are the strategic tools he uses to achieve his stated goals. His impulsive ways have pretty much become the new normal in international diplomacy. The latest in a series of shenanigans that have come to define Trump's persona is the idea of the Gaza 'Board of Peace'. The proposal is a mockery of the United Nations and the time-tested instruments of multilateralism. The maverick move is in sync with Trump's propensity for deal-making outside traditional multilateral frameworks. Projected as a pragmatic, business-like mechanism to stabilise Gaza, the concept implicitly challenges the relevance of international institutions in managing one of the world's most intractable conflicts. At its core, the proposal demonstrates Trump's scepticism about the UN, which he has repeatedly criticised as inefficient, biased, and overly bureaucratic. The 'Board of Peace', especially if it is dominated by select regional powers or US-aligned actors, would signal a shift from universal multilateralism to ad hoc governance. A swift pushback to this preposterous idea is a welcome development. Two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) — China and France — have rejected Trump's invitation to be on the Board of Peace. They have rightly pledged their continued allegiance to the spirit of multilateralism and the principles of the UN Charter. India too had received an invitation from Trump but is yet to respond.

India should outright reject the idea instead of taking cover under diplomatic niceties. On the other hand, Pakistan, which loses no opportunity to display its obsequiousness to please the Trump administration, has accepted the invitation to join the board. Any credible peace effort in the war-ravaged Gaza must grapple with realities Trump often sidesteps: international law, civilian protection, and the need for inclusive governance. If the Gaza initiative prioritises optics over substance, it risks becoming another plan that collapses under the weight of ground reality. Peace imposed without legitimacy, consent, and accountability rarely survives. Traditionally, New Delhi has supported a two-state solution while balancing strong ties with Israel and the Arab world. A weakened UN system complicates India's diplomatic calculus, as New Delhi often relies on multilateral forums to promote stability without direct intervention. Trump's latest brainwave on Gaza looks less like a diplomatic initiative and more like a real estate advertisement for a distressed asset. Fresh from a brazen operation to extract Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela to "secure the oil," and amid the renewed attempt to capture Greenland, Trump has now turned his gaze to the rubble of the war in West Asia. His 'Board of Peace' is designed to manage the reconstruction not through aid grants, but through investment tranches.

If the Gaza initiative prioritises optics over action, it risks failing amid harsh realities on the ground

Nehru and KCR — Politics of erasing nation-builders

On trial are not individuals, but history itself — and history, time and again, has proven resilient

PENDYALA MANGALA DEVI

Politics is never merely a contest for power. At its deepest level, it is a struggle over history, memory, and moral legitimacy. As George Orwell warned, "Who controls the past controls the future." The systematic questioning of leaders who shaped history is, therefore, not accidental; it is a deliberate political strategy aimed at appropriating the past to dominate the future.

India has witnessed this phenomenon before. Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the principal architects of modern India, was subjected to sustained political delegitimisation decades after India's independence. Today, the same political script is being replayed in Telangana against K Chandrasekhar Rao (KCR). This is no coincidence — it is a pattern.

Enduring Paradox

History presents an enduring paradox: those who did not participate in a struggle often attempt to redefine it. Hannah Arendt observed that "great leaders are often judged not by their actions, but by the anxieties they provoke." India's freedom struggle was not authored in drawing rooms or television studios; it was written in prisons, protests, and sacrifice. Nehru's repeated imprisonments, his intellectual leadership, and his role in shaping a constitutional, republican democracy are established historical facts.

Yet, political forces that remained largely absent from the freedom movement — most notably the RSS and its political arm — now question Nehru's nationalism. This is not a legitimate historical debate; it is an attempt to seize moral ownership over the freedom struggle itself. When one cannot claim sacrifice, one attempts to rewrite sacrifice.

As long as Nehru remains central to India's national narrative, the foundational legitimacy of the freedom movement cannot be appropriated by those

who stood outside it. Hence, Nehru must be converted from a nation-builder into a subject of controversy. This is not about Nehru; it is about controlling the meaning of India.

Manufactured Amnesia

Karl Marx famously remarked that history repeats itself — first as tragedy, then as farce. What was once a tragic assault on the legacy of India's freedom struggle now reappears as a farcical imitation in Telangana politics.

Telangana was not bestowed by benevolence. It was born of prolonged struggle, sacrifice, and collective assertion of dignity. The question is not rhetorical: Who sustained the Telangana movement across decades? Who transformed scattered protests into a coherent political force? Who carried the struggle from the streets to Parliament and negotiated its constitutional recognition?

The answer is unequivocal: K Chandrasekhar Rao.

As BR Ambedkar reminded us, "Leadership is not proclaimed; it is forged in struggle." KCR's leadership was neither accidental nor opportunistic. It was shaped through resignations,

History does not reside in official files; it lives in collective memory, and no amount of political distortion can erase who fought, who stood firm, and who stayed silent

Unlawful walkout

The latest incident of Tamil Nadu Governor RN Ravi's 'walk out' from the State Assembly without reading his customary address and raking up the 'national anthem' row once again, is yet another case of his acrimony and his cantankerous nature towards Chief Minister MK Stalin and his government. It is the established norm of the TN Legislative Assembly to play the State's invocation to Tamil before the address and the national anthem at the end of the Governor's speech. Ravi, therefore, has no right whatsoever to alter the conventional practice followed in the Assembly according to his desire. Also, just a press release from the Lok Bhawan cannot be a proven document to justify his claims of his charges against the government, warranting his walkout. His actions show a growing pattern under the current BJP-led government that uses Governors' offices in the non-ruling BJP States as an instrument to delegitimise the constitutional roles of the State governments. Will Prime Minister Narendra Modi have the courage to talk about Governor Ravi's conduct in the TN State Assembly?

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR, Chennai

Letters to the

Editor

Imperative care

This refers to the Opinion 'Forgotten behind bars' (Jan 22). Many mentally ill prisoners are languishing in jails waiting for their legal cases to complete and get justice. Mentally ill contractual prisoners need utmost care to recover and undergo legal proceedings. It is a lapse in the judicial system that these contractual prisoners are incarcerated in jails without psychological care and are detained for so many years. The government should appoint psychologists in jails or transfer such patients to mental hospitals for treatment to prevent their condition from deteriorating further. It is mandated for any contractual person to get timely treatment for their well-being.

ABHILASHA GUPTA, Mohali

Dictatorial attitudes

The renewed demand by Donald Trump that Greenland should align with the United States has sparked concern across the international community. His speech at the World Economic Forum raises a deeper question for the international community. Greenland is a self-governing territory, and its people have repeatedly rejected any idea of joining the US. As Denmark is part of the NATO framework, urging NATO nations to say "yes" to his demand is nothing but an expansionist tactic. Human values must take precedence over global military powers and their dictatorial attitudes.

RAVI CHANDRA SEKHAR RAO, Kharagpur

Digital arrest

Fragile family bonds and poor communication often lead to unresolved conflicts and heightened vulnerability to external stressors, making individuals increasingly susceptible to the influence of social media. Cybercriminals are well-trained to identify and exploit these vulnerabilities, wasting no time in trapping victims through romance scams, fraudulent investment schemes, fake law-enforcement calls, and intimidation tactics. Once digitally ensnared, many victims find it extremely difficult to escape. There is a pressing need for regular counselling and guidance through TV and print media. Senior citizens require special attention and care. Meanwhile, cybercrime units of the police are burdened with thousands of unresolved cases, highlighting the seriousness of the problem.

BRIJ GOYAL, Ludhiana

India in the

hotspot

■ Al Jazeera

India won't relocate B'desh's WC games from India

Bangladesh has one day to decide whether its men's cricket team will travel to India for the T20 World Cup or face expulsion from the tournament, the International Cricket Council (ICC) has reportedly told the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) after a board meeting.

■ BBC

Indian couple who won a \$200,000 settlement...

A dispute that began over heating a dish in a microwave has ended with two Indian students winning a \$200,000 settlement from a US university. Aditya and his fiancée, Urmil, filed civil rights lawsuit against the University of Colorado, Boulder, after they faced a series of "microaggressions and retaliatory actions".

■ The Washington Post

Centuries-old bull festival remains a popular draw

Hours before daybreak in Avaniapuram, in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu, a large crowd gathers to celebrate the annual harvest festival called Pongal. Spectators occupy long makeshift galleries erected on both sides of a barricaded track. Those who can't find space climb onto the rooftops of nearby houses.

Write to us at letters@telanganatoday.com

Crackdown on Gangsterism in Punjab

In Punjab, the war against drugs and the massive campaign against drug traffickers have been successfully carried out so far. Under this campaign, the police actively conducted raids and seized drug consignments. Hundreds of people involved in the illegal drug trade have been put behind bars. Now, the Punjab government and police administration are focused on eliminating gangsterism, the gun culture, and the era of extortion. The opposition has complained that mafia members sitting in jails are issuing threats for extortion and planning murders from within the prisons. Hooliganism is on the rise in the state. There are also sporadic reports of snatching incidents occurring here and there. The government has taken note of this and has launched "Operation Prahar" (Operation Strike) to crack down on gangsters. The Punjab Police and the government are continuously taking strict action against criminal elements. A special operation will run for 72 hours, starting on Tuesday. The government has promised to eliminate the gangsters. Currently, two thousand police teams have been activated to take action against the gangsters, and they are conducting intensive raids. These teams comprise 12,000 police personnel. On the very first day, the police took 1374 people into custody. These include people who were providing support to the gangsters. The government has allocated Rs. 10 crore to reward people who provide information about gangsters and help in their arrest. If any citizen helps in the arrest of a major criminal, they will be given a reward of Rs. 10 lakh. Punjab Police Chief Gaurav Yadav said that police and intelligence agencies have reported that 60 gangsters are operating against Punjab from abroad, running networks of drug trafficking, arms supply, murder, extortion, and racketeering. The DGP stated that Red Corner Notices have been issued against 23 of them, and legal proceedings will be completed and notices sent against the remaining 37 gangsters within three months. The police have already identified 1200 associates and 600 family members of the gangsters in the first stage of this "Operation Prahar." Action will be taken against all those found to be involved with the gangsters. Young people now also have the opportunity to stand up against this gangsterism operating both domestically and internationally and fulfill their national duty. The responsibility for conducting this operation and managing its intelligence network has been entrusted to IG Ashish Chaudhary, who has recently returned to Punjab after a long stint at the NIA. In addition, three DIGs (DIG Gurmeet Chauhan, DIG Akhil Chaudhary, and DIG Kanwaldeep Singh) have been assigned to the Anti-Gangster Task Force. It should be noted that this structure is already in place. The Anti-Gangster Task Force is already operational. Now, the actions under this task force will be intensified to deliver a decisive blow against the criminals. An officer at the SSP level can also award a reward of one and a half lakh rupees in this anti-gangster campaign. Police Commissioners and DIGs can approve up to two lakh rupees, and DCPs and officers above them can approve rewards exceeding two lakh rupees. In addition, a reward of 60,000 rupees will be given for the recovery of every kilogram of illegal substances. The investigating officer responsible for securing a conviction will receive 40,000 rupees, and those responsible for freezing assets will receive 20,000 rupees. Clearly, the force is being motivated with these rewards so that they can step forward and confront the criminal elements and eradicate them completely. The sooner and more diligently this work is done, the better it will be for the peace, tranquility, and development of Punjab.

Abhishek Vij

Gold and silver prices soar, stock market crashes

The market situation at the beginning of 2026 is similar to that of last year. Gold is selling at over Rs 150 lakh per ten grams and silver at Rs 319 lakh per kilogram. In this situation, those who had accumulated gold and silver for generations have suddenly become wealthy. A new trend has emerged in the country: sell in the stock market and invest in gold and silver. The huge profits from the stock market and mutual funds are plummeting due to market fluctuations. This stock market crash and the decline in share prices are nationwide. On the weekend, investors lost Rs 6 lakh crore in a single day. The fear of trade tensions in the US and Europe is also a contributing factor. The US and Europe have always been trading partners. Their markets have been open to Indian traders without restrictions. Indian investors have earned the most money from Europe and the US. But now, due to Mr. Trump's threats to European countries and NATO, selling in the stock market has increased. Share prices have started to fall. The return on investment has decreased to approximately 8 percent, which has further increased selling. This percentage return can be easily obtained by investing in fixed deposits in banks. As selling increases, the stock market is bleeding. The quarterly results have also not provided any strong direction for the stock market. US President Trump's tariff war is one of the reasons. The impact of tariffs has severely affected our export industries. The government claims that the increase in tariff rates has not affected India's exports. However, it has certainly affected exports to the US. It is also true that the Indian government, sensing this threat, is entering into free trade agreements with other countries. Meanwhile, India wants to increase trade with Russia and China but does not want to join their trade bloc. This is a sound policy because, to a greater or lesser extent, we cannot ignore our trade relations with the US. Therefore, due to global tensions and tariff uncertainty, the stock market appears to be plummeting. In such a situation, we can only hope for stability in the world and for President Trump to exercise sound judgment in trade matters.

Integrated governance and India's new infrastructure confidence

India's infrastructure story is entering a decisive phase, shaped not only by scale but by coordination, predictability, and long-term vision. Integrated governance—where ministries, states, public sector institutions, and private stakeholders work through shared frameworks—has emerged as a defining force behind this transformation. Together, these systems are redefining how India plans, builds, and delivers infrastructure, creating confidence across sectors and regions.

At the heart of integrated governance is alignment. Large infrastructure projects often involve multiple agencies responsible for land acquisition, environment clearance, financing, and execution. Earlier, fragmented decision-making slowed outcomes. Today, coordinated platforms and inter-ministerial mechanisms are reducing overlaps and delays, ensuring that projects move forward with clarity and shared accountability. This alignment is helping India deliver infrastructure with greater certainty and consistency.

One of the most visible outcomes of this approach is the accelerated delivery of transport networks. National highways, expressways, rail corridors, ports, and airports are now planned as part of a unified logistics ecosystem rather than isolated assets. This integration allows freight and passenger movement to become faster, safer, and more cost-efficient. For businesses, farmers, and everyday commuters, these improvements translate into tangible gains in productivity and access.

Digital governance has further strengthened this shift. Technology-enabled monitoring systems now track project progress in real time, offering policymakers early warnings and data-driven insights. Dashboards, geospatial mapping, and centralized portals enhance transparency while empowering administrators to resolve issues proactively. As a result, infrastructure execu-



partnerships benefit from clearer risk-sharing frameworks and faster approvals, while public investments gain from better sequencing and prioritization. This fiscal coherence supports long-term sustainability while enabling rapid expansion.

Equally significant is the role of states within this framework. Cooperative federalism has allowed state governments to align local priorities with national infrastructure goals. States are now co-creators rather than passive implementers, adapting central programs to regional needs. This shared ownership has improved execution quality and encouraged innovation at the grassroots level.

Social inclusion is another area where integrated governance has made meaningful strides. Infrastructure projects increasingly incorporate local employment, skill development, and community participation. Roads connect remote habitations, digital networks extend public services, and renewable energy projects bring reliable power to underserved regions. By embedding social outcomes into infrastructure planning, India ensures that growth remains broad-based and inclusive. Environmental sustainability has also benefited from

coordinated decision-making. Unified clearance mechanisms allow environmental safeguards to be addressed early rather than as afterthoughts. Renewable energy corridors, green transport initiatives, and climate-resilient infrastructure demonstrate how development and sustainability can progress together. Integrated governance helps balance growth ambitions with ecological responsibility.

Perhaps the most powerful outcome of this model is confidence—confidence among citizens that projects will be completed, among investors that policies will remain stable, and among institutions that collaboration yields results. This confidence fuels momentum, enabling India to plan bigger and deliver faster without sacrificing quality.

As India continues its journey toward becoming a global economic powerhouse, integrated governance will remain a central pillar. By harmonizing institutions, leveraging technology, and fostering cooperation across levels of government, India is not just building infrastructure—it is building certainty. This approach positions the country to meet future demands with resilience, efficiency, and optimism.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY
Hope is not the belief that things will improve on their own, but the courage to work toward improvement every day. -Rebecca Solnit

Delivering at the scale

India's infrastructure expansion today reflects a deeper transformation in governance itself. The shift toward integrated governance has allowed the country to move beyond fragmented execution and embrace a system where planning, funding, and delivery function in unison. This approach is enabling India to build at unprecedented scale while maintaining speed, quality, and accountability.

Integrated governance recognizes that infrastructure is interconnected. Roads support industry, ports enable trade, power grids sustain digital services, and urban transport shapes productivity. By coordinating policies across sectors, India has created infrastructure ecosystems rather than standalone projects. This holistic planning ensures that investments reinforce each other, multiplying their economic and social impact.

Central to this progress is institutional coordination. Ministries, regulatory bodies, and implementation agencies increasingly operate through shared timelines and objectives. Regular coordination reviews and unified policy frameworks reduce uncertainty and streamline decision-making.

For project developers and contractors, this clarity translates into smoother execution and fewer disruptions.

The logistics sector offers a strong example of this transformation. National initiatives now link highways, railways, inland waterways, and ports through integrated planning. This has reduced turnaround times, lowered costs, and improved supply chain efficiency. Such coordination enhances India's competitiveness while strengthening domestic manufacturing and exports.

Technology has amplified the effectiveness of integrated governance. Digital platforms monitor milestones, expenditure, and outcomes across thousands of projects. These systems promote transparency and accountability while enabling swift corrective action. By shifting from reactive problem-solving to proactive management, India has improved both efficiency and credibility in infrastructure delivery.

The quiet rise of purpose-driven living

Success was once measured almost entirely by wealth, status, and visibility. Today, a quieter but significant shift is underway. Across generations, people are redefining what it means to live well, placing purpose, balance, and contribution at the centre of their lives.

This change is visible in the choices people make about work. Many professionals are seeking roles that align with their values rather than solely chasing higher salaries. Social enterprises, non-profits, and ethical businesses are attracting talent eager to solve real-world problems. Even within corporate environments, employees are advocating for sustainability, fairness, and social responsibility.

Purpose-driven living is also reshaping consumption habits. Consumers are becoming more mindful of what they buy, favouring locally made, environmentally responsible, and ethically sourced products. This shift is encouraging businesses to rethink production methods and supply chains. The result is not perfection, but progress—small improvements that collectively reduce harm.

Education systems are adapting to this new mindset. Schools and universities are placing greater emphasis on critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and civic responsibility. Students are encouraged to understand the social and environmental



consequences of their actions. Learning is no longer confined to exams; it is increasingly connected to real-life challenges and solutions.

Mental health awareness plays a central role in this transformation. People are recognizing that constant pressure and burnout are unsustainable. Practices such as mindfulness, exercise, and digital boundaries are gaining acceptance. Rest is being reframed not as laziness, but as an essential component of productivity and creativity.

Volunteering has also evolved. Rather than one-time acts, many individuals are committing to long-term engagement with causes they care about—education, environment, healthcare, or human rights. These sustained efforts create deeper impact and stronger relationships between volunteers and communities.

Another defining feature of purpose-driven living is intergenerational learning. Older generations are sharing experience and wisdom, while younger people contribute energy and innovation. This exchange challenges stereotypes and builds mutual respect.

Beyond Power and Retirement! Living in the Present by Serving Society



Iqbal Singh Lalpura
Former Chairman, National Commission for Minorities, Government of India

An officer or a judge enters public service after passing a prescribed examination. With that examination come salary, allowances, authority, and social standing. These are not privileges granted for personal comfort; they are instruments entrusted to serve society, as a friend, a guide, and a protector of the weak. Whether in the executive, police, or judiciary, the essence of public service remains the same: to uphold justice, resist wrongdoing, and stand firm against pressure of power or money.

This is the ideal. The reality often falls short.

During service, authority creates a protective illusion. Files move, orders are complied with, and influence appears natural. But many learn, consciously or unconsciously, to adjust rather than reform, to avoid difficult decisions, to

dilute justice, to rationalize silence. In this gradual compromise, institutions weaken and public faith erodes. Corruption is not always about taking money; it is equally about surrendering independence.

Yet every public servant remembers moments when he or she resisted pressure, when a powerful person was denied an illegal favour, when money failed to bend a decision, when the law was allowed to take its course. In those moments, the system may have frowned, but society silently blessed. The satisfaction of those decisions lingers long after retirement. Those blessings are the true rewards of service.

Guru Nanak Dev Ji reminded rulers and administrators centuries ago that justice is the foundation of governance:

"Rāja chulli nāu ki" (Ang 1240)

When justice is cooked in the vessel of truth, only then does governance become righteous. When justice is diluted by fear or favour, authority loses moral legitimacy.

The judiciary, no less than the executive, carries this burden. Courts are the final refuge of the citizen. When judges withstand pressure from power, wealth, or popular sentiment, democracy breathes. When they falter, injustice becomes institutional. Judicial

independence is not protected merely by constitutional provisions; it survives through personal courage exercised daily, quietly, often without applause.

One fundamental truth distinguishes bureaucracy and judiciary from political power. Political authority is temporary, subject to elections and public mood. Bureaucracy and judiciary are continuous institutions, extending beyond governments and regimes. This continuity is not a weakness; it is a moral strength. It gives the civil servant and the judge a unique opportunity to serve without fear of electoral loss. This space between permanence and transience is where public service must find its courage.

When this opportunity is wasted, retirement exposes the truth. Majority of them comes from rural or suburban areas, which they leave for better opportunities and majority settle down in the capital area of the country or state. However after retirement there is no one to call them their own and they hesitate to be with their villagers whom they never looked back.

After retirement, the uniform is folded, the gavel rests, the official chair is vacated. The retired officer or judge becomes an ordinary

citizen, standing in queues, waiting for hearings, seeking basic services. This transition should lead to reflection. If one held authority for decades and yet the system still humiliates the citizen, including oneself after retirement, then the failure is not abstract. It is collective and personal.

Retired officers and judges are not alone in this responsibility. Retired Army officers, with their deep sense of discipline, leadership, and organisational training, also have a vital role to play in rebuilding society. Having led jawans in the most testing circumstances, they possess the moral authority and practical experience to mobilise disciplined, law-abiding citizens.

Along with former soldiers and conscientious retired civil servants, they can help organise innocent civilians to stand firmly against drug peddlers, organised criminals, and mafias that are vitiating

society and destroying the future of Punjab's youth. Such collective action does not mean taking the law into one's own hands; rather, it means strengthening society from within—creating awareness, supporting law-abiding institutions, resisting fear, and restoring confidence among citizens. When experience, discipline, and conscience come together,

they can act as a powerful deterrent to those who thrive on silence and helplessness, and can help reclaim social spaces surrendered to crime and addiction.

Many choose to withdraw into comfortable isolation, living on memories of power once exercised. Clubs, social gatherings, and endless recollections replace engagement with present realities. Nostalgia becomes a shelter from accountability. But past authority is not contribution, and leisure is not legacy.

Punjab today stands in need of its experienced minds. Erosion of institutional trust, challenges to law and order, youth alienation, drug abuse, and social fragmentation demand wisdom forged through experience. Retired officers and judges possess deep understanding of where institutions fail and how they can be repaired. Silence at this stage is not neutrality; it is abdication.

Mistakes made during service need not define failure. Acknowledged honestly, they can guide reform. Retirement offers freedom—from transfer, pressure, and fear. It is the stage where truth can be spoken without consequence to career, and service can continue without compromise.

Guru Gobind Singh Ji gave a

timeless call to ethical action: "Shubh karman te kabhu na taron."

Never retreat from righteous action. This command does not expire with retirement. In fact, it becomes more relevant when authority is gone and only conscience remains.

Philosophers across civilizations echo this truth. Edmund Burke warned that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Public servants who do nothing after retirement allow the erosion they once witnessed to continue unchecked.

Punjab does not need retired officials who live in the shadow of past power. It needs citizens of conscience who live in the present and serve society with clarity and courage. It needs former officers and judges who mentor, guide, write, speak, and stand, using experience not to dominate discourse but to elevate it.

The examination was only an entry point. Service was the test. What one does after retirement is the final moral audit.

Institutions survive on rules, but societies survive on conscience. Power fades. Integrity endures.

Punjab is waiting, not for authority, but for responsibility renewed through experience.

How community innovation is quietly transforming Rural India

Across rural India, a quiet transformation is underway—one driven not by sweeping headlines or grand policy announcements, but by community innovation and local leadership. From renewable energy initiatives to grassroots education models, villages are demonstrating how sustainable development can take root when people shape solutions for themselves. In many parts of the country, access to basic services was once a persistent challenge. Today, community-led efforts are bridging these gaps with remarkable creativity. Solar-powered irrigation systems, for instance, are helping farmers reduce dependence on erratic electricity and expensive diesel. These systems not only lower costs but also promote environmentally friendly farming practices. Education has seen similar innovation. In areas where teacher shortages once disrupted learning, local volunteers and retired educators have stepped forward



to support schools. Digital classrooms—often run through shared devices and community internet hubs—are expanding access to quality learning materials. Children who once walked long distances to attend school now have opportunities closer to home, supported by collective effort. Women have emerged as key drivers of this rural revival. Self-help groups across states like Kerala, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan have empowered women to manage micro-enterprises, savings collectives, and small-scale manufacturing units. These initiatives generate income while strengthening social bonds and decision-making

power within households and villages. Healthcare access has also improved through community participation. Accredited social health activists (ASHAs), local nurses, and trained volunteers have played a crucial role in spreading awareness about nutrition, maternal health, and preventive care. Mobile health units and telemedicine services, supported by local coordination, now reach areas once considered inaccessible. One of the most encouraging aspects of this transformation is how traditional knowledge is being respected and revived. Indigenous water-harvesting systems, seed preservation practices, and crop rotation methods are being blended with modern science. This balanced approach enhances resilience while preserving cultural heritage. Digital connectivity has amplified these efforts. Mobile phones and affordable internet access allow farmers to track weather updates, students to attend virtual classes, and artisans to sell products beyond their local markets.

Why young people are redefining success today

A quiet shift is reshaping how young people define success. Across cities and small towns alike, ambition is no longer measured solely by job titles, salaries, or conventional milestones. Instead, a generation is embracing purpose, balance, and personal growth as equally important markers of achievement.

This change is visible in career choices. Many young professionals are exploring fields that align with their values—environmental work, social entrepreneurship, creative industries, and community-based initiatives. Rather than chasing narrow definitions of prestige, they are seeking work that feels meaningful and sustainable.

Education pathways are evolving too. While formal degrees remain important, young learners are increasingly supplementing them with online courses, skill-based training, and experiential learning. This flexibility allows them to adapt to a fast-changing world while maintaining curiosity and creativity.

Mental well-being has become a central priority. Open conversations about stress, burnout, and emotional health are helping reduce stigma. Young people are more willing to seek support, practice self-care, and establish boundaries—recognising that long-term success depends on well-being, not exhaustion.



Technology, often criticised for its excesses, is also enabling positive change. Digital platforms allow young creators, educators, and innovators to share ideas, build communities, and reach global audiences. A single smartphone can now be a classroom, studio, or marketplace—unlocking opportunities that were once unimaginable. There is also a renewed respect for individuality. Success is increasingly seen as personal rather than comparative. Some choose entrepreneurship, others value stable routines; some prioritise travel and exploration, while others focus on family and community. This diversity of paths reflects growing confidence in self-defined goals.

Social awareness further distinguishes this generation. Many young people are deeply engaged with issues such as climate responsibility, inclusion, and ethical consumption.

When small acts begin to heal a fractured world

In an age dominated by conflict, climate anxiety, and relentless headlines of despair, optimism can feel like an act of resistance. Yet across cities, villages, and digital spaces, quiet revolutions of kindness, innovation, and resilience are unfolding—often unnoticed, but deeply transformative. These moments remind us that progress does not always arrive with fanfare; sometimes it grows patiently, one small act at a time.

Across communities worldwide, people are reclaiming agency in simple but powerful ways. In neighbourhoods once divided by distrust, shared initiatives—community kitchens, local clean-up drives, and volunteer teaching programmes—are rebuilding social bonds. These efforts do more than solve immediate problems; they restore faith in collective action. When strangers cook together or children receive free tutoring from local volunteers, a sense of belonging emerges, replacing isolation with purpose.

Environmental action, too, is no longer confined to policy rooms or

international summits. Ordinary citizens are becoming stewards of their surroundings. In towns facing water scarcity, residents are reviving traditional rainwater harvesting methods. Urban dwellers are transforming vacant plots into community gardens, growing vegetables while nurturing cooperation. These initiatives may appear modest, but their impact is tangible—lower food costs, greener neighbourhoods, and a renewed respect for nature.

Technology, often blamed for deepening divides, is also proving to be a powerful tool for inclusion. Digital platforms are enabling rural artisans to reach global markets, students to access free learning resources, and patients in remote areas to consult doctors online. For many, a smartphone has become more than a device—it is a gateway to opportunity. When used thoughtfully, technology amplifies human potential rather than replacing it.

One of the most encouraging shifts is the growing emphasis on mental well-being. Conversations around



stress, trauma, and emotional health are no longer taboo. Workplaces are introducing wellness policies, schools are integrating counselling services, and individuals are learning to prioritise rest without guilt. This cultural change reflects a deeper understanding: progress is meaningless if it comes at the cost of human dignity and mental peace.

Youth, often portrayed as disillusioned, are emerging as some of the strongest agents of positive change.

From climate activism to social entrepreneurship, young people are questioning outdated systems and offering fresh solutions. They are

building start-ups with social missions, launching independent media platforms, and volunteering in crisis zones. Their optimism is not naïve; it is informed, urgent, and rooted in lived realities.

Even in regions marked by prolonged conflict or economic hardship, stories of resilience stand out. Teachers continue to educate children in difficult conditions, healthcare workers serve with limited resources, and families support one another through informal networks of care. These acts rarely make headlines, yet they form the backbone of societal survival. Hope, in such places, is not abstract; it is practiced daily.

The power of storytelling itself is undergoing a quiet transformation. Readers and viewers are increasingly seeking narratives that explain, connect, and uplift rather than sensationalise. This shift is encouraging journalists, writers, and creators to highlight solutions alongside problems. By documenting what works, media can inspire replication and accountability, ensuring that optimis

mism is grounded in evidence, not denial.

Positivity does not mean ignoring injustice or pretending problems do not exist. Rather, it involves recognising humanity's capacity to respond with creativity and compassion. It means acknowledging pain while refusing to surrender to cynicism. In this sense, hope becomes a discipline—a deliberate choice to believe in improvement despite setbacks.

The world today remains deeply unequal and uncertain. But within that uncertainty lies possibility. Every tree planted, every child taught, every honest conversation held is a reminder that change is cumulative. Progress is rarely linear, but it is real. As people continue to choose cooperation over apathy and empathy over indifference, they are quietly reshaping the future. These actions may not dominate news cycles, but they endure. And in their persistence lies a powerful truth: even in the most challenging times, humanity continues to move forward—steadily, imperfectly, and with hope.

Federalism at stake

Governors, govt should avoid confrontation

THE chaos in the Karnataka Assembly on Thursday is a new low in the raging conflict between Raj Bhavans (now rebranded as Lok Bhavans) and elected governments in states where the BJP is not in power. Governor Thawarchand Gehlot's decision to confine his customary address to a few lines — discarding the text prepared by the Council of Ministers — has triggered a storm whose impact is being felt far beyond the Congress-ruled southern state.

The Governor's address at the start of the first House session of the year is a constitutional convention — rather than a personal statement, it's expected to be a formal articulation of the state government's policies and priorities. Gehlot, who delivered a self-drafted, truncated speech before walking out, is being accused of acting at the Centre's behest. The bitter confrontation comes close on the heels of similar incidents in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Such discord, which has become common in recent years, has fuelled the perception that the Governor is increasingly being used as a tool of political one-upmanship rather than a non-partisan bridge between the Centre and the state. The Governor has the right to raise objections to a draft address, but constitutional morality demands that such disagreements be resolved through dialogue; a faceoff on the floor of the House should be avoided at all costs.

Governance inevitably suffers when governors and state governments work at cross purposes. This is not merely a clash of egos but a litmus test of cooperative federalism. According to the Centre, the name "Raj Bhavan" has been scrapped as it reflected a colonial mindset. The new term, "Lok Bhavan", will be truly befitting if public interest always takes precedence over political wrangling. Both power centres must respect the mandate of the people.

Sajjan's acquittal

Delay weakens accountability for 1984 riots

THE acquittal of former Congress MP Sajjan Kumar by a Delhi court in the Janakpuri-Vikaspuri violence case once again underscores the tragic dissonance between legal outcomes and moral accountability in the long shadow of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. More than four decades after one of independent India's gravest episodes of communal violence, the criminal justice system continues to struggle with the burdens of delay, eroded evidence and fading memories. The court's verdict rests on a familiar and troubling foundation: the inability of the prosecution to establish culpability beyond reasonable doubt. Witnesses, many of whom testified decades after the events, were found to be inconsistent or reliant on hearsay. From a strictly legal standpoint, the judgment adheres to the principle that suspicion, however strong, cannot substitute proof. Yet, for survivors and families of victims, such reasoning offers little solace.

Notably, this acquittal does not absolve Sajjan Kumar of responsibility in the broader context of the 1984 violence. He remains incarcerated, serving life sentences in other riot-related cases where courts found sufficient evidence of instigation and complicity. Nonetheless, each acquittal in a separate case feeds the perception that justice for 1984 remains fragmented and incomplete.

The Janakpuri-Vikaspuri case also highlights a deeper institutional failure. The delay in registering FIRs, the reopening of cases decades later and the heavy reliance on oral testimony reveal how systemic inertia crippled the prospects of timely justice. When investigations begin years after the crime, courts are left adjudicating history rather than evidence. The lesson is clear: Communal violence cases demand swift, professional investigation and witness protection from the outset. Justice delayed, as the 1984 riots painfully demonstrate, is not merely justice denied. It is justice diminished, both for victims and for the rule of law itself.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SATURDAY, JANUARY 23, 1924

The Viceroy's speech

IT was once said of William Gladstone by an aristocratic minister that his verbosity had become "a positive danger to the Commonwealth." The remark was most unjust, because if ever there was a statesman whose words were a power and, for the most part, a power for good, that statesman was Gladstone. But we do feel at times that the length of some of Lord Reading's speeches is a source of equal embarrassment to his admirers and his critics. One reason for the length of the speeches, of course, is that the Viceroy, who is no longer the President of the Indian Legislature, has fewer opportunities of addressing the members of that body and the public than his predecessors had. But there is nothing to prevent His Excellency from speaking often, and if and as long as he remains the actual Head of Government, no reasonable man can possibly object to his doing so. There are, indeed, matters in which some part of the intended effect of a speech is inevitably lost in the present conditions, when the Viceroy refers to an event long after it has actually taken place. Who does not feel, for instance, that the part of the present speech in which His Excellency refers to the suspension of the cotton excise duty, with far greater advantage have been given to the public weeks ago than at a time when public interest in the controversies is no longer as keen as it was on the morrow of the announcement? Subjects of outstanding importance are dealt with by His Excellency in his speech, such as the decision to appoint a Royal Commission on Agriculture.

BJP tightens grip on Maharashtra

Saffron party shines in civic polls, but its alliance with Shinde's Shiv Sena remains uneasy



TRYSTS AND TURNS

JULIO RIBEIRO

WE Catholics use an Italian word, "Papabili", to identify Cardinals who have the qualities to become the Pope. There is no corresponding term in the lexicon of politics, but if there was, it would surely be used for Maharashtra Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis, who has done wonders for the BJP in the 2024 Assembly elections and the recent civic polls.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah and Uttar Pradesh CM Yogi Adityanath are often mentioned as the contenders to succeed PM Narendra Modi as and when he steps down. To that list, Fadnavis' name has to be added. He has divided and weakened Bal Thackeray's Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) of Sharad Pawar, who was once hailed as the Maratha强man but has now been reduced to a mere shadow of his former self.

Playing on the ambitions and weaknesses of his political opponents, Fadnavis first lured Eknath Shinde, a Shiv Sainik from Mumbai's neighbouring Thane district who had risen from the ranks, to jump ship and join forces with the Hindutva brigade. Then he repeated the exercise with Sharad Pawar's nephew Ajit. Shinde had been fearing stagnation within the Shiv Sena as the compulsions of dynastic rule had closed the doors for his progress.

Shinde was made the Chief Minister of one of India's most prosperous states, thereby sealing the split in the ranks of the "Marathi Manos".

Bal Thackeray, the Sena patriarch, had played on the sensibilities of the Marathi-speaking res-



CHINKS IN MAHAYUTI : Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis (left) with his deputy Eknath Shinde. PH

idents of Mumbai by convincing them that "outsiders" (those who spoke Gujarati at home) were robbing them of their patrimony and Tamil as well as other southerners were depriving them of white-collar jobs which could assure them of a better life. Balasaheb was an orator par excellence, a notch above even Modi. Like the Prime Minister, he could convince his audience that black was white, and vice versa. Such is the power of words when uttered by seasoned orators!

Marathi-speaking people residing in Mumbai were mainly from the coastal villages and small towns south of the city in the Konkan area of the state. They joined the Sena in hordes. When asked to use muscle power to drive home their point, they did so enthusiastically. The police were not keen to stop their excesses as the ruling Congress in those days was using the Sena to neuter the Left parties which constituted the main opposition to its rule. The government's pusillanimity encouraged the Sena, which soon became a force to reckon with in Mumbai.

I once had a conversation in New Delhi with then Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani. The BJP had decided to hitch its wag-

The spectacle of two allies guarding their assets from poaching by the other is comic, to say the least.

on to the Sena to gain a foothold in Maharashtra. I told Advani about the methods used by Bal Thackeray to assert the Sena's dominance. I thought I was warning him of the dangers involved, not realising that the BJP was taking a calculated decision to ride on the back of the "tiger". Advani looked at me with a glint in his eyes and dismissed my views as those of one who did not understand politics. (he was correct).

The BJP is now firmly installed as the Sena's senior partner in Maharashtra. After the split in the Sena and the NCP, Fadnavis set his sights on ruling the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), which boasts of an annual budget that exceeds that of

some small states.

The Sena had dominated the municipality for more than two decades. It was widely rumoured that corporators appropriated 10 per cent share of the contracts signed within their jurisdiction. It was commonly understood in the city that the Sena could survive as an organised political party because of the pickings from the municipality, its sole source of funds when it was not part of Central or state governments.

Many Sena members, including corporators, crossed over to Shinde's faction because they were deprived of their "subsistence". The municipal elections were delayed by over three years to apparently enable Shinde to win over Sena corporators who found themselves powerless after the Mahayutu government appointed its own functionaries to manage the BMC's affairs.

The Opposition's repeated accusations of "vote chori" can be dismissed as the rant of poor losers, but one allegation is true. A lot of money was distributed among voters during the civic polls. Today, the BJP is easily the richest party in India. The high number of its corporators elected unopposed due to last-minute withdrawals by their opponents

is the spectre of all ties guarding their assets from poaching by the other is comic, to say the least. Shinde has moved his party's corporators to a five-star hotel in the city. He obviously suspects his friend, Fadnavis, of trying to get some, if not all, of them to cross over to the all-conquering BJP.

Meanwhile, the saffron party's Hindutva agenda is set to face resistance in West Bengal, Punjab and the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Religion-centric governance has not proved viable in Pakistan. Let's hope we don't follow our neighbour's footsteps.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

The common vice of democracy is disregard for morality. —Lord Acton

A village trip down memory lane

LT GEN RAJ KADYAN (RETD)

WHENEVER I visit my ancestral village in Haryana, I walk through the *gali* that I took on my way to school. Most houses lining it were made with mud bricks. They were given an annual protective coating (*leepna*) of a mix of dung and husk. In our big village, there were only a handful of *pucca* houses, including ours. Constructed in 1932, it was made with small bricks and lime mortar; in those times, cement was scarcely available. Nearly a century old, the *haveli* still stands strong. Not occupied, it is a haven for bats. In the dark staircase, they flutter around menacingly.

Neary was a mud house. Its wall served as a makeshift sports arena. A *jooti* was hung from a nail near the drip edge (*mander*). Boys would come running, and deadpointing with momentum, climb the wall to bring it down with a kick. The only kit needed was worn-out footwear — a fine example of *atmanirbharata*. Today, a cement wall stands there, covered with political graffiti and sundry gewgaws.

A family owned two houses across the street. These were connected through a bridge. This *dobari* was a famous landmark, and men used the shade for playing *chowpati* on hot summer afternoons. The farmland, lacking canal irrigation, was too dry for growing a summer crop.

One day, walking under the *dobari*, I stepped on a sleeping dog. He caught me just below the knee. Nearly eight decades later, I still carry the canine marks. More than the bite, I remember the pain when my mother put red chilli powder on the wound. With the nearest dispensary being five krosi away on a dirt track, this was a common treatment for dog bites.

An open space adjacent to the village was used for popular wrestling bouts on Holi. When a wrestler circled the arena with the tail of his *lungot* hanging loose, it signified a challenge. Someone from among the spectators would come forward and shake hands with him. The bout was thus arranged.

As they grappled, there was loud cheering from their supporters. There were no prescribed rules; one only had to pin the opponent down flat on his back. The spectators would pay money to the winner, a kind of crowdfunding. The name of anyone who paid five rupees or more was announced with a drumbeat. Today, that open space (*gora*) is all built up.

Fast-forward to 2012, Gurgaon. My granddaughters used to visit us from Mumbai. I would take them to the nearby market, where they were thrilled to see stray cows. I carried the younger one on my arm while the elder walked along holding my finger. One day, with the child blocking my view, I tripped over a broken portion of the road. Instinctively, I took the fall on my wrist; the child remained unharmed. Whenever I pass by that spot, the incident comes alive — the road there is still broken.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

India's presence must be felt

Apropos of 'The lengthening shadows'; India needs to be cautious but not overly worried about a formal US-China-Pakistan alliance. US and China are rivals, with Washington viewing a role for Delhi to offset Beijing. China and Pakistan have a structural alliance, but Pakistan is also hobnobbing with the US. India should be careful about potential mis-calculations or escalations in Kashmir or other border areas. The China-Pakistan axis increases the risk of a two-front threat and undermines India's diplomatic influence in the region. The US-India strategic partnership counters China's influence. India must strengthen ties with neighbours, enhance regional security, and leverage forums like BRICS and Quad for its own benefit.

VK TANGRI, MOHALI

Cement ties with allies

With reference to 'The lengthening shadows'; India faces multiple security challenges including terrorism, border disputes and cyber threats, courtesy China's growing nexus with Pakistan and India's other neighbours. Pakistan has signed security pacts with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. India is working hard to assert its economic autonomy in the face of US tariffs. Besides economic strength, military preparedness and a cautious and pragmatic diplomatic approach are the need of the hour. Deepening strategic alliances with the EU and other nations can also help.

DS KANG, HOSHIARPUR

Reflection, not reproach needed

With reference to 'Two failures too many for ISRO'; the situation warrants a moment of reflection rather than reproach. In space exploration, setbacks are inevitable and often become the foundation for future success. ISRO's reputation for cost-effectiveness and innovation remain strong. Recent failures should act as a wake-up call to enhance component testing, reinforce redundancy, strengthen cryogenic stages and ensure transparent analysis. A balanced approach, greater focus on Next Generation Launch Vehicles and indigenisation of critical components will help ISRO retain its competitive edge.

VIJAY KUMAR KATIAL, PANCHKUL

Guru's visionary leadership

Apropos of 'When the Word became the Guru of Sikhs'; the article offers a rare blend of historical insight, philosophical depth and spiritual sensitivity, illuminating one of the most transformative moments in Sikh history with remarkable clarity and reverence. The nuanced explanation of Guru Gobind Singh's decision to vest eternal authority in the Guru Granth Sahib powerfully captures his moral courage, visionary leadership and timeless wisdom. The article transcends mere historical narration to provoke ethical reflection on authority, humility and truth.

PARKINDER SINGH, MOHALI

Gradual rot in bureaucracy

Refer to 'Aur kitna sukaage Sukha ko: SC slams builder-official nexus'; such terse remarks by the apex court are a serious blot on the collective conscience of politicians, builders and bureaucrats. People of my generation, born around the Partition, have been witness to an era when both politicians and civil servants were largely insulated from corruption. Over time, however, the rot set in — initially at a slow pace, and now with alarming intensity. It is deeply shameful that the Supreme Court has had to intervene to safeguard ecological interests. Humanity continues to remain oblivious to the perils of tampering with nature, which is bound to wreak havoc on mankind if we keep exploiting it beyond sustainable levels.

VK ANAND, CHANDIGARH

Govt jobs most sought after

Refer to 'Merit in the dock'; at a time when rising unemployment has become a nationwide crisis, securing one of the few government jobs opportunities available is akin to finding a needle in a haystack. Against this backdrop, allegations that the top positions were allotted through unfair means are deeply troubling and warrant an impartial and thorough investigation. Equally important is the need for the government to urgently address the widening gap between employment opportunities and the growing number of job seekers.

AYESHA MIRZA, JAMMU

Why India's rise hasn't won it friends



AIR VICE MARSHAL
MAMMOHAN BAHDUR (RETD)
EX-ADOL DG, CENTRE FOR AIR
POWER STUDIES

INDIA'S neighbourhood has become complex. Setting aside PR rhetoric, to say that New Delhi has no true friends on its borders (barring Bhutan) would not be wrong. By any yardstick, the political power of a nation with a \$4-trillion economy (fourth largest in the world) should catalyse relations with its neighbours to its advantage. That it is not exactly so needs a clinical assessment.

Pakistan as an adversary is a no-brainer and so too is China — notwithstanding the handshakes in public between PM Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping during the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting in September 2025.

While Islamabad would be feeling hurt considering the statement made by the Indian Air Force on May 10, last year with its deadly pan-Pakistan precision strikes on military installations, it would also be planning to get back — not necessarily through a kinetic engage-

ment; one is already seeing some increased terrorist activity in the Valley.

Relations with China are more complex since we are dependent on it in more ways than one in non-military areas and yet, militarily, have to match them 24x7 — man for man, tank for tank on our northern borders. With Beijing aiming for a multiple aircraft carrier navy, it would not be long before a PLAN carrier group makes a foray in the Indian Ocean, mandating another front for New Delhi to address.

But what about the others with whom India shares land and maritime proximity? A colour-coded map of India's neighbourhood friends would have more shades of red than blue. The osmotic effects of New Delhi's economic, military and cultural positioning, that should have translated to positive influence around us, are conspicuous by their absence.

Writing on what constitutes power, strategist George Friedman has termed it an intangible entity; the ambiguity that real power exudes about the likely future course of action (deterrent or kinetic) is what gives it the coercive quotient. A nation has to reach that standing in the power matrix to enable it to sway sentiment in its favour without going kinetic.

Have we, instead of nursing relationships with our neighbours, jumped the starter's



HELPFUL: Where lies the problem when India has been ferrying items as basic as water to the Maldives? AN

gun and started expecting deference that automatically accrues to real power?

In 2011, cautioning against mistaking influence and weight with power, India's then NSA Shiv Shankar Menon had said that 'For a considerable amount of time, India will be a major power with several poor people. Power is the ability to create and sustain outcomes — weight we have, our influence is growing, but our power remains to grow and should first be used for our domestic transformation.'

The absence of a power leverage explains the cosyng up of Bangladesh with Pakistan despite Dhaka

New Delhi does not have deep pockets with surplus funds like China to positively impact policies of other countries.

knowing well the pitfalls of neglecting its big neighbour which helped it get independence. We now have another border to tend and it would be interesting to see which party comes to power in the forthcoming national elections.

In Nepal, the Chinese have already made inroads through infrastructure projects (rail, roads, energy) and digital technology programmes. Their tourist inflows have also increased substantially with direct air and road connectivity. Indian media has not helped with its intrusive behaviour as the scenes of 'Indian media go back' witnessed

in the 2015 earthquake were seen again during the Gen-Z uprising.

The story has been similar in the Maldives and Sri Lanka when new governments took office. Luckily, the downturn seems to be reversing — but there is still a fair distance to cover. Myanmar has to be watched, considering the deep Chinese inroads there and our unsettled and volatile North-East.

Despite these unhelpful vibes, the Budget allocates developmental assistance to many of these neighbours since we share centuries-old cultural ties and are mindful of social sensitivities of our own border communities as well. So, where lies the problem when India has always been helpful, even ferrying items as basic as water to the Maldives?

The answer lies in the question posed earlier — 'have we jumped the starter's gun and are confusing influence and weight with power?'

On the hard power matrix, despite a welcome increase in defence exports, the growth of our military industrial complex has yet to impact India's unenviable position as the second largest arms importer in the world — this, without factoring in the \$32.5-billion Rafale import coming up soon.

A GDP of \$4 trillion is excellent, but the per capita GDP where India is 143rd

in world rankings, is the true determinant of a nation's economic depth. With millions still below the poverty line requiring succour, New Delhi does not have deep pockets with surplus funds like China to positively impact policies of other countries.

The worldwide upheaval due to Trump's arm-twisting edicts has shown what real economic power can do — the Venezuela regime change has hardly created any condemnation and the usurping of Greenland, if it happens, would be another validation of the analysis of Thucydides in 404 BCE: 'The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.'

China too is no exception — the use of its monopoly on rare earths to keep the US tariffs at bay is an example.

So, even as our diplomats burn the midnight oil working their charm, let us continue on the path of an economic surge that has been the vision of all governments since Independence.

If our endeavours for a Viksit Bharat by 2047 are to remain focussed, then amicable relations with neighbours are a sine qua non.

Till then, to avoid being 'the ugly Indian' and frittering away goodwill in our neighbourhood, our talk and actions should heed the Margaret Thatcher view that 'Being powerful is being like a lady; if you have to say you are, you aren't.'

Stray dogs shouldn't have to serve as sentinels for street kids



SUMAN VERMA
DEVELOPMENTAL
PSYCHOLOGIST

the right of stray dogs to live, alongside statutory obligations under the Animal Birth Control (ABC) Rules that prioritise sterilisation, vaccination and release rather than indiscriminate removal.

The Bench has rightly demanded solutions, not knee-jerk removals — calling for a better implementation of the ABC rules, designated feeding zones, shelters and even potential state compensation where failures lead to human harm.

Yet, in this legal and administrative choreography, the most vulnerable stakeholder remains largely absent from our action: the street child.

That stray dogs may offer some measure of protection to homeless children is not a romantic claim; it is an indictment. It reveals a governance vacuum so deep that animals have come to occupy roles that should belong to the state — protection, deterrence and companionship in spaces where children have been abandoned to fend for themselves.

India does not lack laws for children. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act mandates identification, rescue, shelter, rehabilitation and reintegration of children in need of care and protection. Constitutional care institutions remain overcrowded, underfunded



PROTECTOR: When stray dogs are the last line of defence for street children, where is the first? iStock

and India's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child place an unequivocal duty on the state to ensure children's survival, dignity and development. And yet, thousands of children continue to live outside these protections, invisible to census counts, excluded from welfare databases and absent from urban planning.

The Supreme Court's stray dog case inadvertently exposes this contradiction. Crores are debated for animal shelters, feeding infrastructure and sterilisation programmes, while child care institutions remain overcrowded, underfunded

or altogether missing in urban spaces where street children are most visible. The result is a cruel inversion of priorities — not because animals are being protected, but because children are not.

It is important to say this clearly: framing this issue as dogs versus children is a false and dangerous binary. The court has been careful not to adopt it and civil society must resist it as well. Both stray dogs and street children are casualties of the same systemic neglect — unplanned urbanisation, weak municipal capacity, fragmented welfare delivery and a persistent tendency

to respond only after tragedy strikes.

The question, then, is not whether stray dogs should be removed from schools or hospitals. Public safety demands that they should. The real question is what happens next — and to whom the state turns its attention once the dogs are moved.

If dogs are relocated in the name of safety, will the children who remain on the streets finally be relocated into care? Will municipal urgency extend beyond animal control to child outreach teams, night shelters, mental health services and long-term rehabilitation? Or will the pavement simply become quieter, leaving children more exposed than before?

The court has hinted at accountability by raising the prospect of compensation for dog-bite deaths, linking administrative failure to public harm. That some logic must apply to children. When a child is assaulted, trafficked or dies on the streets, it too is a failure of governance — no less grave, no less preventable.

What is most striking is how routinely the presence of street children is treated as an unfortunate backdrop rather than a policy emergency. Children living on streets face daily exposure to violence, abuse, trafficking, where is the first?

substance dependence and severe mental distress — risks far greater than those posed by stray animals alone.

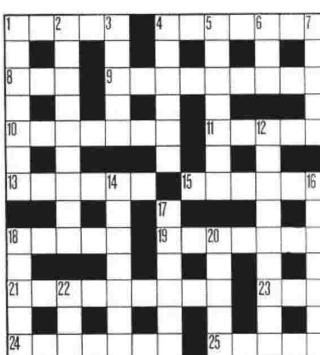
Yet outreach teams remain sporadic, shelter capacity is inadequate and rehabilitation pathways are poorly coordinated across states. Unlike stray dogs, whose numbers and movements are debated in courtrooms, street children remain administratively invisible. This invisibility is not accidental; it reflects chronic underinvestment, weak inter-departmental coordination and persistent failure to treat child homelessness.

Stray dogs should not have to serve as sentinels for abandoned children. That they do tells us not about canine loyalty, but about child absence.

If the Supreme Court's deliberations lead to more humane, lawful management of stray animals, that will be welcome. But if they also force us to confront a more uncomfortable truth — that India has normalised the presence of children without shelter, safety, or care — then this case may yet serve a larger constitutional purpose.

Because the most unsettling question raised in that courtroom was not about dogs at all. It was this: when stray dogs are the last line of defence for street children, where is the first?

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Father and son, explorers of Americas (5)
- 4 To lower (7)
- 8 Excessively (3)
- 9 Tied (3)
- 10 Recompense (7)
- 11 Expelled publicly (5)
- 13 Capital of Poland (6)
- 15 Accustom (6)
- 18 A savoury jelly (5)
- 19 Poetic pastoral paradise (7)
- 21 Judge's review of evidence (7-2)
- 23 Usual tedious procedure (3)
- 24 Framework of wooden ship (7)
- 25 Insincere (5)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Sweet tooth, 8 Adept, 9 Rat-a-tat, 10 Vikings, 11 Abyss, 12 Reduce, 14 Temper, 17 Avian, 19 Bouquet, 21 Cuisine, 22 Trash, 23 Deep-seated.

Down: 2 Wrecked, 3 Eaten, 4 Thrust, 5 Outface, 6 Hotly, 7 At a stretch, 8 At variance, 13 Confine, 15 Plumage, 16 Obsess, 18 Iliad, 20 Ultra.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

FORECAST

SUNSET	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	12:52 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	16	07	
New Delhi	19	12	
Amritsar	13	04	
Bathinda	18	04	
Jalandhar	13	04	
Ludhiana	16	05	
Bhawanipatna	16	04	
Hisar	16	05	
Sirsia	16	05	
Dharamsala	13	04	
Manali	08	0	
Shimla	09	03	
Jammu	18	08	
Kargil	01	-07	
Leh	-02	-07	
Dehradun	13	04	
Mussorie	08	04	

CALENDAR

JANUARY 23, 2026, FRIDAY		
■ Shaka Samvat	1947	
■ Margishirsh Shaka	3	
■ Margishirsh Parivatsa	10	
■ Hijri		
■ Shukla Paksha Tithi 5, up to 1:47 am		
■ Parigha Yoga up to 3:59 pm		
■ Purvabhadrapad Nakshatra up to 2:33 pm		
■ Moon enters Pisces sign 8:34 am		
■ Basant Panchami	1447	

TEMPERATURE IN °C



A democratic civilisation will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection—not an invitation for hypnosis

Umberto Eco

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
—Rammath Goenka

GREENLAND MARKS THE RETURN OF GREAT POWER ENTITLEMENT

RONALD Trump's recent promise not to use force in trying to wrest Greenland offered Western capitals a brief, uneasy relief. But beneath the rhetoric lies a president intent on asserting dominance over the Arctic through coercion, signalling that allies can be compelled without direct confrontation. Trump's shelving of the threatened 25 percent tariffs on eight European countries was less a retreat than a recalibration. After talks with Nato Secretary-General Mark Rutte in Davos, he floated a loose "framework" on Greenland and Arctic security, and suspended the tariffs due from February 1. The episode suggested neither victory nor defeat, but leverage tested and temporarily set aside—not surrendered.

The rationale begins with strategy. Greenland's location carries immense weight in an increasingly militarised Arctic. Yet, Trump moves beyond strategic logic into entitlement, repeatedly calling Greenland "our territory" and firmly situating it within "our hemisphere". The language recasts defence cooperation as a claim of possession. Familiar grievances follow: America's wartime defence of Greenland, Denmark's alleged ingratitude and the refrain that Washington bears an unfair Nato burden. Hints that allies might not be defended in return are more than bluster—they signal a worldview in which guarantees are conditional, respect is owed and loyalty carries a price.

Several impulses collide in Trump's Greenland push. Arctic security concerns are real, particularly as Russia and China expand their reach. There is also Trump's appetite for legacy—the allure of reshaping maps and leaving a historic imprint. Underpinning both is a fixation on respect: a resentment of perceived ingratitude for America's role as the ultimate guarantor of Western security and a willingness to extract costs from allies who take it for granted.

International law is clear: Danish sovereignty over Greenland was affirmed in 1933, and wartime arrangements conferred responsibility, not ownership. Yet, Trump has shown scant regard for precedent. Diplomacy has stalled, trade has been weaponised and Europe now faces an uneasy choice—retaliation risks fracture, restraint risks submission. When Trump says, "We'll see what happens," it is less a shrug than a test. Greenland, once peripheral, is now a litmus test for America's alliances in a world where power increasingly trumps law.

DGP'S SLEAZE VIDEO NEEDS CLEAN, THOROUGH PROBE

LEAZE tapes involving the powerful are hardly unfamiliar in Karnataka's political and bureaucratic history. What makes the latest episode different—and far more serious—is that, for the first time, a serving Director General of Police has been suspended after obscene videos allegedly showing him in compromising situations with women inside his office went viral. The 47-second clip, comprising three recordings involving different women, features K Ramachandra Rao, head of the Directorate of Civil Rights Enforcement. Its circulation has embarrassed not only the state police but also the government, which moved swiftly to place the officer under suspension. Rao has claimed the videos are fabricated and intended to target him.

Two issues demand scrutiny. One is the question of consent in encounters involving a senior police officer exercising enormous institutional authority. The other is the standard of propriety expected of an IPS officer, especially within an official workplace. In an era where deepfakes and digitally manipulated content can be generated and disseminated with ease, the claim of fabrication cannot be dismissed out of hand. At the same time, if the recordings are genuine, their creation within a high-security government office raises troubling questions about how such material was recorded and accessed. Either scenario calls for restraint and rigour. Trial by social media serves no one. What is required is a forensic, technology-driven investigation by a competent and independent agency, capable of determining authenticity, consent and culpability.

The case is further complicated by Rao's past brush with controversy. As the stepfather of Kannada actor Ranya Rao—convicted under COFEPOSA in a gold smuggling case—he was earlier suspended while heading the State Police Housing and Infrastructure Development Corporation, before being cleared and reinstated. That history makes it all the more important that the present inquiry be seen as fair, thorough and free of political or institutional bias.

The government's January 19 suspension order, citing "prima facie" grounds pending inquiry, is appropriate. High office demands higher standards. While the suspension shields the police force from immediate reputational damage, only an impartial and exhaustive probe can restore credibility and establish the truth.

QUICK TAKE

EMERGING MAP OF SCIENCE

A BHISHEK Nagaraj of the University of California, Berkeley and Randal Yao of MIT have arrived at a nuanced understanding of the geography of science after analysing data from 44 million publications between 1980 and 2022. Their paper, published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, shows that growing from near-zero levels four decades ago China today accounts for more than a third of all publications in top-rated journals. But the production dominance has not yet translated into a shift in global diffusion and impact. American researchers still account for two-fifths of breakthrough publications and citations to Chinese research come more from within China than outside. While it aligns with C V Raman's conviction that science offers the best possibility for fellowship, it also implies that global fellowship fosters better science.

THE year gone by will be enshrined in the BJP's annals for its spectacular success in two state polls: Delhi and Bihar, which it convincingly wrested against great odds. The new year began with a near-sweep in the prized Brihammumbai Municipal Corporation polls, where it seemed not so long ago that the BJP was doomed to be subordinated to old ally Shiv Sena.

For the BJP, a victory is just that—whether it is for a local body, state assembly or parliament—meant to be celebrated as not just something politically significant but as a morale booster. A message to the cadre to keep working because bigger triumphs are in sight if they keep at it. But this year, the BJP needs a stronger stimulant because most of the year's elections might be more daunting for it than the ones just past. Up for grabs are three states where success has eluded it so far: West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

Data from the previous assembly elections in the states afford clues to the tasks before the BJP. Of the 294 assembly seats in West Bengal, the saffron party won just 77 of the 188 it contested in 2021 and registered a vote share of 39 percent. In contrast, victor Trinamool Congress walked away with 213 seats and a poll percentage of more than 40 percent.

Of Tamil Nadu's 189 seats it contested in 2021, the DMK romped home with 133 and a vote share of 36 percent, while its ally Congress picked up 18 seats with 4 percent of the votes. The BJP won just four of the 20 seats it fought, cornering a bit less than 3 percent votes. In Kerala, the BJP was out for a duck despite contesting 115 seats and notching up more than 10 percent of the votes.

The east and the south don't appear promising so far for the BJP. But given its distinctive ability to strategise in unforeseen ways, its capacity for hard work and, most importantly, a special skill to draw narratives that punch holes in the opponents' campaigns that are often hard to fill, who knows what the impending elections hold for it and its adversaries?

West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala are expected to vote in April-May. So we can be sure to be subject to several cacomophous exchanges in the coming months—between the BJP and the never-say-die Mamata Banerjee spoiling for a

feud or two in Bengal; between a combative K Annamalai, presently the BJP's best known face in Tamil Nadu, and the soft-spoken but laser-focused M K Stalin along with family scion Udayanidhi Stalin; and between the two entrenched blocs in Kerala, the UDF and the LDF.

Regional parties that draw power from a province's culture can pose a tougher test than national ones. That's the challenge the BJP faces in three states this year

THE CONTESTS THAT WILL DEFINE 2026 POLL SCAPE

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

Columnist and political commentator



At daggers drawn, the UDF and the LDF are resolute in not allowing space for a third player, certainly not the BJP. The RSS has constructed a network across the state over the years, but has not succeeded in translating its efforts into votes for its political progeny.

In recent years, the BJP's storylines have successfully persuaded voters in the Hindi heartland, unless an opposition party offered a more convincing version like the Samajwadi Party's in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls in Uttar Pradesh.

However, the dynamics shaping the elections vary. If Tamil Nadu's politics is invariably dictated largely by alliances because of the multiple caste-based parties on the canvas, Bengal and to an extent Kerala are driven by narratives pivoting around Centre-state contradictions that have also impacted Tamil Nadu (at al-

leged imposition of Hindi, for instance).

In Bengal, unfazed by its losses in the 2021 assembly and 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the BJP kick-started its offensive against Banerjee and Trinamool with an unwavering commitment to the Election Commission's special intensive revision to purportedly identify the "infiltrators" from Bangladesh and "illegal" Rohingya settlers from Myanmar. It has gone to town about Trinamool's "Muslim aping", juxtaposing it with state-specific issues such as the corruption charges emanating from cash-for-jobs abuses and the rape-murder of a junior doctor at a Kolkata hospital, with legislative party leader Suvenu Adhikari at the campaign's forefront.

The attacks culminated in an Enforcement Directorate raid on I-PAC, the private consultancy functioning as Trina-

moor's principal database and back-up apparatus. The raid was enough to draw out the street-fighters in Banerjee, who confronted the raiders with their Trinamool warriors and put the officers on the defensive. In between, the BJP leadership's numerous gaffes on Bengal's cultural icons were grist to the Trinamool's charge that the BJP has still not comprehended the state's history and legacy—a point its state leaders couldn't counter.

Perhaps realising that his digs on Banerjee didn't go down well with voters in 2021, Narendra Modi advised his Bengal MPs to depict the SIR process in the "right" way without getting boastful about the numbers or belligerent about the intention. The BJP's apprehension was that the Matua community—dominant in at least 30 of the 294 assembly seats—which the party had nurtured as a vote bank, was ratified by the SIR exercise because many who had migrated from Bangladesh did not have the required documents. As of now, Bengal seems a long haul for the BJP.

In Chennai, where the BJP's priority is ostensibly putting together a broad anti-DMK front, the latest acquisition—or rather, reacquisition—was the TTV Dhinakaran-led Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam for the NDA. Dhinakaran revived the legacy of former AIADMK chief J Jayalalithaa and promised to honour it—an indication that Dravida politics principally survives on the memories of K Karunanidhi for the DMK and Jayalalithaa for the NDA.

But getting actor Vijay's Tamizha Vetri Kazhagam would be the icing on the cake for the BJP except that Vijay's anti-BJP utterances and the censor certificate controversy over his film *Jana Nayagan* could be impediments in the path to negotiations.

In Kerala, the BJP's win in the Thiruvananthapuram corporation was toasted as a "big breakthrough". But in a recent interview, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, the party's state president, conceded that the UDF and the LDF "amplified that the front had an 'implicit partnership' to thwart the BJP's rise. Nonetheless, Chandrasekhar added that the BJP had not given up on its programme to reach out to Muslims and Christians through community clerics and influencers.

The challenges from the three states reinforce one point: fighting regional forces that draw their political sustenance from a province's history and culture is tougher for the BJP than confronting the Congress, whose emphasis on "secularism" and "mohabbat" is sounding increasingly tired.

(Views are personal)

ONE MORE BHASHA, MANY QUESTIONS

THE University Grants Commission's recent directive ambitiously titled 'Learn One More Bharatiya Bhasha' presents itself as a progressive reform couched in the rhetoric of cultural pride and linguistic revival. It promises to promote multilingualism, bridge regional divides and shift India away from an 'English-dominant framework' to a 'Bharatiya bhasha-centred learning ecosystem'. Yes, it sounds uplifting. However, a closer examination of both the wording and the structure of the guidelines reveals a series of long-standing anxieties that this initiative does little to address.

The very title raises suspicions from states with a history of opposing central language policies. 'Learn one more Bharatiya bhasha' may sound innocent, but this is precisely the phrasing that Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and even Maharashtra have objected to for decades, viewing it as a thinly-disguised version of the old three-language formula. The document reaffirms that every higher education institution (HEI) must offer courses in at least three Indian languages. The logic is unclear: if the goal is multilingualism, why limit it to three?

More importantly, who decides the additional languages? Going by experience, Hindi will undoubtedly find a place, further fuelling the charge that the new guidelines are not new at all; they simply repackage an older, contentious formula in glossy language about national integration and employability. Even the celebrated idea of awarding students who learn five or more languages seems more symbolic than real.

At the postgraduate and doctoral levels, where students are deeply immersed in research, the likelihood of taking up multiple additional languages is minimal. It is hard to imagine a PhD scholar balancing coursework, fieldwork, deadlines, and the mandatory research output while simultaneously chasing certificates in four or five languages. The incentive is impressive to read, but impossible to implement.

The prentence becomes even more evident as the National Education Policy's credit structure itself has reduced the space for languages in undergraduate programmes. What used to be a three- or four-semester engagement with language learning in many institutions has now shrunk to a single semester. If the system genuinely valued multilingual learning, it would not have reduced its

curricular space in the first place.

Let's examine the guidelines in detail. They insist that all HEIs offer courses at three levels—basic, intermediate and advanced—and that these courses be open to all: undergraduate and postgraduate students, doctoral scholars, teachers, staff members and even local community residents. In principle, this inclusivity sounds generous. In practice, it becomes unwieldy. Research has consistently shown that adult learners face significantly greater difficulty in acquiring new lan-



The UGC's push for students and faculty members to learn "one more Bharatiya bhasha" is misguided. Though multilingualism can be valuable, learning a new language at an advanced age while teaching or pursuing a PhD would be extremely tough. Merely complying to keep an institution's ranking would be a burden

guages. Expecting students in their twenties and beyond to learn an additional language simply because an institution needs to meet an accreditation requirement is unrealistic at best and coercive at worst.

The UGC quite deceptively uses the word 'encourage' while the incentive structure tells the real story. When national accreditation and institutional ranking scores—metrics that shape funding, reputation, admissions and research grants—are linked to compliance, no guideline can be treated as optional. Institutions cannot afford to ignore anything linked to rankings. As we saw with the Indian knowledge system mandate, colleges will likely scramble to produce rapid, symbolic com-

pliance. Once again, the burden of this coercion will fall not only on administrators, but on staff and students.

Another troubling aspect of the initiative is the push to replace the so-called 'English-dominant' framework. While the desire to strengthen Indian languages is legitimate, the assumption that English must be pushed aside for Indian languages to flourish reflects a false binary. English has become the language of aspiration, mobility and global opportunity, not simply because of colonial legacy, but because of current academic, economic and professional realities.

For many marginalised families, English has been the key to upward mobility. Karnataka's experience is a stark reminder: engineering colleges attempting Kannada-medium programmes have consistently struggled to attract students. Not because students disrespect Kannada, but because they clearly understand the stakes of employability. Hence, linking placement prospects to proficiency in Indian languages may have unintended consequences.

Instead of fostering genuine curiosity, it risks turning language learning into a transactional, certificate-driven exercise. When learning becomes a burden, its purpose is defeated. Sadly, the guidelines also mandate dashboards, tracking and evaluations, bureaucratising what should be an interest-driven process; a language learned under surveillance is rarely learned with joy.

None of this is an argument against multilingualism. India's linguistic diversity is one of its greatest strengths, and a deeper understanding of cross-regional languages can enrich our cultural fabric. Learning a new language is a beautiful thing, but it cannot be engineered through mandates, ranking incentives, or token compliance. True multilingualism grows when students have the freedom to curiosity, and opportunity to explore languages within their own terms, not when the system nudges, evaluates, and rewards them for it.

By turning language learning into yet another compliance mechanism, the initiative can easily burden students, polarise states and weaken India's multilingual future. (Views are personal)

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Revamping BJP

Ref: *Challenge before Nitin Nabi* (Jan 22). Nitin Nabi's rise signals a needed youth push for the BJP, but steering a party rooted in old alliances through shifting voter moods won't be easy. A smart move would be fostering grassroots dialogues to draw in fresh ideas and keep the outfit dynamic. SM Jeeva, Chennai

US megalomania

Ref: *Moving on: A UN without US* (Jan 22). It's paradoxical that the same US which was instrumental in the foundation of the UN is now trying to clip its wings. This exposes America's bumptious mindset marked by a larger-than-the-universe megalomania. Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Faltering Nato

Ref: *Don goes back foot* (Jan 22). Donald Trump's remarks at Davos show a familiar mix of bluster and tactical retreat—ruling out force while still pressing for control. The tone risks alienating Nato allies at a time when unity matters most. Multilateral talks focused on shared Arctic and climate security would be wiser. Quiet cooperation could serve everyone better than public. M Barathi, Bengaluru

SIR Incompetencies

Ref: *Underqualified, untrained persons roped in as BLOs* (Jan 22). It is perhaps true that the booth level officers are untrained or all of this might be a deliberate act. The modus operandi—pitched as efficient—is practically inaccurate and ignorant. I experienced it myself while trying to include my wife's name in the revised list. Rabindranath C. Maduram

Trading horses

Ref: *Shinde gets Raj support* (Jan 22). In the aftermath of a split verdict, Shinde Sena needs alliance support to claim the mayor's post. Rai Thackeray's offer may possibly give Shinde Sena an edge, but what does the ally stand to gain from this act of nominal 'ditch politics'? PV Prakash, Mumbai

Weakening funding

Ref: *Kerala will get more funds if Pinarayi joins NDA* (Jan 22). It seems fine for a minister to invite another person to his political stream, but the tactic that the fealty of the reigning CM of a state would result in inflow of more central funds to the state is beyond justification. It sends the wrong precedent about the federal system of this democratic country. Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha

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OPINION

Time to sit and wait

Sophie Wushuang Yi says with Trump on rampage, China is likely to opt for strategic patience

The successful capture of Venezuela's president, Nicolas Maduro, this month was not merely a tactical achievement—it was a template. Within weeks, an unmistakable pattern has emerged: an aircraft carrier group redirecting towards the Middle East as protests engulf Iran, European Nato allies scrambling to deploy troops to Greenland in response to Washington's annexation rhetoric, and domestically, a rapidly expanded immigration enforcement apparatus patrolling American cities with military-grade equipment.

These developments raise questions: does this trajectory represent one president's aberration, or is a cultural pressure-cooker of a leadership world eventually accommodate? And for what specifically? What, if anything, should China do with this apparent strategic window?

The scope of American military operations has expanded dramatically. Strikes in Nigeria on December 25 marked the first known direct US intervention in Africa's most populous nation. Operation Hawk Strike in Syria has seen over 200 precision munitions fired against Islamic State targets since December.

The USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group has begun moving towards the Persian Gulf. American forces are operationally committed across Venezuela, Syria, Nigeria and Somalia, while military pressure mounts on Iran—straining the credibility of an administration that campaigned on ending foreign entanglements.

The Arctic spectacle illuminates an unprecedented Nato conundrum. After a January 14 White House meeting, France,

Germany, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Finland said they would dispatch military personnel to Greenland under Operation Arctic Endurance. Donald Trump's response was immediate: tariffs against Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Finland, escalating from 10 per cent on February 1 to 25 per cent on June 1.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's warning that a US attack on Greenland would mark "the end of Nato" underscores what legal scholars confirm: any US military seizure of Greenland would trigger Nato's collective defence clause against the United States itself.

Most distinctly Trumpian is the transformation of Immigration and Customs Enforcement into a parallel force. ICE's budget has jumped from US\$8 billion to about US\$28 billion annually; it is now the highest-funded law enforcement agency in the federal government. The agency has expanded by 120 per cent in under a year, to over 22,000 personnel. ICE operates outside the Posse Comitatus Act's constraints that restrict the US military from taking part in civilian law enforcement in the country.

Chinese netizens have developed their own framework for understanding America's decline: the "kill lines" (*chan sha xian*)—political polarisation, unsustainable debt, social fragmentation, crumbling infrastructure, the opioid epidemic—that many believe will prove more consequential than any pressure Beijing could apply.

The logic is: why risk intervention when the US' internal contradictions may accomplish what no adversary could? Yet the question persists: with American attention

fragmented across multiple theatres, does China have a strategic window? Canada's new strategic partnership with China—including Ottawa slashing EV tariffs from 100 per cent to 6.1 per cent in exchange for reduced canola duties and an energy cooperation framework spanning oil, gas and clean technology—suggests some states are already positioning for alternatives to US leadership.

■ ■ ■
States seeking to diversify strategic options will come to Beijing; China need not pursue them

The honest answer is that China's hands may be as constrained as the US', albeit for different reasons. China and Russia are partners but emphatically not allies—a distinction with profound significance. Beijing benefits from Moscow's role in exhausting Western attention, but bears no treaty obligations to support Russian actions. The partnership offers diplomatic coordination and energy security, but no template for joint exploitation of American distraction.

More fundamentally, China's rise occurred within the existing international order, not despite it. Beijing benefited enormously from the trade architecture, financial systems and stability that American hegemony underwrote. A chaotic

interregnum may not serve Chinese interests better than the gradual reshaping of an order that remains functional.

The wiser course may be precisely what Beijing appears to be doing: observing while allowing the old order to deteriorate under its own contradictions, without Chinese fingerprints accelerating the collapse. Allied hedging behaviour—the Philippines' multi-alignment, Japan's defence build-up, European reconnaissance in Greenland, Canada's diplomatic overtures—creates opportunities for patient engagement. States seeking to diversify strategic options will come to Beijing China need not pursue them.

Trump has accelerated trends already present and created path dependencies that will persist regardless of his successor. National Guard deployments may prove reversible; ICE's institutional expansion creates precedents that future administration successors cannot easily dismantle.

The pre-Trump equilibrium cannot be restored. Yet unpredictability is not synonymous with opportunity. A presidency conducting simultaneous operations across multiple theatres while threatening its allies introduces volatility benefiting no major power—including one that prefers calculated manoeuvres to chaotic flux.

As realists argue, great powers pursue their interests through available means. For China, those means may be strategic patience rather than opportunistic exploitation, allowing structural pressures to reshape the international order while reshaping to domestic challenges that ultimately determine great power trajectories.

Sophie Wushuang Yi holds a PhD in Chinese studies (international relations) from King's College London, where she specialised in Sino-US relations

LETTERS

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Four steps to build a lasting foundation for greater fire safety

I wish to express my strong support for the Fire Services Department's swift launch of a two-month operation, following the Wang Fuk Court fire in Tai Po ("Hong Kong authorities start 2-month inspection operation on building fire safety", January 19).

In focusing on older residential and mixed-use buildings first planned in or before 1987 and containing multiple units of flats, the inspection of installations such as fire alarm and hose reel systems, the operation is both practical and well targeted.

The strict verification of annual inspection certificates (FS 251) also sends a clear message to owners' corporations, property managers and contractors: having fire service installations in place does not automatically mean they are reliable; maintenance, testing and accountability must be demonstrably upheld.

Also welcome the department's measures: requiring standardised damage notices to be displayed prominently when installations are defective, and requiring prior risk assessment and notification before any shutdown of fire installations for maintenance and other works. These steps improve transparency and would help residents make better decisions in an emergency, avoiding dangerous reliance on failed equipment.

To ensure short-term enforcement translates into sustained public confidence, I propose four refinements.

First, establish a consistent inspection checklist or framework that goes beyond certificate-based compliance to include functional test records, repair times and rates of application.

Second, adopt a risk-based inspection strategy after the two months, prioritising "three-nil" buildings lacking an owners' corporation, a residents' organisation or property management, and buildings with prior non-compliance history.

Third, strengthen collaboration with the Buildings Department and Home Affairs Department to pair enforcement with practical support, including technical guidance and information on repair funding, especially for resource-constrained older buildings.

Fourth, publish anonymised post-operation statistics—common defects, rectification rates and reoffending rates—to drive industry self-discipline and community education.

With these enhancements, the operation can become a lasting foundation for a stronger fire safety culture.

Dr James Tsui Siu-lung,
registered professional surveyor (building surveying)

Can Hong Kong cinema scene survive streaming onslaught?

I was almost moved to tears as I watched *Back to the Past* in a full house recently. Not only did the film conjure nostalgic moments from the original historical sci-fi television series, being among so many movie-goers was also reminiscent of the heyday of the local cinema scene.

Cinema attendance has dwindled considerably compared with pre-pandemic levels, resulting in theatre closures not only in Hong Kong but in many other markets around the world. This decline is attributable to people's diminished motivation to go to the movies.

In particular, streaming has spelled trouble for cinemas. For a reasonable monthly subscription fee, one can watch hundreds, if not thousands, of films. To cater to the language needs of viewers, audio and subtitles are available in multiple languages. Algorithms also ensure viewers' preferences are taken care of.

If one can sit comfortably at home and enjoy a movie, why venture out to a cinema, where one might encounter screaming children and inconsiderate viewers spoiling the plot?

Cinemas are essentially fighting an uphill battle to lure people away from the comfort of their homes. Their survival hinges on their ability to provide a novel viewing experience that cannot be replicated at home. A combination of virtual reality goggles and vibrating seats could have viewers on the edge of their seats during high-octane action films or creepy horror movies.

Additionally, concessionary tickets and membership cards could help attract return visits. Weekend specials and promotional offers could encourage people to get into the habit of going to the cinema to celebrate birthdays and spend leisure time.

It is hoped that cinemas can recapture their past glories. If they remain viable, watching a film in a full house would not fill us with collective nostalgia.

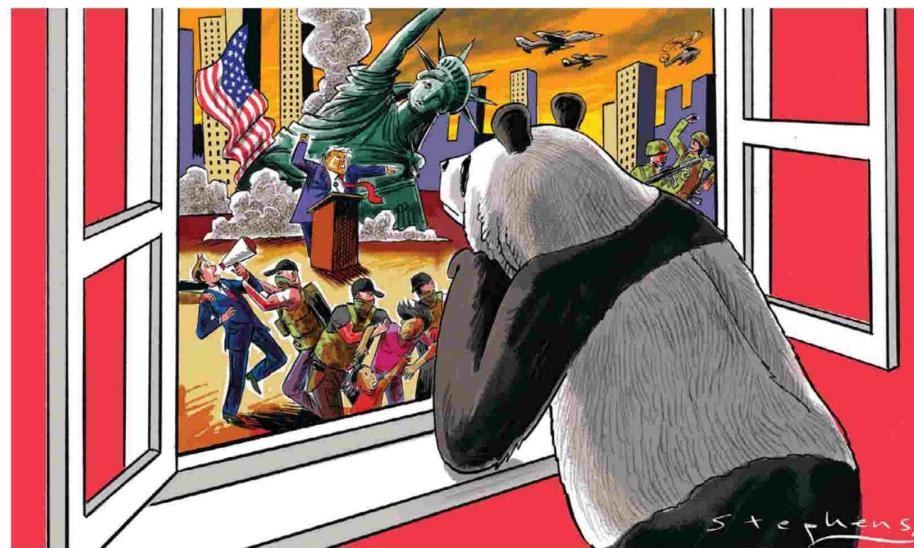
Jason Tang, Tin Shui Wai

Thoughts and prayers with tenants of subdivided flats

In 2026, Hong Kong continues to struggle to improve the lot of tenants in subdivided flats.

Under the new basic housing units regime, landlords might exit the market rather than invest in costly renovations. Low-income tenants unable to find affordable units could be rendered homeless. I can only pray that these residents can move into suitable public housing as early as possible.

Eleanor Kwong, Wan Chai



The danger of turning foreign policy into moral theatre

Jinghan Zeng says Denmark finds itself exposed after burning a diplomatic bridge with China

The renewed debate over Greenland has put Denmark in an awkward strategic position. When a close ally openly flirts with the idea of territorial acquisition—however unrealistic or rhetorical—it exposes an uncomfortable truth for many middle and small powers: alignment does not guarantee protection and loyalty does not always translate into leverage.

In an age defined by intensifying competition between the United States and China, governments increasingly feel inclined to show where they "stand". Yet the Greenland episode should prompt a deeper reflection about the risks of narrowing diplomatic space too hastily.

Denmark's China policy over the past decade offers a telling example. In response to growing geopolitical pressure and heightened concerns about values, security and influence, Denmark chose to close all Confucius Institutes, signalling a decisive break with what were once regarded as benign platforms for cultural and language exchange. At the time, some welcomed the move as a clear break from a cleavage of ties with a politically uncomfortable partner.

Years later, the irony is hard to miss. Confucius Institutes were jointly established by Chinese universities and host universities. Their primary function was to teach the Chinese language, enable cultural exchange and provide institutional channels for engagement. In diplomatic terms, they functioned as bridges: imperfect, contested, but nevertheless useful.

By dismantling these bridges entirely, Denmark did not merely reject a cultural

programme; it signalled a broader willingness to tolerate even a risk of engagement with Chinese language and culture. That choice went far beyond managing risk. It amounted to closing doors.

The decision appeared largely cost-free. Denmark enjoyed strong transatlantic ties, a relatively stable European environment and little perceived need to hedge. China, after all, was portrayed as a distant challenge best managed through collective firmness rather than selective engagement. But the strategic environment has shifted.

Europe today is more fragmented, more

economically constrained, and more uncertain about long-term US commitments than it was a decade ago. Meanwhile,

Washington's increasingly transactional approach to alliances has made even close partners uneasy. When Greenland re-enters public discourse as a strategic asset rather than a sovereign territory,

Denmark finds itself exposed—caught between dependence and diminishing room to maneuver.

Contrast this with Canada. Ottawa, too,

has faced tensions with China. Yet Canada has retained multiple channels of communication, including Confucius Institutes, while recalibrating oversight and governance expectations.

Rather than burning bridges, Canada

has sought to hedge—managing risk to manoeuvre in a changing international order. This logic is evident as Prime Minister Mark Carney pursues a renewed strategy with China, partly to diversify trade, investment and diplomatic options amid escalating US tariffs and growing uncertainty in the global economy.

Middle powers do not benefit from rigid binary choices. They benefit from optionality. In a world where great-power relations are volatile and alliances increasingly conditional, keeping doors open is not weakness—it is strategy.

Closing Confucius Institutes did not

make Denmark safer, richer or more

influential. What it did was eliminate

what Europe needs: a bridge to a

new world.

These debates echo Denmark's earlier

trajectory: concern over values and influ-

ence are translated into calls for closure,

often without a clear plan for what replaces

these institutions or what strategic purpose

their removal ultimately serves.

The question policymakers should ask

is not whether Confucius Institutes are

perfect, but whether eliminating them

enhances national resilience. In most cases,

the answer is far from obvious.

For Denmark, rebuilding engagement with China will not be easy. Trust, once

eroded, takes time to restore. Yet reopening

institutional channels—starting with

education and language—may be one of the

few pragmatic steps available.

Re-establishing a Confucius Institute, or a

similar joint cultural platform under revised

governance arrangements, would not

signal surrender. It would signal realism.

The broader lesson is clear. In an era of

great-power rivalry, middle powers should

resist the temptation to turn foreign policy

into moral theatre. Symbolic victories are

cheap, but they are also costly.

China's actions have exposed the

limits of Denmark's strategy.

Jinghan (Michael) Zeng, a former director of

a Confucius Institute in the UK, is a professor

in the Department of Public and International

Affairs at City University of Hong Kong

In a world where great-power relations are volatile ... keeping doors open is not weakness – it is strategy

actively debated under the previous Conservative Party government, placing dozens of university-based institutes under threat of closure and alienating foreign students from programmes to political influence.

These debates echo Denmark's earlier trajectory: concern over values and influence are translated into calls for closure, often without a clear plan for what replaces these institutions or what strategic purpose their removal ultimately serves.

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Opinion

Gazans need their rights, not temporary arrangements

HANI HAZAIMEH



The second phase of the Gaza agreement represents far more than a diplomatic step forward. It is a defining test of whether the international community is finally willing to move beyond crisis containment toward justice, accountability and sustainable peace. For this phase to succeed, it must rest on three pillars: protecting Palestinian rights, curbing Israeli violations that have historically sabotaged ceasefires, and ensuring that Palestinians themselves govern their land and decide their future. Without these foundations, reconstruction will become yet another prelude to renewed destruction.

For years, Gaza has been treated primarily as a humanitarian problem rather than a political one — a territory to be fed, managed and periodically rebuilt after devastation, but never truly freed. This approach has failed catastrophically. No amount of aid can substitute for freedom

and no reconstruction effort can endure under siege. The current moment offers a rare opportunity to break this cycle. But only if Palestinian rights are placed at the center of the process — as enforceable realities rather than rhetorical commitments.

The most urgent requirement is to protect Palestinians from continued Israeli military incursions and violations that hold out ceasefires before they take hold.

But this will not suffice if Palestinians are excluded from shaping their political destiny. One of the gravest failures of past postwar arrangements has been the sidelining of Palestinian agency — replacing self-rule with externally managed governance models designed to prioritize “stability” over legitimacy. Palestinians must not be governed on behalf of others — they must govern themselves.

This means restoring genuine Palestinian political authority in Gaza through inclusive national frameworks, institutional rebuilding and democratic legitimacy. It means

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rejecting models that outsource governance to foreign administrators, security contractors or interim bodies lacking a public mandate. And it means reconnecting Gaza politically and administratively with the West Bank and East Jerusalem as part of a unified Palestinian polity — not entrenching fragmentation, which has long undermined prospects for statehood.

Reconstruction, therefore, must be political as well as material. Gaza does not merely need roads and hospitals — it needs sovereignty, accountability and freedom from structural violence.

At the same time, international legitimacy resolutions — including the right of return and the right to self-determination — must be reaffirmed rather than postponed indefinitely in the name of “pragmatism.” Every attempt to defer these questions has only deepened injustice and instability. Sustainable peace cannot rest on unresolved dispossession. Nor can Gaza’s future be separated from the

broader Palestinian national question. A ceasefire that ignores these foundations is not a solution — it is an intermission.

Palestinian leadership must be central — not symbolic — in all political, security and reconstruction arrangements. No foreign architecture, however well-funded, can substitute for political consent rooted in representation.

Reconstruction projects divorced from sovereignty will fail. What must replace them is a rights-based framework that recognizes Palestinians as subjects of law, not objects of management.

The second phase must not fail — not because failure would embarrass diplomats but because it would condemn millions to continued dispossession, insecurity and despair. Gaza does not need another ceasefire that collapses under violations. It does not need reconstruction without rights. And it does not need governance without representation.

It needs freedom, accountability and self-rule — now, not later.

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CARTOON BY ANAID HAMALASHIQ AL-JARAJI



Syria's government moved to establish the legal-political foundations for integration through a presidential decree

The path to SDF integration into the Syrian state

HASSAN AL-MUSTAFA



Syria's Defense Ministry on Tuesday declared a four-day ceasefire with the Syrian Democratic Forces, an announcement that coincided with a significant American policy signal. US envoy Tom Barrack stated that integration into the Syrian state — complete with “citizenship rights, cultural protection and political participation” — represents “the greatest opportunity for the Kurds in Syria right now.” He added that the SDF’s original anti-Daesh support mission has “largely expired” and emphasized America has “no interest in (a) long-term military presence in Syria.”

Barrack’s remarks clearly favored Damascus’ central government, likely surprising Kurdish expectations. They signal a recalibration of American engagement in post-Assad Syria, fundamentally reframing the SDF’s status from anti-Daesh combat force to a local faction expected to merge into state structures.

Syria’s government last week moved to establish the legal-political foundations for integration through a presidential decree tackling core Kurdish grievances. The decree eliminated “exceptional measures” stemming from the controversial 1962 Hasakah census, extended citizenship to all residents of Kurdish origin* — including previously unregistered individuals — and designated Nowruz as a nationwide public holiday.

These decisions demonstrate Damascus’ intent to offer more than military capitulation — instead proposing genuine citizenship free from cultural or ethnic bias against Kurds. The goal: making state reintegration an attractive, socially acceptable option within Kurdish communities, rather than a submission to a superior force.

Yet, despite these diplomatic and legislative initiatives, conditions on the ground remain volatile. Fighting resumed after an initial pause and gunfire exchanges

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continued, prompting Damascus to issue the four-day extension. Serious security concerns arose when 120 Daesh detainees escaped Al-Shaddadi prison during redeployment chaos — 81 were recaptured, according to Associated Press reports, though other Western sources cited higher figures.

Three factors now define the SDF’s trajectory. First, American backing no longer guarantees its survival as a quasi-independent entity viewed by central authorities as separatist. Instead, Washington is applying pressure for state integration.

Second, regional endorsement for integration from Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar increases the costs of reverting to being an armed militia operating outside state control. Integration, on the other hand, fits within a broader regional stability framework that emphasizes institution-building, sovereignty and territorial unity.

Third, Syria’s government must demonstrate its governance capacity domestically

and internationally — managing the country effectively, ensuring stability, improving economic conditions and attracting investment. This requires tangible evidence that it can accommodate Kurdish diversity without triggering new cycles of rebellion. Damascus therefore prioritizes resolving the SDF question regardless of the perceived costs.

Real operational complications exist. Trust between Syria’s central authority and Kurdish communities remains tenuous. Yet transparent dialogue, unambiguous antidiscrimination legislation establishing citizenship as the baseline, and authentic representation across government, military, security services and state institutions would make SDF integration substantially more achievable.

Simultaneously, the SDF must abandon unrealistic aspirations of expansive Kurdish autonomy, recognizing that integration into the state with equal rights and genuine partnership better serves Kurdish interests than separatist positioning.

Opinion

How to feed 10 billion people

YURDI YASMI



With the world struggling to feed 8 billion people today, how will we feed 10 billion by 2050? Meeting the nutritional needs of a growing population requires not just a radical increase in food production — almost all of it plant-based — but also a more equitable distribution to ensure that no one is food-insecure.

That is a tall order. The current food system is already buckling. About 673 million people go to bed hungry every night and, in 2025, we witnessed two famines (in Gaza and Sudan), each driven by conflict, climate shocks and soaring food prices. At the same time, 1.66 billion hectares — 60 percent of which is agricultural land — have been degraded by the very practices we rely on to feed the world.

For decades, the agriculture sector has responded well to rising demand by developing higher-yielding crops and using more of everything: more fertilizer, more pesticides and more water. Yet this trend has produced unnecessary waste, polluted rivers, degraded the soil and released ever-more greenhouse gases. We need to find

a better path — and science can show us the way. We already have the knowledge and the tools to optimize what we use and diversify what we grow.

One priority is to improve efficiency. Improved pesticide management — through precision spraying, biopesticides and residue monitoring — reduces chemical waste while safeguarding biodiversity. Agroecological practices, such as intercropping, crop rotation and integrating trees into farm systems, further enhance soil health, lower input dependence and strengthen long-term resilience.

The next priority is to diversify the food system. Decades of productivity gains have fostered a dangerous dependency

on just three crops. Wheat, rice and maize now provide most of the world's calories. Such reliance on monocultures creates profound vulnerability to pests, diseases and climate change.

The solution lies in the crops we have marginalized. Traditional and underused species — hardy millets, nutrient-dense legumes, indigenous fruits, robust yams — offer ample nutrition alongside other benefits such as climate resilience.

Finally, we must scale up effective

We already have the knowledge and the tools to optimize what we use and diversify what we grow

technologies. Data analytics and precision agriculture tools are already reshaping farming. Drones can plant seeds and deliver inputs with pinpoint accuracy. Artificial intelligence platforms can use satellite imagery to provide tailored, real-time recommendations. Robots can detect weeds for targeted spraying, avoiding the need for blanket herbicide applications. Digital soil tests and weather stations can guide day-to-day decisions and blockchain systems can link small-holders to transparent and traceable markets.

Scaling these tools will require substantial investments in agricultural extension services (to promote best practices), major science-based policy shifts and knowledge-sharing platforms to help farmers optimize inputs. Likewise, ongoing innovation must be incorporated into local practices, which calls for greater collaboration among governments, investors, the private sector and farmers.

The objective is clear: agriculture must produce more with less — more crop per drop, more calories per kilogram of fertilizer and more nutrition per hectare — every season, everywhere. That requires replacing one-size-fits-all industrial packages with resilient, context-specific

systems finely tuned to local soils, water regimes, crops and climates. Publicly funded research must lead where markets fall short to ensure equitable access to precision agriculture, while private innovation continues to scale up what works. Knowledge is no longer the bottleneck; political will and aligned incentives are.

Even in the face of recurring conflict, drought and market chaos, stable production and affordable prices are possible. Resilient soils, diversified cropping and precision management hold the key. A world where nearly everyone eats well, farmers prosper, soils regenerate, waters run clean, biodiversity recovers and agrifood

systems emit minimal greenhouse gases is not utopian. It is the realistic reward for embracing a different agricultural model before the old one collapses.

The only question is whether we use the knowledge, science and proven tools already in hand. Future generations will not ask whether the solutions existed; they will ask what took us so long to implement them. The choice is ours and it starts with turning science into real-world practice.

The objective is clear: agriculture must produce more with less every season, everywhere

Yurdi Yasmi is Director of the Plant Production and Protection Division at the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

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Escaping the French budget maze

ERIC HAZAN AND JEAN PISANI-FERRY



For the second year in a row, France has failed to pass a budget before the end of December, as required by the constitution. At the time of writing, Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu's relentless efforts to find a compromise among the political parties willing to strike a deal seem likely to bear fruit, albeit at the expense of forsaking President Emmanuel Macron's signature supply-side policy.

The core problem stems from the fact that French public accounts are deep in the red, with a fiscal deficit exceeding 5 percent of gross domestic product. Having backed down from higher initial ambitions, Lecornu's hope is to keep the deficit below that threshold in 2026 and to bring it down gradually to 3 percent by 2029. In an extraordinary reversal of fortune, France is now lagging behind the likes of Spain and Portugal, which have come back from the brink to achieve stable or diminishing debt ratios.

Why does France stand apart and what is to be done? With the 2027 presidential election just over a year away, this is an essential question not just for France but also for the eurozone and the EU.

The key to escaping the budget maze

is to separate financial requirements and political choices. Ensuring debt sustainability belongs to the first category, while decisions about the composition of the fiscal adjustment — which bits of public spending should be preserved and which reduced or cut — belong to the second. Since the current policy discussion has not been structured to distinguish neatly between these two categories, politics keeps encroaching, impeding progress.

Finding a solution hinges on an explicit agreement between the political center (what remains of Macron's majority of a few years ago) and the center-left (namely, the Socialist Party). But is a responsible compromise possible in today's fragmented political landscape? To answer

this question, we recently conducted a policy experiment that challenges the conventional wisdom.

We asked a sample of about 150 self-declared center-left citizens to find agreement on a seven-year fiscal adjustment path. We started by presenting them with the amount of expenditure cuts or tax increases needed to stabilize the debt ratio in the medium term, which we estimated to be at least €10 billion (\$129 billion), equivalent to 3.8 percent of France's 2024

GDP. With this as the binding constraint, the choice of corresponding measures was left to the participants.

This overall constraint was generally accepted: citizens did not dispute it. Instead, they focused on selecting policies from a very detailed menu of €175 billion in expenditure cuts and €170 billion in tax increases, prepared by the Council of Economic Analysis. The rule for selecting measures was that simple majority support was not a sufficiently high bar.

To ensure legitimacy, only measures clearing with at least 60 percent support were classified as "consensual."

Measures that are costly in the short term but yield benefits over a 10-year horizon — such as spending on business research and development or expenditures aimed at increasing senior citizens' labor market participation — could be chosen as well. Because of the aggregate constraint, these required additional expenditure cuts or tax increases, but they also broadened the scope for choice.

Consensus was found on a balance between expenditure cuts (55 percent) and tax increases (45 percent). The former included a wholesale restructuring of public spending, while the latter mostly

consisted of taxes on the upper middle class and the elimination of "brown" tax expenditures. Predictably, "consensual" measures fell short of the required €110 billion but only by €13.5 billion. A last round of voting was therefore necessary to come up with a sufficiently ambitious adjustment program. In the event, citizens ended up choosing to cut public pension entitlements rather than raise additional taxes or find other savings on expenditures.

The lesson is clear: center-left voters are not allergic to fiscal realism. When confronted with the facts, they come up with solutions. What they reject is opacity, improvisation and the absence of a credible horizon. The real failure

is institutional, not societal.

France's budgetary impasse reflects a broader loss of strategic ambition. The experiment described here shows that a way out exists. When the rules are made clear, the horizon credible and the trade-offs transparent, citizens are prepared to support difficult decisions. What is missing is not consent but method. The real choice for France (and other democracies) is simple: govern deliberately or be driven by events.

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EDITORIALS

Parking meter deal from hell is a Chicago nightmare. Can the city exorcise this devil?

In 2008, a cash-strapped city of Chicago leased some 36,000 parking meters to a Morgan Stanley-led entity called Chicago Parking Meters LLC (you likely know it as Park Chicago on your phone) for the absurdly low sum of \$1.15 billion. About a year ago, that entity (other big investors include Allianz Capital Partners and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority) had earned some \$2 billion, mostly from ordinary Chicagoans lining up their vehicles with the public sidewalk.

That was with another 57 years still left on the deal.

We've opined several times on this stunning piece of governmental malpractice and mayors subsequent to Richard M. Daley, whose crew made this monumental mistake for which we now pay a pretty price, have tried to improve the deal. They never have meaningfully succeeded. Mayor Rahm Emanuel managed to swap some things around in 2013, mostly in a revenue-neutral kind of way, adding an evening hour of paid parking to sub for free Sunday parking in some neighborhoods spots, saying at the time that he didn't want churchgoers and synagogue attendees to have to pay to park. But the bones of this deal from hell have survived one challenge after another.

The parking meter fiasco has been back in the news this week because that original consortium put the deal up for sale and why not? They already have made their pile.

And no doubt attracted to the potential political benefits of excising the devil's deal, Mayor Brandon Johnson confirmed reports that the city was thinking about buying the meters back. Actually, he did a lot more than muse: we have been given to understand



A parking meter sign outside the Nederlander Theatre on West Randolph Street in Chicago's Loop on Tuesday. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

that the city was in fact the highest bidder in the reaucting of its own meters, but elected not to proceed with the purchase.

We fully understand Johnson's temptation: aside from the hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue the city is losing every year, the deal also stops the city from doing a variety of desirable civic things (such as holiday markets and other special events) because if Chicago takes away even one of the spots for longer than a few hours, a bill comes due from the meter owners.

Who would not want to be rid of Chicago Parking Meters LLC and any successors?

On the other hand, the very idea of borrowing to give this amoral crew yet more of the taxpayers' money (well in excess of \$3 billion more, we hear) is as annoying as

it gets. And, as some aldermen pointed out, there was also the real danger of compounding one loss with another, yet bigger.

Chicago Parking Meters LLC played the city for fools in 2008 and there is no certainty that would not happen again.

By Tuesday, this consideration appeared moot. Johnson said that the deal had been complicated with another private entity. To our minds, the city's exit from the game (not out with private equity players) was the best call. The heart of one of the orange or yellow Chicago taxpayers — already has been squeezed for the most juice, already

is being squeezed for the most juice, already

OPINION



Journalists wait for the start of a news conference at the end of Pope Leo XIV's first Extraordinary Consistory, a special formal assembly convening the College of Cardinals from around the world, at the Vatican on Jan. 8. GREGORIO BORGIA/AP

Where to find solace in the age of ICE

By Bob Kustra

Where can one go to hear the moral sanity that counters the grudging actions of the American president? Where can we hear the voice of compassion and empathy as immigration agents ignore the most basic rights of Americans and demonstrate the heavy hand of authoritarian government in action? Who would have guessed it would come from a former Chicago priest now influencing others in the Catholic hierarchy?

President Donald Trump's MAGA rallies have served as training sessions for at least a third of Americans, who rally to support his administration's actions regardless of how ruthless and deadly they have been recently in Minneapolis. Republicans now scoff at President Ronald Reagan's reference to America as "a shining city upon a hill."

Today, Trump teaches how to put self ahead of that shining city upon a hill. He degrades the language we use to modulate our disagreements and seek common ground. He stretches the truth into fabrications, and he punishes those with whom he disagrees.

His latest lesson was giving the finger to a worker at a Michigan auto plant who yelled at him for his handling of the Jeffrey Epstein controversy, thereby giving license to his minions to do the same in any conflict

or disagreement.

Americans hoping for a better day yearn for a leader who may differ with political opponents but doesn't cast them as enemies to be executed for treason, as Trump did to U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly, a former astronaut and Navy fighter pilot. Most Americans according to the latest polls disapprove of Trump and hope for a return to a president who governs with a respect for the norms presidents of both parties have observed when criticizing those who differed with them.

Historically, strong congressional leadership offered strong dissenting voices, which gave hope to Americans about a new leadership. Trump's daily doses of cut-and-dash behavior and the vengeance he wreaks on anyone who differs with him are not match for conventional norms used to counter a strong president.

Both Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries are weak matches for Trump's incessant manipulation of the media with major networks such as CBS folding to his threats and intimidation. Democratic governors have challenged Trump's autocratic leadership, but their states suffer greatly as Chicago learned with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's violent rebuttal to Gov. JB Pritzker's criticisms of Trump and as Gov. Tim Walz is experiencing in Minnesota.

The election of the Chicago-born Pope Leo XIV came at a most strategic moment as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Trump have vied for the world "makes right" title. With Trump as the world's bully, it seems likely that the College of Cardinals knew exactly who they were choosing when they voted for a missionary priest from South America with his roots in the most American of cities, Chicago.

The College of Cardinals, with the Vatican's most sophisticated diplomatic corps, must have known how Cardinal Robert Prevost could serve as a moral corrective to Trump who ignores international law and is devoid of any empathy for those who suffer at his hand. The new pope has taken center stage in the world arena serving as a counterweight to Trump.

Leo's appointments of bishops since becoming pope reveal a strong concern about Trump's ICE approach to border control. If there is a common thread in the pope's appointments of U.S. bishops, almost all of them have been critical publicly of Trump's immigration policies.

Leo replaced the controversial Cardinal Timothy Dolan, archbishop of New York, who called Charlie Kirk a "modern-day St. Paul," with Bishop Ronald A. Hicks of Joliet, who served as a missionary priest in El Salvador.

In a stunning and broadened critique of Trump and after a recent

conversation, Cardinal Blase Cupich, archbishop of Chicago; Cardinal Robert McElroy, archbishop of Washington, D.C.; and Cardinal Joseph Tobin, archbishop of Newark, New Jersey, had with Leo, they called for a "genuinely moral foreign policy" in a statement. Referring to Venezuela, Ukraine and Greenland, they said that "military action must be seen only as a last resort in extreme situations, not a normal instrument of national policy."

Last month, the National Catholic Register reported that 54% of Catholics still support Trump's immigration policies, the same percentage of Catholics voted for Trump in 2016. Only time will tell if Catholics follow their church's leadership and reject the policies of Trump.

Leo and his American bishops and cardinals offer people of all faiths a path paved with compassion and justice for those seeking to improve their lives. Just as importantly, they employ the soft power of the Vatican to warn against a government that threatens and intimidates by brandishing its weapons when it fails in or avoids diplomacy.

Bob Kustra served two terms as Republican lieutenant governor of Illinois and 10 years as a state legislator. He is now host of "Readers Corner" on Boise State Public Radio and a regular columnist for the Idaho Statesman.

Universal child care is how Chicago makes affordability real

By Liam Stanton

Chicago talks a lot about affordability. But for families with young kids, there is one cost that overwhelms almost everything else — child care.

I know this firsthand. Like so many parents in this city, my family has paid day care bills that rival a mortgage payment. Every month, those costs force real trade-offs: savings, stability, career decisions or family needs, staying in the city we love or quietly wondering how long we can make it work.

That's why Chicago should move toward universal child care.

Not as a slogan. Not as a political talking point. But as a practical, serious way to support working families — and to make affordability something people actually feel in their daily lives.

Other cities are beginning to recognize this reality. In New York, state and city leaders have committed to expanding child care access by publicly funding care for young children, starting with 2-year-olds and building toward a broader universal system. Their logic is simple. The cost of doing nothing — parents leaving the workforce, families leaving the city, kids starting



New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani greets preschool children at the Flatbush YMCA in Brooklyn before he and Gov. Kathy Hochul announce a plan to expand free and subsidized child care for New Yorkers on Jan. 8. ANNA WATTS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

school behind — is greater than the cost of investing early.

Chicago has already shown that it understands this principle. Under Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the city made a sustained push to expand access to full-day and universal pre-K for 4-year-olds. That effort helped thousands of children get a stronger start and gave working parents meaningful relief. It was the right move — and it worked.

Universal child care is the next step in that same evolution.

This isn't about telling parents that it understands this principle. Under Mayor Rahm Emanuel, the city made a sustained push to expand access to full-day and universal pre-K for 4-year-olds. That effort helped thousands of children get a stronger start and gave working parents meaningful relief. It was the right move — and it worked.

If we are serious about keeping families in Chicago — not just attracting young professionals, but helping people stay when they start raising kids — this is where affordability stops being a buzzword and becomes real.

Yes,

universal child care will be hard. It will require clear priorities, tough budget decisions and real partnership with the state. But the difficulty isn't about the cost.

Chicago already makes choices every year about what matters. We invest billions through our budget, tax structures and development incentives. The real question isn't whether we have resources — it's whether we are willing to prioritize working families as part of the city's long-term strength.

Universal child care is not

a handout. It's an investment in people who want to work, contribute and build a life here.

When parents can afford work,

they stay in the workforce,

advance in their careers and

generate real economic returns

for the city — from property

taxes to stronger local businesses

and more stable neighborhood

economies. Employers benefit

from a more stable workforce.

Children benefit from early

learning that sets them up for

success long before they enter a classroom.

And the city benefits from families who can plan their future here — instead of constantly wondering when they'll be forced to leave.

Too often, Chicago responds to affordability with temporary fixes that don't match the scale of the challenge. Universal child care can be different. It would be structured to commit us to the idea that this city works best when working families can thrive.

Chicago has always been strongest when it invests in the foundations of a good life: education, opportunity and stability. Universal child care belongs squarely in that tradition.

If we want Chicago to remain a city where families can put down roots — not just get started but stay — then this is a conversation we can't keep postponing.

Affordability becomes real when families feel it every month. Universal child care is how Chicago gets there.

Liam Stanton is a lifelong Chicagoan, entrepreneur and founder of The Chicago Style Project, a neighborhood advocacy group focused on bold, practical solutions for Chicago's biggest challenges.

OPINION



Sisters Mariela Del Toro, from left, Diana Izaguirre and Cynthia Zavala walk through Starved Rock State Park in Oglesby on Dec. 19, 2025. TROY STOLT/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

How can we bring more people to Starved Rock? By train

By F.K. Plous

All of us who love nature were cheered by the news that Starved Rock State Park is getting \$372 million in essential improvements. Crumbling trails are being reinforced with fresh crushed stone, the park's handsome wooden bridges and limestone walls are being overhauled or replaced, and the invisible but vital plumbing and drainage systems are being modernized.

There's only one problem that Starved Rock's do-over doesn't address: capacity. The most popular destination in Illinois' state park system can't handle any additional visitors during the peak summer season because its parking lot is full and cannot be expanded. More parking — even if a garage were built — would degrade the fragile natural environment the visitors come to see.

The park itself is not crowded. Its trails and groves and canyons can accommodate many more visitors. What Starved Rock can't absorb is more cars.

So here are two questions supposed to get there?

The simple answer by train. The main line of Amtrak's Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad runs along the north shore of the Illinois River, and there's space for a platform in downtown Utica right across the river from Starved Rock. If trains were running, a bus could shuttle passengers across the river and into the park in about seven minutes.

The problem is that restoring Rock Island for passenger service is going to cost a lot of money. The venerable Rock went bankrupt in the late 1970s and was liqui-

dated in 1980, with its weaker lines abandoned and the stronger ones sold off to other railroads or to startups. The 40-mile Chicago-Joliet segment went to Metra, the 74 miles from Joliet to Bureau were sold to the giant Eastern freight carrier CSX Corp. and the rest of the Illinois tractage out to the Quad Cities was sold to the startup Iowa Interstate Railroad, which also got the 47-mile branch from Bureau to Peoria.

Unfortunately, none of this track except the Metra segment can be used for passenger trains. It's "dark territory" lacking the automatic block signals that prevent train collisions. If a passenger train were to operate, its top speed would be 59 mph, too slow to compete with highway travel. Rebuilding the Rock to modern passenger-train standards — 110 to 135 mph, hourly service, frequent passing tracks, grade-crossing enhancements, and new stations and platforms — would probably cost more than \$1 billion.

But the stakes are bigger than just Chicago-Starved Rock. In a scandal underexposed for decades, the two largest cities outside Chicago, Peoria and the Quad Cities, each with about 400,000 residents, are not connected to Chicago by passenger train service, even though lesser communities are.

■ **Carbondale**, 330 miles from Chicago with only 26,000 residents and a Southern Illinois University enrollment of 11,000 students, enjoys two daily state-sponsored Amtrak trains to Chicago (plus service from Amtrak's long-distance City of New Orleans). Yet the Quad Cities, only 170 miles from Chicago, have no passenger-rail

connection to Chicago. ■ **Quincy**, population 39,000, has two daily Amtrak frequencies to Chicago, 300 miles and five hours away, while Peoria, a wealthy industrial-commercial community of over 400,000 that is only 151 miles from Chicago — less than three hours from Chicago by modern trains — still lacks a passenger-rail connection.

Fortunately, both Peoria and the Quad Cities are located on the former Rock Island and would be within three hours of Chicago if the tracks were re-engineered for passenger trains. The quickest and cheapest way to bring Illinois' Rock Island track up to modern passenger-train standards is for the state to buy it from its current owners, reengineering it for higher speeds and frequencies, and hire Metra to operate hourly frequencies to Peoria and the Quad Cities (with a stop at Utica for Starved Rock visitors).

The freight train operators will still be able to use the Rock by purchasing "trackage rights" from the state. Trackage rights are a venerable user fee that railroads pay when they have to venture onto another railroad to reach a customer. In fact, the Iowa Interstate rail pays trackage rights fees to CSX in order to reach Joliet, and both carriers pay trackage rights fees to Metra to reach Chicago.

The huge success of the new Brightline passenger trains between Miami and Orlando suggests that with appropriate engineering improvements, Metra could be operating the same type of frequent and popular diesel-powered trains from Chicago to both the Quad Cities and

Peoria. Both of those two cities have vibrant, diverse economies based on manufacturing, digital technology, food processing, large regional medical centers and Inland Waterway transportation, and both have substantial populations of college students from Chicago. But airfares are discouragingly high, and highway congestion makes driving so unreliable that business travelers scheduled for a conference in Chicago usually drive here the day before and book a hotel room to make sure they're on time for their morning meeting. A strong passenger train connection to Chicago would make thousands of lives easier (and safer).

Quick, frequent rail connections between a large city and its hinterland are a fundamental of modern economic geography. In Ireland, Dublin, population 1.35 million, has 14 daily round trips to Cork, population 200,000 and 135 miles away. Surely Chicago, with a metro population of 9 million, can support 14 daily frequencies to destinations of 400,000-plus less than 150 miles away — especially when trains to both destinations can use the same track for the first 14 miles.

Passenger trains to the Quad Cities and Peoria can deliver something the Irish trains can't: a stopover at Starved Rock.

Gov. JB Pritzker is a successful businessman. He needs to sit down with the CEOs of CSX and the Iowa Interstate and make a deal.

F.K. Plous is a Chicago transportation writer and a publicist for Corridor Rail Development Corp.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

A threat to our alliance

During World War II, the U.S. built military bases in Greenland to protect it from Germany. Today our European allies, including Germany, are sending troops to Greenland to protect it from the U.S.

President Donald Trump claims that seizing Greenland is the only way to keep China and Russia from doing the same. The best way to ensure Greenland's security, as well as our own, is to work with our allies instead of against them.

The U.S. has a military base in Greenland and is allowed to have more under a treaty signed in 1951. Greenland is also protected by a NATO security guarantee that requires all members to respond to one of them if attacked.

Trump's belligerence is risking the demise of the most successful alliance in history — one that allowed us to win the Cold War and came to our aid after 9/11. He's also doing a huge favor to Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, who see a weakening of the West as crucial to their territorial ambitions in Europe and Southeast Asia.

— Mike Mosser, Chicago

Trump's confusing ways

Since the new year has begun, a number of President Donald Trump's statements and actions demonstrate confusion and contradiction.

First, when it comes to Greenland, Trump has said just because Denmark landed a ship there 500 years ago doesn't mean it has a right to the land. In approximately the same historical time frame, English ships landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, and Jamestown, Virginia. Those colonists declared that the land was now theirs. So by Trump's logic, if Denmark has no real claim to Greenland, by what right do we have a claim to American soil?

Second, Trump condemns Iranian leaders for the shooting of demonstrators. He threatens reprisals if they do not immediately cease. Compare that to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement killing

of Renee Good in Minneapolis. She was lawfully demonstrating and, despite how Vice President JD Vance, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and others want to spin it, she was not threatening the ICE agents involved. Simply watch the video and listen to the audio. Good was not disrespectful to the ICE agents and was not part of some mythical left-wing terrorist group. She backed up her car and was trying to escape the situation of which she was not the intended target. For that, she was shot, and the Trump administration deems it justified. ICE agents should do their jobs in a lawful way. They have not been given the right to become Judge Dredd.

Third, Trump says he has lowered pharmaceutical prices by as much as 1,500%. Even a middle school student understands that is mathematically impossible. If a prescription costs \$60, lowering it by 50% then means it costs \$30. Lowering it by 100% means you're paying nothing.

Fourth, in a White House meeting with oil executives on how to rebuild the U.S. oil industry, Trump stopped mid-meeting, got up and walked over to a window. He gazed out over the demolished East Wing and started to describe his vision of the new balloon room and how "beautiful" it is going to be. When he returned to his seat, Secretary of State Marco Rubio discreetly slipped him a note to get back on point. Trump then read the note out loud. I wonder how Fox News would have framed this had Joe Biden been filmed demonstrating similar behavior.

These are just a few of Trump's statements that confuse me.

— Tom Smoucha, Arlington Heights

What do 75% of us do?

I read a poll recently that said 75% of Americans disagree with President Donald Trump trying to take Greenland. He doesn't care. He has said the only thing that can stop his international ambitions are his morals, and we know he has none.

So my question is: If he takes the United States into a war with our NATO allies over

Greenland, what will/can we 75% of Americans do? Will we blindly follow because it is our country at war?

— George Recchia, Oak Park

Denied his validation

I guess no one should be surprised. President Donald Trump essentially saying "You wouldn't give me the Peace Prize, so now I want Greenland."

Reminds me of playing ball when I was a young girl and my team was winning. "It's my ball, I'm taking it and going home."

— Virginia Dore McGraw, Naperville

Trump's focus is wise

Artificial intelligence wars are on the horizon. Direct access to rare earth elements and other minerals profusely abundant in Greenland is crucial to AI. That's the ticket.

President Donald Trump wisely wants to acquire Greenland for the rare earth elements, for national security and the proposed Golden Dome missile defense system. And, because it's a lead apple, China and Russia are angling to control Greenland.

— David N. Simon, Chicago

Claims put in perspective

President Donald Trump claims to have "stopped eight wars" in his current term and therefore should be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Let's put this in perspective.

1. He didn't. Most of the conflicts either were not wars or haven't been stopped or neither is the case.

2. The prize is not a quid pro quo for a count of achievements, even real ones; it's based on overall contributions to world peace. Trump has done as much to create or encourage conflict as to bully other nations into temporary ceasefires. Such as: siding with Vladimir Putin over Ukraine; supporting Israel's violations of international law; dismantling U.S. programs that reduce starvation, disease and thus the risk of

war; bombing Iran; attacking civilian ships on the high seas; invading Venezuela and kidnapping its president; threatening use of force against an ally, Denmark, in order to seize its territory and punishing other allies for not supporting this blatantly uncivilized behavior, etc.

3. Most of these actions were taken without constitutional authority. Because the sycophantic, loyalist elements in Congress refuse to do their constitutional duty, Trump has filled the void and become effectively a dictator.

Every major international involvement has been closely tied to Trump's desire to grab valuable assets or to satisfy a potent U.S. political faction.

Against this background, Trump recently sent a message to the Norwegian prime minister saying that because Norway did not award him the Peace Prize, "I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace," as if he ever did, and challenging in absurd terms Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland.

At the same time, his attacks on American democracy have become increasingly egregious: his weaponization of government to seek vengeance against individuals, cities and states that oppose him, blatantly unconstitutional attacks on free speech, trashing of the best aspects of the civil service system, attempts to make the government officially Christian, uncontrolled violence against lawful residents and citizens; etc.

This is the behavior of a small child — but not one you would let your children play with. He has made the U.S. formerly the symbol of democracy and stability, one of the most despised, and certainly the most feared, nations on earth.

What will it take for the most Americans who remain in Congress to do their duty and remove him?

— Steven Gruenwald, Schaumburg

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The FT View



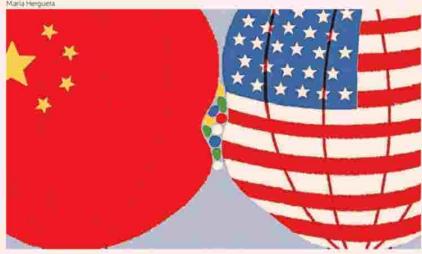
FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Trade Secrets

Carney's new global order needs more political will



Alan Beattie

By common consent it's the best speech at Davos this year; perhaps the best speech ever at Davos; perhaps the best thing ever to happen at Davos, given that so little of substance traditionally happens there.

Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney gave a brutal warning that mid-sized countries must create a flexible and multi-layered system to replace a broken-down US-anchored international order.

But we have, at least in trade, heard something like this before, and yet not much change was forthcoming. In 2017, during the first Trump administration, Canada's then foreign minister Chrystia Freeland argued that "the fact that our friend and ally has come to question the very worth of its mantle of global leadership puts

The search by countries like Canada for reliable partners also meets political constraints on both sides. All global governance, ultimately, is local.

Canada is rich in minerals, including rare earths, but attempts to forge a deal with the EU have been going on for years without achieving much. The CPTPP and the EU have proposed co-operation to forge bonds outside the US orbit of influence, but Brussels' insistence on regulatory sovereignty has stopped the initiative getting beyond drafting stage. The European parliament voted yesterday to postpone ratification of a trade deal with Mercosur, the South American trade bloc, geopolitical signalling be damned.

As for domestic constraints in Canada, Carney recently announced a deal with China, creating an import quota of 49,000 electric vehicles in return for lower tariffs on Canadian oil. It was a nifty piece of economic diplomacy. But it's small compared with the Canadian new car market at nearly 200 vehicles a year. Carney has to keep in mind the interests of Ontario, where most of Canada's 125,000 auto jobs are located and which depends tightly on integrated supply chains with the US.

Similarly, Canada remains in a stand-off with the UK. Talk to update their bilateral trade deal have stalled because London wants more access to Canada's highly protected cheese market than Ottawa is prepared to give, while Canada is fiercely critical of UK food regulations.

The institutions that might facilitate middle-power diplomacy are also weak. Carney correctly said the World Trade Organization was "greatly diminished" – even its foundational most-favoured nation principle is threatened. Some governments are trying to use the institution for "plurilateral" agreements, but India fights to block them. As Carney himself hinted, many lower-income countries think the multilateral system has been run in rich countries' interests, and they are wary of repeating the experience.

Carney's analysis is right, and his approach good in principle. But it required the Depression and second world war for countries to overcome their protectionist and isolationist instincts and build a multilateral system. It will take a long time, and probably even more despatch from Trump, to prompt the kind of agile system of multi-layered mid-size co-operation that Carney wants to see.

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A better way to address China's population decline

Lifting economic confidence will do more for birth rates than a pronatalist push

Beijing will need to change tack if it hopes to raise China's low fertility rate. Efforts so far appear to be delivering little success. Official data released on Monday showed that the number of births last year fell to their lowest level since records began in 1949. Deaths, driven largely by old age, continued to climb. Taken together, this means the country's population shrank for the fourth consecutive year.

China's demographic decline complicates Xi Jinping's ambitions. The president wants to double GDP by 2035, complete the country's transformation into a techno-industrial superpower and expand its influence on the global stage. A smaller workforce will make it harder to sustain rapid economic growth and generate the taxes needed to provide

healthcare and financial support for a swelling elderly population.

Beijing's battle stems in large part from its "one child" policy. Although it scrapped the policy in 2016, its effects linger: at 0.98, the fertility rate is far below the 2.1 needed for the population to remain stable. The decades-long measure has also skewed demographics, leaving too few children to look after ageing parents and many living alone. An app called "Are You Dead?", which can be used to check up on lonely family members, including elders, recently became the most popular paid Apple Store download in the country.

A slew of pronatalist policies used by Beijing and provincial leaders to push up the fertility rate over the past decade appears to be having little impact. These include baby bonuses and looser restrictions on marriage registrations, through to state-sponsored mass weddings and, more recently, a higher tax on contraceptives.

Beijing's investment in robotics might

alleviate labour shortages. China has 470 robots per 10,000 employees – more than double the global average – according to the International Federation of Robotics. But even with its impressive advances in technology, Chinese humanoids are unlikely to increase productivity sufficiently to compensate for the projected steep drop in the country's population. The UN forecasts its 1.4bn population will halve by the turn of the century.

The Chinese Communist Party's response needs to evolve. Pro-birth measures often do not achieve sustained increases in fertility rates as they fail to adequately address the structural barriers to parenthood. Experts reckon persistent pessimism about the economy has discouraged young people from getting married and having kids. The jobless rate among those aged 16 to 24 was 17 per cent in November, compared with about 11 per cent pre-pandemic. Intense industrial competition has also made many companies

Measures to encourage the public to have children often fail to adequately address the structural barriers to parenthood

reluctant to hire or pay high salaries, and many households are still reeling from the housing crash.

Expanding access to affordable childcare is crucial. China is among the world's most expensive places to raise a child, in part, because of its highly competitive education system. The cost of raising a child until they are 18 is estimated to be over six times per capita GDP. Beijing should move faster to reform the *hukou* system, which restricts rural migrants' access to social services in cities. Expanding benefit and pensions support, which would ease burdens on younger carers, would also help. These measures have long been advocated to revive consumption, counter deflationary pressures and rebalance China's growth model.

If China wants more children, cajoling parents cannot be the main tactic. Instead, it would be wise to focus on building an economy and welfare system in which raising a family feels affordable, secure and worthwhile.

Letters

How US companies leave themselves open to state interference

Shareholder primacy seems to have run its course with corporate boards and managers bucking recent trends towards more transparency and accountability for investors, workers, consumers and communities alike.

This is a concerning development that we at the US Impact Investing Alliance have been calling "management primacy". Sujeet Indap, Alexandra White and Patrick Temple-West wrote compellingly on that topic in early December ("Donald Trump drives historic shift of power from

investors to boardrooms", Report, FT.com, December 8), but it is important to interrogate further where this could lead.

When corporate leaders systematically silence their shareholders, they shift the balance of investor power, making corporations more likely targets for political strong-arming.

The Trump administration has already demonstrated an interest in intervening directly in the affairs of major corporations, making it a

dangerous time to hamstring investor rights. The power dynamics that dictate the financial system should be questioned, to be sure, but the current trend towards corporate consolidation of power leaves companies open to state interference.

A return to shareholder primacy in which corporations maximise short-term profits at any expense is not the solution. Investors must reassess their rights, their voice and their role in the capital markets, including as systemic stewards.

Investors who consider the resilience of the underlying systems – social, economic and environmental – that enable healthy capital markets to function will be ahead of the game.

Investors who do so in coalition with others will bring us one step closer to a more sustainable and equitable economy in which externalities are addressed, and all stakeholders are truly valued.

Fran Seegull
President of the US Impact Investing Alliance, New York, NY, US

Hindu calendar gets it right

Sarah O'Connor is quite right to argue that January is an unnatural time for those in the northern hemisphere to "turn a new leaf" (Opinion, January 20). While she highlights the Persian New Year (Nowruz), and the UK's eccentric fiscal calendar, as more intuitive alternatives, she overlooks an ancient system that has championed this alignment for millennia: the Hindu calendar.

The Hindu New Year (Vikram Samvat) begins on the first day of the month of Chaitra – a date that synchronises with the awakening of the natural world. This year, the dawn of Vikram Samvat 2083 falls on March 19, occurring just as the spring equinox signals a biological "reset". Known as Gudi Padwa, Ugadi or Navreh in different parts of India, the festival celebrates the arrival of Vasanta (spring), acknowledging that new beginnings are more sustainable when the earth is waking up, rather than when it is hibernating.

Western society's insistence on a midwinter "handbrake turn" into resolutions is a triumph of arbitrary



Roman history (the Julian calendar) over biology. Perhaps if we followed the Hindu model and waited until March to start our engines, our collective willpower – and our spirits – would remain intact well into the summer. **Naleen Kumar**
Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

Changes to the UK's drug price regime long overdue

The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry strongly supports a rigorous, independent role for the medicines watchdog, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice), in assessing new medicines and indications. However, decisions on public spending and taxation rightly sit with the elected government ("Trump's demand for higher NHS drug costs would be 'huge backwards step'", medicines watchdog says", Interview, January 16).

Addressing the 25-year freeze on the cost-effectiveness threshold used to assess NHS medicines is long overdue. It will allow more NHS patients to benefit from new, effective treatments and is a necessary part of the government's wider effort to improve the health of the population, restore the UK's competitiveness in life sciences, and stimulate economic growth. There is also a strong case for regularly reviewing the threshold in the future to ensure it keeps pace with inflation and continues to meet the government's aims.

Nice has estimated that three to five additional medicines would be made available to NHS patients each year, but this is based on a retrospective review of its decisions and takes no account of either the medicines that are not being submitted for evaluation (which has been around 20 per cent of its potential work programme for the last five years) or that companies are having to deprive the UK as an early launch market.

Changes are needed if the government wants NHS patients to be treated with the latest innovations.

Richard Torbett
Chief Executive, Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, London, UK

So this is how the president rebrands his Board of Peace

So Donald Trump says "I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace" ("US president turns mockery into a weapon of diplomacy", Report, January 21). So his Gaza "Board of Peace" will presumably be rebranded as "Bored of Peace"?

Graham Taylor
Worcester, Worcestershire, UK

OUTLOOK

LONDON

My year with a flip phone



by Harvey Nriapia

When my newest phone first arrived, it was hard to love. There was none of the slow-open drama of an Apple package and hardly any features to try out. It was a cumbersome, utilitarian thing. We were simply incompatible.

In the time-wasted period between Christmas and New Year in 2024, ashamed at having spent much of the past 12 months on a screen, I had ordered a flip phone.

To me, an iPhone-owner since the age of 12, smartphones have always been the default device. "What's an A to Z?" I would innocently ask, as my parents recounted tales of getting lost in the distant past. Mine was a childhood of hyperconnectivity and "information at your fingertips".

And addition. X. Instagram. Back to X. I spent hours flitting between apps. At university, classmates would send screenshots back and forth across the lecture hall like darts. Take my data – privacy concerns be damned.

After years of smartphone model upgrades the Sunbeam Juniper, my new flip phone of choice, might as well have been a Martian device. It was actually from Missouri. The company was founded in 2018, when US telecoms networks started phasing out 2G and 3G connectivity and rendered existing "dumb phones" useless. Co-founder Sterling Martin told me that some customers were drawn to the devices for religious

reasons, including Mennonites who reject what they consider advanced technologies. Others choose them in the hopes of preventing their smartphones from "taking control of their lives".

In the "dumb phone" community there is one other division those who remember the pre-smartphone era and those who don't. Flip phone message boards tend to be mostly inhabited by denizens of the former. There is a muscle memory for those who occupied the world BC (before cellular). Those born afterwards, like me, must discover it anew.

That meant working out what to do with all the extra free time. Ofcom data published last month suggests UK adults spend nearly three and a half hours on their smartphone each day, jumping to five hours and five minutes for adults aged 18-24.

The first few weeks of life without a smartphone were a steep learning curve. Mobile banking was obsolete. No maps meant tracing the contours of an unknown route with a few directions scribbled on paper. This was not too hard in London – notwithstanding the late party arrivals and Tube strike-induced diversions. Abroad was harder, and led to more difficult travails.

In theory, the flip phone also set up a firewall between my work and life. Colleagues could text or call out of hours. But as most prefer Slack and Google Chat, I ended up lugging my work laptop around with me so that I could stay in touch.

Still, I loved showing the flip phone off. Older folks would start "back in my day" conversations. Most of my fellow Gen-Zers would praise my courage at attempting to survive life without being connected at all times. There were a few dissenting voices.

One old school friend asked if I got it "just to be different" and my teenage cousin, whose world is all TikTok sounds, was unimpressed at the idea of going analogue.

But the Sunbeam was a conversation starter, sparking discussions about device dependency and the nefarious motives of tech companies. Everyone I spoke to about it admitted some level of digital overwhelm. I was particularly encouraged when one friend bought a flip phone of his own (albeit a higher-tech model than mine).

A year on and I'm still using the Sunbeam. It has proved hard to split up from the device. Practicality issues notwithstanding, flip phone life lives a more intentional life, able to look up at the world in a way that smartphone ownership had prevented for as long as I can remember.

I have been tempted to swap back a few times but haven't committed to buying a smartphone again. I keep eyeing the newest tangerine iPhone 17 with a mix of awe and suspicion. It looks like a cumbersome, utilitarian thing, with none of the slow-burn lessons of the Sunbeam. We are simply incompatible, I think.

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Opinion

What happens if the UK and US reach net zero (migration)?

ECONOMICS

Chris Giles



Forecasters in both the US and the UK say that net zero is about to happen. Net zero migration that is. The predictions raise two questions. Are they plausible? And is a rebalancing of migration flows an economic and political triumph or a disaster?

On the first question, it is important not to confuse plausibility with certainty. The approach of net zero is plausible, but the data is poorly measured in both countries and net migration figures are extremely sensitive to small errors in guessing immigration or emigration.

In the US, Brookings estimates that net migration turned negative in 2025, while the Congressional Budget Office thinks there were over 400,000 net

immigrants. The difference results from a relatively small disagreement over the level of deportations last year and whether this action by Donald Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency encouraged other migrants to up sticks or not.

The UK data is just as problematic. Following lower than expected official net migration figures of 204,000 in the year ending last June, James Bowes, a researcher at the University of Warwick, forecasts net zero migration this year. The Migration Observatory at Oxford University instead thinks it will fall temporarily to a little over 250,000 this year before rising to 340,000 by the end of the decade.

Here, the difference stems mostly from a guess about the proportion of foreign graduates and people with visas who came to the UK in a 2022 surge staying on in 2026. They also rest on official estimates of the movement of UK nationals, which stem from a heroic interpretation of tax and social security records. If you don't bother the tax system for a few years, statisticians will assume you have emigrated. This is

important in the calculation of net migration, but could be horribly wrong.

You might think the politics of lower net migration is easy. In America, it has been. Speaking at the World Economic Forum this week, Trump bragged that the US had achieved reverse migration for the first time in 50 years — "boy that was nice". The Department of Homeland Security might have been cavalier

Public finances take an unambiguous hit in the short term, making budget targets harder to achieve

with its use of numbers, but was happy to describe a rise in "self deportations" as "historic". It is trickier in the UK. Even though the prime minister said the drop in UK net migration was "a step in the right direction", voices on the right framed the departure of UK, Polish and Romanian nationals as an indictment of his government's record.

Net zero has multiple economic con-

sequences. The first is for rules of thumb. Instead of thinking it is normal for the US economy to create around 150,000 jobs a month, as was true in 2023 and 2024, that figure is now plausibly zero or even negative. Net zero would also wipe out three-quarters of UK adult population growth.

Fewer people and jobs would have a significant effect on GDP growth. Brookings estimates that US potential growth would drop by around 0.2 percentage points, while net zero in the UK would have a larger effect because the drop is more significant relative to population size. The OBR estimates that adult population growth contributes 0.7 percentage points to the UK's potential growth rate and so potentially 0.5 percentage points of growth per year are at stake.

With migrants contributing tax revenue and visa fees, but eligible for few state benefits, net zero has immediate fiscal effects, which again would be larger in the UK. A one-off drop in 2026 would not make much difference but if the longer-term net migration rate fell from 340,000 to zero, it would put the government's fiscal rules in jeopardy,

according to the OBR, even with the additional headroom Rachel Reeves added in the Budget.

That said, it is important not to exaggerate the effects. Lower GDP spread among fewer people implies little change in living standards. Monetary policy is also broadly unaffected because lower migration limits labour supply but also labour demand and consumption, leaving the effects on inflation muted.

Fiscal policy is different, though. The public finances take an unambiguous hit in the short term, making fiscal rules in the UK or deficit reduction in the US harder to achieve.

For the longer term, however, recent dynamic modelling suggests net migration has a far less favourable impact on the public finances once pension rights and healthcare costs in old age are included. Lower net migration is therefore one of those rare events when governments improve the long-term outlook of public finances at the expense of the time they are in office.

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The WTO needs a serious overhaul

Maroš Šefčovič

The World Trade Organization is facing the most serious crisis in its history, as trade is weaponised, tariffs are deployed as instruments of power and dependencies are deliberately exploited.

A predictable, rules-based trading system is not an abstract ideal; it is a strategic necessity. About 70 per cent of global trade still operates under WTO rules, binding economies and supply chains into a highly interconnected ecosystem. If the WTO fails, the consequences would be severe: a 3-7 per cent drop in global GDP, deep losses for open economies, and disproportionate harm to low-income and smaller economies that rely most on fair, enforceable rules.

If the WTO is to meet today's challenges, its rules must be fair and deliver balanced, legitimate outcomes. Currently, they do neither.

Over the past three decades, several WTO members have expanded their share of global trade while keeping their markets largely closed. At the same time, state support for industries and other non-market policies have multiplied, distorting competition on a global scale. The result has been structural trade imbalances and chronic overcapacities, with damaging effects on both developed and developing economies.

This is not what the WTO's founders intended nor what we need now. The organisation was meant to evolve, updating tariff commitments and trade rules as economic realities change. Instead, it froze the 1995 balance, locking in asymmetries that no longer

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reflect today's global economy. Meanwhile, WTO membership has expanded and diversified, making inaction not only unjustifiable, but increasingly unsustainable and costly.

We urgently need a new system of global trade governance fit for the 21st century. Europe wants a reformed WTO that preserves predictability, while delivering fairness and flexibility. To ensure predictability, we must safeguard the WTO rules that already work — on technical regulations, customs valuation and policy monitoring. Businesses worldwide rely on these rules for the smooth flow of daily trade.

To ensure fairness, we need to address asymmetries among members in market openness and a commitment to fair competition. Developing countries should be treated with a more targeted, needs-based approach. We must boost transparency and provide stronger remedies to counter the negative impacts of state intervention. We must also rethink how the "most favoured nation" principle functions and whether the current balance of rights and obligations remains fit for purpose.

The certainty provided by MFN remains indispensable. But has MFN, as currently applied, genuinely fostered openness and a level playing field among WTO members, or has it become a straitjacket that cements the status quo and enables free riding?

We need a frank discussion on the link between MFN status and reciprocity, taking into account members' levels of market openness, commitment to fair competition and transparency, and evolving weight in global trade. This must include exploring options to allow for more agile and targeted adjustments of tariff treatment in response to changing realities and threats to economies. Access to lower tariffs cannot be unconditional: it must be earned through stronger, credible commitments to the core principles of free and fair trade.

Finally, as its membership has grown and diversified, the WTO's governance must become more flexible; its institutional set-up should be reviewed to streamline decision-making, and willing members should be able to advance agreements when seeking closer co-operation in specific areas. As the world's largest trading bloc, the EU calls on all WTO members to join us in a genuine overhaul of the organisation, ensuring it continues to underpin global trade rather than drift towards irrelevance.

The writer is EU commissioner for trade and economic security

Always beware a declining superpower

POLITICS

Janan Ganesh



Donald Trump's obsession with rank — his almost geological sense of strata — and you get the mistreatment of Greenland, the gunboat diplomacy in the Caribbean and other Suez-style attempts to recover lost prestige. (Only more successful, perhaps.)

But even under a normal president, the US might be behaving badly around about now. Status-anxious countries have to puff themselves up. It is a rare superpower that takes decline well.

For proof that more is going on here than Trump, remember that America under George W Bush was already chafing at the "rules-based liberal order", almost no one called it at the time. Even aside from the Iraq invasion, Bush held the International Criminal Court in extreme disregard. This isn't a complaint against him. There was and is a lot of global flummery that is more leftwing than strictly liberal. Bush, who was pro-Western to his core, was right to mistrust some of it. The larger point is that America's disaffection with the legalistic world order predares Trump. There must be something structural going on that has been nagging the US, and that might be decline.

Because the performance of the US this century has been so awesome in absolute terms — economically, technologically — the nation's relative decline can be hard to visualise. But it is there, in the limited effectiveness of US sanctions over recent years, in the struggle to stay ahead on artificial intelligence, and in geopolitics, the same process plays out on the largest scale. What is Russia's war in Ukraine if not a protest at its reduced status since the Soviet collapse?



military gap over China is not what it was at the turn of the millennium. Even a garden variety Republican president would be lashing out in these circumstances, if not as recklessly as Trump.

Always beware the downwardly mobile. Those of us who live a better life than we were born into cannot begin to understand the trauma of going in the opposite direction. A small drop in status can unhinge people, even if their absolute position remains good. It was the Weimar middle class, inflamed out of their savings during the slump, who turned to the National Socialists in elections, not necessarily the worst-off. In geopolitics, the same process plays out on the largest scale. What is Russia's war in Ukraine if not a protest at its reduced status since the Soviet collapse?

America's disaffection with the legalistic world order predares President Trump

The individual matters, no doubt. In fact, Trump has won over to the Great Man theory of history. But some patterns seem to hold across time, person and place. If there has ever been a declining power that did not behave erratically as it settled into its new status, I don't know it. Trump's behaviour is an extreme version of something that might be happening anyway, has happened in the recent past and is liable to happen after him.

The line from Thucydides, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must", is getting quite the airing of late. You are meant to nod gravely along to it, as though it expresses a bitter but universal truth about international relations.

Does though? The phrase implies that a country becomes more aggressive as it grows more powerful. Well, the US was never mightier than it was around the time of Trump's birth in 1946, when it made half of the manufactured goods in the world and had a nuclear monopoly too. With all this power, the US didn't "do what it could" to the weak.

Instead, it set up the Marshall Plan and Nato, those masterpieces of enlightened self-interest. It rebuilt Japan and Germany as pacifist democracies. The beligerent turn in American behaviour has in fact come in its relative decline.

Leadership explains some of this, in that Harry Truman was "better" than Trump, but only some. The rest is structural. It is easier for a nation to be magnanimous from a great height. Paranoia and aggression set in when that position slips. As such, we should expect a volatile US until it gets used to the role of being a, not the, superpower. Britain and France go there in the end, despite having to fall much further.

No one ever quotes the other bit of the famous Dylan Thomas poem about decline. After naggering the reader to "rage against the dying of the light", he concedes that giving up makes more sense: "wise men at their end know dark is right."

Trump prefers the rage, but then so would other leaders in his place.

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Why China has so many robot IPOs

Lizzi Lee

Engineering talent has reinforced these foundations. China has cultivated a large and increasingly diverse pool of specialised labour across automation, control systems and advanced manufacturing.

Yet beyond the Vegas exhibition halls, the mood among Chinese tech vendors was notably more restrained. In closed-door conversations, there were no illusory stories about the challenges they face.

Entrepreneurs in China consistently point to weaknesses in frontier research and advanced materials caused by US restrictions on hardware. Engineering ingenuity can only stretch existing resources so far and access to deep, liquid capital markets remains tight. Most robotic start-ups are still in cash-burning, pre-profit phases with little margin for delay.

These realities help to explain the sector's rush towards public listings. Over the past year, dozens of Chinese robotics and AI companies have filed for IPOs in Hong Kong, many of them fractionally oversubscribed. Investor enthusiasm for companies such as Geek+ and OneRobotics is genuine but so is the fun-

draining urgency. Embodied AI is a capital-intensive, long-horizon business. And although listing rules for hard tech have loosened, the queue remains long and the timelines uncertain.

The result is a growing bias from start-up investors for development paths with commercial justification.

Despite wide variation in technical

approaches, many Chinese robotics firms are converging on the same applications: industrial automation, logistics, hazardous environments and household tasks. Even so, large-scale deployment in the near term is unrealistic. The viral, dancing robots remain far from commercial reality.

As with electric vehicles, this means that China's manufacturing prowess is both an enabler and a constraint. Expansion outpaces demand. That means global markets are critical to the success of the sector. Hence all the stalls at CES — the biggest electronics trade show in the world.

Within the US, Chinese technology is often viewed primarily through a security lens. China hopes that its export controls will gradually lose their bite. But this is not the end of the sector's problems. There is growing concern within China that the country's own emphasis on national security and self-sufficiency risks underestimating the need for access to international hardware and global markets. And there is recognition that a research culture that prioritises short-term goals is poorly suited to large-scale breakthroughs.

A familiar line is now circulating in the country: China once exchanged market access for technology; today, that logic is reversing.

This pattern extends beyond robotics. See the Hong Kong IPOs of other tech companies such as Zhipu and MiniMax. At a recent high-profile AI industry summit in Beijing, China's leading tech

superstars openly warned of limited access to high-end chips, capital and complained about a research culture that was overly focused on deliverables.

The robots that are on display to the rest of the world offer a vivid demonstration of China's strengths. But despite strong policy support for emerging technologies, Beijing remains highly sensitive to perceived leakage of technology and talent. Understanding China's technological future requires moving beyond a simplistic "who is winning" narrative. The more consequential story lies in how geopolitical constraints are rewriting incentives, business models and the direction of innovation.

For both the US and China, the greatest risk to progress does not lie in technological advancement, an area in which both countries are formidable. The real risk is that political narratives will strip innovation of the shared foundations that are needed to make it durable, intelligent and safe.

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