

OPINION

 The
Hindu
Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

 Gaining ground
at the grassroots

Maharashtra local bodies results confirm the assembly polls trend — the Mahayuti is on a roll

The results of the first phase of the Maharashtra local bodies polls are in step with the trend the state witnessed in the assembly polls held in November last year. Mahayuti, the alliance that included the BJP, Shiv Sena, and NCP, won a landslide 235 seats in the 288-seat legislative assembly. The Opposition alliance, Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA), that included the Congress, Shiv Sena (UBT), and NCP (Sharad Pawar), was reduced to a mere 50 seats. Despite infighting among allies and the resignation of two ministers, the Mahayuti has consolidated the gains of the assembly poll wins and expanded its footprint across Maharashtra. In contrast, the Congress has further shrunk, while the Sena (UBT) and NCP (SP) stare at irrelevance. With city corporations, including in Mumbai, Thane, Pune, and Nagpur, set to hold polls in January, the signs are ominous for the Opposition.

The big win for the Mahayuti in the local body polls is not surprising. Voters tend to favour the ruling party/alliance in bypolls and local body elections. The Mahayuti won 207 of 288 municipal president posts, whereas the MVA was restricted to just 44. There are multiple takeaways from these results. One, the BJP is now the principal pole of Maharashtra politics. It won 117 municipal president posts and over 3,300 councillor seats, accounting for nearly 48% of the total councillors elected. Two, the decline of Congress is continuing and is visible across the state. Three, the cadres of NCP (SP) and Shiv Sena (UBT) have shifted to the groups led by Ajit Pawar and Eknath Shinde. Ajit Pawar's outfit has won conclusively in Pune district, which includes Baramati, the base of Sharad Pawar. And Eknath Shinde's Shiv Sena is pushing the Shiv Sena (UBT) into irrelevance. These electoral patterns were visible in the assembly polls results, but the local body election outcomes confirm that they may be irreversible. That's likely to facilitate realignments in state politics.

The results offer a sobering thought for the MVA. Its obsession with the EC and electoral rolls seems to reflect on its lackadaisical preparation and the failure to regroup politically after the rout last year. Multiple factors influence elections, but voters reward parties that do the hard yards of outreach and agitation. The impending Brihamumbai Municipal Corporation polls, which are fought on distinct urban concerns, development agendas, and identity issues, offer the MVA an opportunity to regroup and fight even as the Mahayuti eyes the big prize. For the Shiv Sena (UBT) especially, it will be an existential fight.

 The soft power of
Radio Ceylon

The earliest radio station in Asia, Radio Ceylon, turned 100 last week. Nearly a decade older than All India Radio (AIR), the Sri Lankan radio service was once the Indian Subcontinent's ears to the world of entertainment as it broadcast in Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu besides Sinhala, and found listeners in faraway places. It came to symbolise the soft power of Ceylon/Sri Lanka, but also the commercial genius that recognised the radio's potential as a transnational popular communications platform. In the process, Radio Ceylon mostly managed to sidestep the treacherous political fault lines in the subcontinent and win listeners across languages and nationalities.

For Indians, Radio Ceylon is identified mostly with Binaca Geetmala and its legendary host, Ameen Sayani. This popular weekly programme of Bollywood music contributed more to the popularisation of Hindi in the voice Mohammad Rafi and Lata Mangeshkar than all the government-funded promotional propaganda. Colombo carried its colonial cultural inheritance lightly and was least coy about celebrating Western popular music (Binaca Hit Parade) as much as Bollywood, whose popularity it understood very early. For sure, its task was made easy by BV Keskar, the Sorbonne-educated I&B minister in the Nehru cabinet, who considered popular music a crass form of entertainment and banned it on AIR stations. That's how Jhumai Telaiya, a town in Jharkhand, discovered Radio Ceylon and Sayani. Later, AIR made amends by inventing Vividh Bharati, hurting Radio Ceylon's popularity. The arrival of satellite television and the internet ended the reign of Radio Ceylon (Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation after Ceylon was renamed as Sri Lanka in 1972) and turned radio itself into an object of nostalgia. But not before it had taught us the lesson that music transcends national borders.

 Reform jobs scheme,
but build on its gains

 Fix implementation, but
do not revoke the right to
employment itself

India's rural employment programme, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (or MGNREGS), has long attracted two criticisms. First, that it is wasteful, and plagued by leakages and corruption; second, that it is distortionary — raising wages without boosting productivity, and hurting employment. Both critiques point to the same policy question: Should the answer be to fix implementation, or to redesign the programme itself?

Over the past decade, credible research has delivered a clear lesson. When implementation improves — by making work more readily available, reducing leakages, and ensuring timely wage payments — the gains are substantial. In a large-scale randomised evaluation of improving MGNREGS implementation, covering around 19 million people in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, we found sharp income increases and meaningful poverty reduction. Crucially, these gains mostly came *not* from MGNREGS wages themselves, but from higher private labour market earnings.

These findings overturned our own prior beliefs. Like many economists, we were sceptical that MGNREGS could raise wages without reducing employment. The data, however, showed the opposite. Better implementation increased both market wages and private employment by strengthening workers' outside options in rural labour markets with employer market power. Higher incomes then boosted

local demand, leading to a significant expansion of non-farm enterprises and employment, as confirmed by Economic Census data. Thus, better MGNREGS implementation improved both equity and efficiency, which is rare for a welfare programme.

The gains were also broad-based. Ordering households from those with the smallest to largest landholdings, the bottom 93% were better off, and only the top 7% were worse off due to higher wage costs. But many large landowners also own non-farm businesses that benefit from higher local demand. So, when we assess the distributional impacts by households' overall socio-economic status and not landholding alone, we find that *nearly everyone* benefits from a better implemented MGNREGS. The deeper point is that a well-functioning MGNREGS is not just a pro-poor policy; it is also a broad-based rural growth policy.

Work-based guarantees also have two other strengths. First, the work requirement helps target the most vulnerable effectively without relying on fine-grained administrative identification. Consistent with this, data shows that landless labourers, women, and Scheduled Castes and Tribes are disproportionately represented among MGNREGS workers. Second, it is a powerful automatic stabiliser. Demand for employment rises during droughts, downturns, and major shocks (as seen in surging MGNREGS demand during Covid-19), and falls in good times.

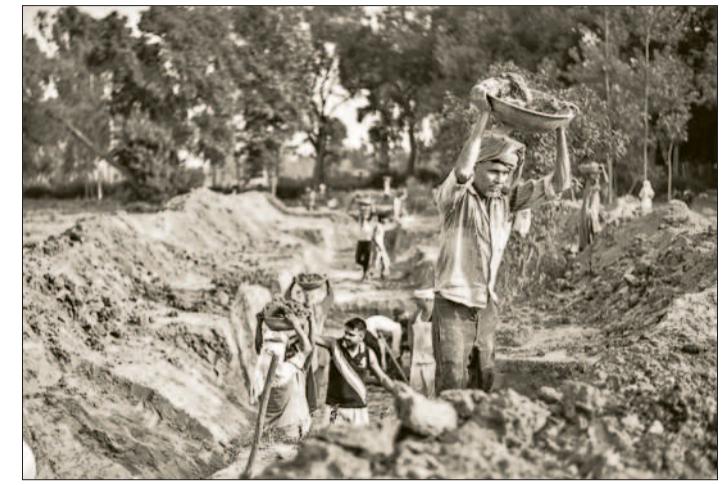
Thus, the key to obtaining the benefits of MGNREGS is effective implementation, which makes it a credible outside option for workers.

mentation, which makes it a credible outside option for workers. Yet, implementation quality has varied widely across states over the last two decades. Some — such as Tamil Nadu, AP/Telangana, Kerala, and Rajasthan — have generated high person-days of work and paid wages reliably. Others, including some of India's poorest states, have persistently under-provided work despite high need. The constraint was not a flawed design, but uneven implementation capacity, and political and administrative will.

Against this backdrop, Parliament has replaced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act with a new law: the Viksit Bharat — Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin). Some elements of the reform deserve praise. The statutory ceiling is raised from 100 to 125 days. Greater emphasis is placed on timely wage payments. And there is a welcome effort to align public works with durable assets related to water security, rural infrastructure, livelihoods, and climate resilience. If the

reform stopped here, the debate would largely be about implementation — which is where it should be.

The concern is that the new law introduces changes that risk weakening the programme's core function as a credible employment guarantee. It replaces a rights-based guarantee that can be demanded by citizens with a centrally designed scheme, and moves from full central financing of wages to a 60:40 Centre-state cost-sharing model (90:10 for some states), with



The key to obtaining the benefits of MGNREGS is effective implementation, which makes it a credible outside option for workers. SHUTTERSTOCK

that the central challenge with MGNREGS was never its basic design; it was inconsistent implementation, especially in states where political will and administrative capacity were weakest. The priority should therefore be to strengthen implementation precisely in those states — through timely wage payments, effective grievance redressal, and administrative support that makes access predictable and credible.

For a country aspiring to become both *viksit* (developed) and *atmanirbhar* (self-reliant), boosting rural wages and sustaining demand growth is essential for raising productivity, expanding non-farm employment, and deepening domestic markets. A credible, well-implemented employment guarantee programme is one of the few interventions with high-quality evidence that it can deliver these outcomes at scale — improving equity while also supporting economic growth. Reforms should build on this strength, and not weaken the essential features that make it work.

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US, Japan & China: New configuration on Taiwan

China-Japan ties are likely to see a prolonged chill after newly minted Japanese Prime Minister (PM), Sanae Takaichi, described a Taiwan Strait conflict as a "survival-threatening situation" for Japan. Beijing seized on the remark to push its narrative and signal regional dominance even pressing Washington to toe its line. But the real story lies beyond the rhetoric. Japan is increasing defence spending and strengthening military posture, while US policy towards China remains competitive, even on the issue of Taiwan.

In order to grasp the evolution of the recent spat, it is first important to understand the context around Takaichi's remarks. First, under Japan's security legislation, declaring a situation "survival-threatening" legally allows the government to activate collective self-defence. The current controversy stems from Takaichi's comments around a hypothetical scenario of a blockade of Taiwan. She said that if American forces were to attempt to break the blockade, Japan could use force to work with them. In other words, she was not talking about Japan independently deploying forces or waging war over Taiwan. Second, Takaichi is not the first leader to articulate such a position. In 2021, then-deputy PM Taro Aso made a similar comment at a fundraising event in Tokyo. The same year, PM Shinzo Abe declared that a Taiwan contingency would be a Japan contingency.

The Chinese response to this entailed repeated public admonishment, soliciting other States' endorsement of its position, curtailing people-to-people ties, economic coercion and direct threats. While demanding that Takaichi retract her comments, the Chinese side has engaged in a sustained disinformation campaign to shape the global narrative and policy orientation on Taiwan. For instance, Chinese commentators have argued that Takaichi's remarks indicate a desire to revive Japanese "militarism", and pose "a grave threat to peace in the Taiwan Strait and to regional security and stability". Such developments must, therefore, be resisted by regional States. Significantly, Chinese officials and commentators have contended that the PRC's sovereignty over Taiwan is an outcome of the post-World War II international order, which must not be undermined. This was the argument that Chinese president Xi Jinping underscored to US president Donald Trump in their recent call.

Soon after that call, some have argued that China was establishing a new dynamic with the US as a partner in promoting its vision of the post-War order. The fact that Trump called Takaichi soon after his conversation


 Manoj
Kewalramani

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BEIJING UNDERSTANDS THAT IF THE U.S. IS SEEN AS SHIFTING AND DITHERING ON TAIWAN, IT WILL HEIGHTEN THE ANXIETIES OF AMERICA'S REGIONAL ALLIES

Manoj Kewalramani is the chairperson of the Indo-Pacific Research Programme and a China Studies Research fellow at the Takshashila Institution. The views expressed are personal

with Xi added weight to this perspective. Reporting suggests that the Taiwan issue was discussed during the call, although the Japanese government has denied this. Whatever the scope of the discussion, it is foolhardy to believe that the US is being co-opted by Beijing into its worldview around the Taiwan issue. For sure, this is how Beijing would like to frame the discourse. In fact, a prominent commentary in the *People's Daily* claimed that the Trump-Takaichi call had "significant practical implications" and both China and the US had a "shared responsibility...to jointly safeguard the post-war international order and resolutely oppose any attempts and actions to revive militarism or undermine regional and global peace and stability".

On the contrary, what is likely taking place is that the Trump administration is interested in sustaining the positive momentum in the broader US-China relationship for now. Trump is clearly keen on trying to ease domestic pressures on the farm sector and arrive at some sort of a broader economic agreement. Trump's recap of the call and treasury secretary Scott Bessent's summary of the talks are indicative of this. None of this, however, means that Trump or the administration at large does not view the relationship with China from a competitive lens. Rather, it indicates that for the moment, Washington is prioritising immediate economic interests. Beijing, meanwhile, is seeking to leverage the moment and gain some tangible acquiescence on its position with regard to Taiwan. For this purpose, it will use the opportunities presented to manufacture crises and gain the concessions that it can. This, in fact, has been a pattern of Chinese behaviour over the past few years, as it has sought to expand its red lines, limiting others' ability to engage with Taiwan.

Beijing understands that if the US is seen as shifting and dithering on Taiwan, it will heighten the anxieties of America's regional allies. That said, it is also true that Trump wants allies and partners to spend more on defence and share greater burden. Consequently, they are all committing greater defence spending and capability development. Japan, in fact, is on track to expand its defence budget to 2% of GDP well ahead of schedule. In addition, it is moving ahead to deploy Type 03 Chu-SAM missiles on Yonaguni island near Taiwan. Moreover, the US has also steadily intensified military drills with Japan. Some of these exercises are reportedly rehearsing joint operational plans for a Taiwan Strait conflict. It is these tangible actions that impact the balance of power rather than words. In addition, as much as there is anxiety around US policy with regard to Taiwan, it is also the case that Trump's administration approved \$1 billion in arms sales to Taiwan in November, and a few days later, weapons worth \$1 billion to Taipei. These are substantive developments that matter much more than rhetoric.

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{ CHRISTOPHER LUXON } PRIME MINISTER, NEW ZEALAND

Our government is relentlessly focused on ... building the future — with new trade deals like this helping to grow our economy



On the signing of India-New Zealand FTA

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More ambition needed

New FTAs welcome, but bigger targets lie ahead

India and New Zealand on Monday announced that they had concluded discussions successfully on a free-trade agreement (FTA). Shortly before that, it was revealed that a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, or Cepa, had been signed with the state of Oman, West Asia. While neither of these two economies is large or of significant global scale, these agreements are an opportune moment to consider India's fresh approach to such pacts in recent years. An initial distrust of FTAs, particularly those signed by the previous dispensation, has now been partly rescinded. India has not gone so far, however, as to begin meaningful negotiations with any of its peer economies. There is still a belief that other developing countries might be able to out-compete India and thus there is more benefit to be had in economic integration with richer nations. In an age in which competitiveness depends on the ability to be part of flexible and disaggregated global supply chains, this is not entirely true. However, any attempt to open up new markets and deepen global integration will be a net positive for the Indian economy, and thus these new agreements are welcome, as is the broader shift in policy that they represent.

Both build on existing, if recent, precedent. A Cepa was signed with the United Arab Emirates shortly after New Delhi began to take a relook at the possibilities of such pacts. And the agreement with New Zealand follows a similar deal with another agricultural powerhouse, Australia. An FTA has also been agreed upon with the United Kingdom (UK), which means that India now has formal trade pacts with three of the five Anglosphere economies. Union Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has said that discussions with Canada will now resume — which is significant, given the downturn in ties between the two nations, which had held up such talks in recent years. Mr Goyal has also indicated that talks with the United States (US) are at "an advanced stage". That agreement, of course, will be harder to obtain.

These piece-by-piece deals with smaller countries are a useful indicator of a new attitude in New Delhi, but it is deals with larger economies, like the US, or with plurilateral groupings, such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), that have a far greater impact and must be a priority. Deadlines for concluding talks with the European Union (EU) and the US have already been missed. They must be finished, however, latest by the end of the first half of calendar 2026 before the new age of tariffs begin to really bite and take a chunk out of the growth momentum that the Indian economy is displaying. For the EU, a possible visit by the senior leadership in the first months of next year serves as an informal deadline. As for the US, the longer it takes to finalise a deal, the more exporters lose valuable contracts that they will not be able to replicate elsewhere. Finally, it is past time to take a relook at larger blocs. Even if the RCEP, which includes China, is considered geopolitically too sensitive an idea at this point of time, the CPTPP — which includes several countries with which India now has FTAs, including New Zealand, Australia, Japan, and the UK — remains a possibility. New Delhi's direction of travel on trade agreements is welcome, but it must show more ambition.

India's Bangladesh options

Measured responses will serve New Delhi better

Escalating violence and a rampup in anti-Indian rhetoric in Bangladesh ahead of elections have raised the stakes for New Delhi in shaping an appropriate response. After the death of a prominent student leader on December 19, seven days after he had sustained a wound from a shootout in Dhaka allegedly by an Awami League activist, the wave of violence that followed focused on minorities. That included the lynching of a Hindu garment worker on December 18 and the targeting of assets of the Indian government. So far, India's response has been low-key. Visa-related service has been suspended in Khulna, Rajshahi, and, most recently, at its assistant high commission in Chittagong after protesters gathered outside. But the trading of charges over reciprocal threats to each other's consular facilities has undeniably upped the ante in already fragile India-Bangladesh relations. New Delhi's approach, therefore, increasingly demands a focus on its immediate and long-term security perceptions.

For India, the political situation in Bangladesh is poised between Dhaka's growing proximity to Pakistan and China. With national elections scheduled for February 12, it is becoming increasingly clear that Muhammad Yunus, Bangladesh's "chief advisor", wields minimal control over the "interim government", which is determining the country's trajectory right now. Buoyed up by overt Pakistani support, the Islamist political party Jamaat-e-Islami, which gained negligible votes in national elections in the past, appears to be gaining traction over the relatively secular student movement, which had initially played a role in Sheikh Hasina's ouster as Prime Minister last year. In January this year, the chief of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's spy agency, led a senior delegation to Dhaka to strengthen intelligence-sharing ties — the first such visit since 1989. In March, Mr Yunus broke tradition by making his first inaugural visit to China instead of India. The visit yielded a raft of economic collaborations and a deepening of defence ties. Adding a layer of complexity is the fact that India continues to provide shelter to Sheikh Hasina and has not acted on a formal extradition request after she was sentenced in absentia for "crimes against humanity".

The growing anti-Indian movement has added an element of uncertainty to the safety of Indian economic assets too. The interim government has assured India of the security of its assets and personnel but the growing intensity of civil unrest has disrupted supply chains, especially in Bangladesh's signature textile sector, in which around a quarter of the units are owned by Indians. Indian-owned fast-moving consumer goods firms have seen markets dwindle, and with Bangladeshis increasingly suspending travel out of security concerns, India's medical-tourism business has seen a notable slump. Given this sharp deterioration with a country once considered a dependable ally, India's options are limited. There are, to be sure, several calls for New Delhi to exercise its heft as a major power and opt for some version of "neutralising" intervention to ensure the accession of a friendly regime. Doing so would not, however, be an optimal answer, not least because the objective is unclear. Regime change is an undesirable playbook at any time, and there is considerable opacity around the strength of pro-Indian forces to warrant such an exercise. A more measured response would be to ensure the safety of Indian citizens in Bangladesh, continuing engagement with the forces of moderation, and avoiding a popular temptation to communalise a volatile situation. History has shown that temperance has served India better than activist intervention.

The cultural life of platform capitalism



ANJALI CHAUHAN

India today is awash in content yet increasingly starved of sustained thought. An endless churn of reels, hot takes, memes, and algorithmically amplified outrage now structures public discourse, privileging immediacy over reflection and visibility over meaning. *The Great Indian Brain Rot* by Anurag Minus Verma enters this landscape not as a nostalgic lament for lost attention spans, but as a diagnosis of how thinking itself is being reorganised under platform capitalism. As Mr Verma notes, "The internet is neither good nor evil. It is simply a mirror to society and culture." But this mirror is neither neutral nor passive. It is engineered by markets and metrics that convert expression into

output, attention into currency, and influence into measurable value. What emerges is not merely a degraded media ecosystem, but a political economy of cognition — one that reshapes how culture is produced, how politics is mediated, and how the self learns to speak, feel, and exist online.

What distinguishes *The Great Indian Brain Rot* from familiar critiques of digital culture is its refusal to pathologise either technology or its users. Mr Verma writes against the grain of moral panic, approaching the internet not as a corrupting force but as a social infrastructure — one through which aspiration, precarity, visibility and desire are unevenly distributed and intensely felt. Moving between essays, anecdotes, and close observation, he reads online behaviour as socially produced rather than cognitively degraded. This empathetic mode allows the book to foreground process over judgement. Instead of condemning digital life as evidence of cultural decline, Mr Verma asks how people come to inhabit platforms structured by competition, performance, and

constant evaluation. The result is a critique that resists easy blame and instead traces the conditions under which contemporary subjectivities are made legible, rewarded, or rendered disposable online.

A central insight of the book lies in its sustained attention to influence as a social and economic form. In Mr Verma's account, the influencer ceases to be a person and instead becomes a format — repeatable, optimisable, and endlessly scalable. What circulates is no longer subjectivity but a calibrated performance, shaped by algorithms that reward consistency, recognisability and output. Influence, in this formulation, functions as a commodity: Accumulated through visibility, measured through engagement, and convertible into economic and symbolic value. The internet thus reorganises social relations by transforming presence into productivity and expression into labour. In doing so, it reveals the extent to which contemporary capitalism has absorbed attention, affect, and personality into its circuits of accumulation.

Once influence is rendered measurable, it becomes governable. Mr Verma is attentive to how metrics, likes, views do not merely record popularity but actively shape behaviour. Individuals are reduced to dashboards of engagement, their social worth increasingly legible through numbers. Within this system, controversy operates less as disruption than as resource. Outrage and scandal are folded into the same circuits of accumulation, generating visibility that can be readily monetised. The creator, as Mr Verma suggests, becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the machine that evaluates them: Compelled to respond, optimise and remain legible to algorithms that reward attention regardless of its content.

Mr Verma's use of the assembly line as a metaphor for digital production is particularly generative. It allows us to see how content creation is organised less as expression than as output, calibrated to the demands of algorithmic circulation. This points to a process of digital dehumanisation, where individuals are apprehended primarily through metrics

and performance indicators rather than social meaning. When creators produce in order to feed the algorithm, they risk becoming, as Mr Verma notes, "indistinguishable from the machine." What is at stake here is not creativity alone, but the reorganisation of participation itself: Visibility is granted on the condition of regularity, recognisability, and scale, aligning cultural production with the logics of contemporary capitalism.

Controversy in this ecosystem

does not function as a breakdown of norms but as a mode of accumulation.

Political positions, moral stances, and even personal crises are rapidly converted into content, stripped of context and recirculated for engagement. In such a system, dissent risks becoming performative rather than disruptive, its value measured less by consequence than by traction. What emerges is a public sphere organised around metrics rather than deliberation, where the line between political speech and market logic grows

increasingly thin.

What *The Great Indian Brain Rot* ultimately offers is not a critique of digital excess but an anatomy of the conditions that organise contemporary life online. Mr Verma shows how the internet has become a dense social terrain where markets, politics, and everyday interaction blur into one another, producing forms of participation that appear open and voluntary while remaining tightly governed by visibility, circulation, and metrics.

The book's strength lies in its refusal to moralise or prescribe. In doing so, it invites readers to

reckon with a question that extends beyond the screen: What kinds of selves, publics, and possibilities are being shaped when attention itself becomes the dominant currency of social life?

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Can India learn from China?

China's rapid development since 1978 shows why govt support should be strongly directed at new starters and R&D

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



In 1978, a new development approach was introduced by Deng Xiaoping in China. A centrally planned, public-sector oriented and inward-looking economy was transformed to one that relied on attracting foreign corporate investors, promoting local private corporations, and rapid export growth. In India, the major policy shift came later in 1991 with delicensing, major financial sector reforms, and enhanced links with the global economy.

The difference between the two economies has widened since these basic policy shifts. Until 1978, China's per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was below India's. Thereafter, it rose rapidly and had reached twice India's per capita GDP by 1992. This widening of the per capita GDP ratio continued even after India's liberalisation started in 1991 and tripled by 2000, quadrupled by 2007, was fivefold by 2012, and about five-and-a-half times in 2024. It is widely believed that China's growth forging ahead of India's growth is largely because of the exceptionally rapid expansion of the manufacturing sector, with its share in global manufacturing shooting up to 28.30 per cent in 2023, while India's share was just 3 per cent.

The first and perhaps the most important point worth noting is the rapid development of the private sector in China after 1978, when there were virtually no significant private sector enterprises in China. The growth of the private sector in China in the post-1978 reform era came from new entrants. They were often individuals with technological skills who focused on rapid growth. In fact, it has been argued that the rapid emergence of private enterprises was not envisioned or promoted by the central government initially and much of the early governmental funding went to public-sector enterprises. The private sector development at the start of the liberalisation reform was led by new enterprises that were set up with support from local governments. Most of the private sector firms that are now large players, not just in China but also globally, were established after 1995.

In India, despite the focus on the public sector as the driver during the pre-liberalisation era, there were a significant number of private sector enterprises and con-

glomerates. Even after liberalisation, the inherited presence of an established private corporate sector, particularly the large conglomerates, constrained the emergence of newcomers in manufacturing. Where newcomers did emerge and grow large was primarily in the services sector, particularly in the skill-intensive information technology sector. Perhaps this accounts for the fact that India's exports of services are comparable in quantity with China's, while its manufacturing exports are just one-tenth of China's.

This suggests that, for increasing our growth rate,

one lesson from China's growth boom and from our infotech boom is that the government's financial and

policy support should be strongly directed at new

starters, move away from support for established con-

glomerates and rely on competition from new-

comers to stimulate them. A closely

related issue is government spending to

support private manufacturing develop-

ment. The Make in India scheme has sev-

eral programmes, the main ones being the

production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme,

and a scheme for the promotion of

electronic components and semiconduc-

tors, which between them have a

budget of about \$36 billion.

Compare this with government spending in the Make in China scheme, which involved substantial funding amounting to about \$330 billion to support manufacturing enterprises. This neat-fold difference in public spending on promoting new manufacturing is one of the reasons behind the difference in performance of the two initiatives. Hence, another lesson from the Chinese experience is that more carefully planned and more substantial financial support should be directed mainly at new starters.

A third lesson from China is the substantial role played by local authorities. In China, local political elites

played a major role in promoting and protecting the new entrepreneurs who emerged, providing welcome options for employment and local financial development, even when it was not a formal part of the central government's policy. This continued at the level of provincial government when private sector development was an accepted part of official strategy. One particular point of interest is the role played by city governments

in promoting industry in China, for instance, recently in the development of electric vehicle companies.

In India, control over financing and formal support for private enterprises rests largely with the central government, although state governments exercise some influence through their direct involvement in land acquisition and the provision of local infrastructure support required by companies. But the substantial role of the Union government in choosing and providing support to specific private projects gives an advantage to large conglomerates and national-level corporate entities relative to local enterprises, particularly the small and medium starters. Learning from the Chinese experience, India should shift the responsibility for supporting projects to states. Perhaps even more important is to strengthen and empower our municipalities to play a much more active role in promoting local entrepreneurship.

Another area where the difference between China and India is substantial is the promotion of research and development (R&D) by the government. R&D spending as a percentage of GDP was more or less comparable between the two countries until 1999. It was 0.75 percent in China and 0.72 percent in India. China's industrial strategy evolved to focus on emerging technologies such as solar and wind power, chip manufacturing, robotics, and later AI and electric vehicles. This was accompanied by a substantial rise in R&D, which reached 2.4 percent of GDP by 2020. In contrast, India's R&D as a percentage of GDP declined from 0.85 percent in 2008 to 0.64 percent in 2020. In absolute terms, the difference in R&D investment is roughly 20:1.

China also strengthened the link between research institutions, producing enterprises, and universities, 8-10 of which have risen to the global top-100 universities list. This has not happened in India. Perhaps the most important lesson from China for India — raise R&D spending substantially and improve the link between research institutions, producing enterprises, and IITs and other universities. This should be the strategy to guide the recent initiatives by the government, such as the Anusandhan National Research Foundation and the RDI scheme. One thing worth adding here is the importance of a sharper focus on improving the quality of school and college education.

There are some aspects of China's strategy that India cannot and should not emulate. India is a democracy, and its governments cannot be as authoritarian as the Chinese government. As a democratic federation, the Union government cannot favour a few selected regions or control the regional migration of workers as the Chinese government did. But the Union government can and should focus more on supporting new starters, reducing bureaucratic red tape to speed up decision-making, encouraging more effective action by states and municipalities for industry promotion, substantially accelerating R&D initiatives by public institutions, and pressuring private enterprises, particularly large conglomerates, to do the same.

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How clean energy can cut food waste

In a small village in Odisha, a group of women farmers turned rising temperatures into an opportunity. With support from the Harsha Trust, the Markoma Women Farmer Producer Company (FPO) — a collective of more than 460 farmers — set up a 5 metric tonne Ecozen solar-powered cold storage unit to serve local vegetable growers.

Piloted in 2018 after a careful assessment of farmer needs, the initiative has reduced post-harvest losses, improved productivity, stabilised prices through organised market linkages, and spread awareness of solar technology across neighbouring communities. This experience shows that reducing food loss requires not just better supply chains, but smarter energy systems.

India loses an estimated 30-40 per cent of its fruit and vegetables after harvest, often before they reach consumers. These invisible losses happen during transport, storage, and processing — all of which depend on reliable energy. Without it, food spoils quickly, farmers are forced to sell at distress prices, and emissions rise as produce rots. Yet discussions on food loss tend to focus on infrastructure and logistics while overlooking the energy systems that power them. A cold storage unit is useless without electricity; processing centres cannot run on intermittent power; even simple preservation techniques like drying increasingly rely on mechanical equipment. For smallholders, dependence on unreliable grids or diesel generators can be devastating.

India's clean energy transition is usually framed around solar parks, wind farms, and electric mobility. But its most transformative, least discussed potential lies in agriculture. Decentralised renewable energy (DRE) solutions — solar mini-grids, rooftop systems, hybrid units — can power cold storage, dryers, and packaging facilities close to farms. These community-level systems reduce grid dependence, cut diesel use, and enable local ownership of energy assets.

Government schemes such as PM-KUSUM, the National Solar Mission, and the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana have already expanded renewable energy access in rural India. If these initiatives were strategically linked with agricultural value chains, they could help bridge the infrastructure gaps that drive post-harvest losses. DRE systems can reduce reliance on diesel, cut operating costs, and make cold storage and processing units viable even in remote areas. However, policy coordination remains limited. Agriculture and energy continue to operate in silos, with separate ministries, financing channels, and implementation pathways. Bridging these divides is essential if renewable energy is to address post-harvest losses effectively.

The employment potential of DRE is also significant. The International Labour Organization estimates

India could generate 3.7 million new green jobs, much of it in renewable energy and its agricultural linkages. Building decentralised solar infrastructure requires technicians, electricians, logistics staff, and operators. Cold chain management and decentralised processing create additional local employment. A solar-powered cold storage unit is not just a piece of infrastructure — it is an enterprise that demands skills, coordination, and community ownership. These green jobs span the entire food system, reducing post-harvest losses while raising farmer incomes.

The clean energy transition also intersects with India's rapid digital transformation in agriculture. Platforms like ITC MAARS offer artificial intelligence-based crop advisory, diagnostics, and market intelligence. But digital tools alone cannot resolve post-harvest challenges. Farmers need energy infrastructure to act on information: Cold storage to preserve produce, processing units to add value, and logistics to reach markets. Digital innovation can guide farmers on when to harvest; renewable energy ensures the harvest does not go to waste. Together, these twin transitions — smart advisory and smart

energy — can strengthen rural resilience. Technology, however, tells only part of the story. Across India, rural communities innovate using what is often dismissed as "jugaad" — improvised, low-cost solutions rooted in local knowledge. In renewable energy, these solutions are not stopgaps but context-specific designs. Farmers have adapted solar dryers from local materials, converted old refrigerated trucks into mobile cold storage, and set up community-run processing units. These small, decentralised interventions rarely appear in policy reports, yet they solve real problems where they arise. Too often, policy conversations frame success in terms of "scaling up," assuming replication at national levels. But agriculture and energy systems are inherently place-specific. What works in the hills of Himachal Pradesh may not work in coastal Odisha. Instead of vertical scaling, India may benefit more from horizontal replication — enabling multiple, locally adapted solutions to flourish. DRE systems are naturally suited to this approach.

As India advances towards its 2070 net-zero target, linking renewable energy with food systems must become a national priority. Programmes like PM-KUSUM have shown how solar can power irrigation; similar linkages are needed for post-harvest systems such as cold storage, dryers, and processing hubs — especially in horticultural clusters prone to spoilage.

Financing and skills remain key challenges, particularly for farmer collectives facing high upfront costs. Targeted credit, public-private partnerships, and green skills training can help bridge this gap.

When a woman farmer in Odisha saves her tomato harvest in a solar-powered cold storage, she shows how energy access can reshape the future of food. As India builds its green energy future, anchoring this transition in local, adaptive, community-led solutions is essential. Sometimes, what works best is what stays small — rooted in its own soil, yet capable of lighting the path towards a more resilient tomorrow.

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Unrest unlimited

Yunus lacks the legitimacy to steer Bangladesh through the latest crisis

The violent unrest that rocked Bangladesh on Thursday night, following the death of Sharif Osman Hadi, a prominent youth leader of the July 2024 uprising against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government, was both a reflection of where the country stands today and a warning of what lies ahead. Hadi, an Islamist and a virulent critic of India, played a key role in transforming the July uprising into a broader movement aimed at remaking the country. He sought a decisive break from Bangladesh's liberation-era values and advocated greater political space for parties such as Jamaat-e-Islami, as well as for Islamist student groups. Hadi was shot by masked gunmen on December 12 and succumbed to injuries on December 18 at a hospital in Singapore, triggering widespread protests across Bangladesh. Although the police have arrested at least half a dozen suspects in connection with the attack, it remains unclear who orchestrated the killing. Some of Hadi's supporters blamed the Awami League. On December 18, mobs torched the offices of *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*, two of the country's largest dailies, trapping staff inside. Cultural centres, Awami League offices, the homes of former ministers, and even the residence of Mujibur Rahman, Bangladesh's liberation hero, were attacked. In Mymensingh city, a Hindu man aged 25 was lynched over alleged blasphemy, as a crowd cheered and filmed while his hanging body was set on fire.

Fifteen months after Ms. Hasina was toppled, Bangladesh continues to reel under mob rule. Ms. Hasina's authoritarianism undoubtedly contributed to the eruption of public anger in July 2024. Her fall offered Bangladesh a chance to begin anew, grounded in reconciliation, pluralism, and democracy. That opportunity has since been squandered. The period following the uprising saw widespread violence against minorities and Awami League workers. The Awami League and its student wing, the Chhatra League, were banned, while the ban on Jamaat-e-Islami was lifted. Mr. Yunus failed to keep Islamist forces, who have a dark past, in check even as reactionary groups pressed for a total rupture with the immediate past. The result has been near-anarchy. Anti-India sentiments, amplified by Islamist forces, have further inflamed tensions. Bangladesh's rulers must heed these warning signs. The focus must shift from vendetta politics to rebuilding state capacity and restoring law and order. Mr. Yunus appears to lack either the legitimacy or the resolve to steer the country through this crisis. For Bangladesh, the only viable path forward lies in inclusive elections with the participation of all the major political parties.

Step up

CSR as corporate obligation can support costs of restoring grasslands

The December 19 judgment by a Supreme Court Bench placing corporate environmental responsibility inside the legal meaning of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reframes how the Court reads CSR in Indian company law while continuing its attempts since 2021 to reduce deaths of great Indian bustards from power infrastructure. The Bench has treated the CSR regime as an enforceable obligation rather than an undertaking at companies' discretion while also reading social responsibility to include environmental and wildlife protection through the Companies Act itself. According to the Court, a corporation as a legal person shares the duty under Article 51A(g), which means spending CSR funds on environmental measures can be framed as discharging one's constitutional obligation rather than engaging in charity. For great Indian bustards, the Court has thus strengthened the legal basis for conservationists to demand corporate financing for projects to recover species endangered by corporate activity. The Court's 2021 interim order restricted overhead transmission lines across 99,000 sq. km and required a committee-led approach to feasibility and under-grounding. In 2024, it constituted an expert committee to balance species protection with climate commitments and renewable energy build-out, which the new order has operationalised. If CSR and project-linked financing become easier to compel, they can support the recurring costs of breeding and releasing chicks and of restoring grasslands and maintaining them.

However, the verdict is also a legal interpretation; it does not specify which companies must pay how much, where, when, and with what audit trail (the penalty for non-compliance will remain according to existing provisions). The Court's shift from a large-area approach, as in its 2021 order, to revised priority areas also reduces conflict with renewable energy deployments while pushing some of the onus to the accurate mapping of habitats – a problem given bustards move around and infrastructure risks can lie outside formal boundaries. The judgment improves the legal position for getting companies to pay for prevention and recovery and specifies a narrower but more detailed habitat and infrastructure plan. Whether it is sufficient will depend less on the doctrine it announces and more on whether governments and utilities can deliver the under-grounding and rerouting work at the required pace, and whether corporate funding translates to outcomes on the ground.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India (December 4 and 5) for the India-Russia Annual Summit had sparked a great deal of interest across the world, apart from India itself, though for different reasons. The West, which since the Ukraine conflict in 2022, has boycotted the Russian President, was keen to see how the visit would turn out, and whether it would undermine the embargo they had imposed on him for reasons that are well known. The Elephant and the Bear, however, managed to adroitly handle the situation, and in a manner that gave little reason for satisfaction to the West, even while maintaining a veneer of strategic autonomy.

A deep connection

Meetings between the heads of state of India and Russia have always been viewed as seminal events. They have often produced transformative results. Few in India can possibly forget how the India-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation signed between the two countries in 1971, when Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India and Leonid Brezhnev was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, transformed the strategic landscape of South Asia. It enabled India to defeat Pakistan and ensure the liberation of East Pakistan, which became the nascent state of Bangladesh. Less significant, but reminiscent of Russia's willingness to extend its hand of friendship to India, was Mr. Putin's gesture in 2009 during a summit meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh of waiving penalties to enable India to secure its second aircraft carrier supplied by Russia. Other instances, not all of it known to the outside world, but significant in so far as the close friendship between the leaders of the two countries, also exist. This has been the glue sustaining a relationship born out of mutual accommodation and faith.

The closeness of the relationship has often irked the West, which, even as it tilted towards Pakistan most of the time and railed against India's policy of non-alignment, viewed Russia's backing for India as an anti-West manoeuvre.

After 1971, the India-Russia relationship took on a fresh dimension, and since the Gorbachev era in Russia, India-Russia ties have gone from strength to strength. The presidency of Mr. Putin for the past quarter of a century further cemented the friendship. Successive Indian Prime Ministers have sustained this relationship.

The Russia-Ukraine war, however, became a test case in so far as India-Russia relations were concerned; India maintained strict neutrality, but it refused to join the anti-Russia bandwagon. This has since been a point of contention between India and the West.

The recent visit of the Russian leader is his first to India after the West imposed embargo on visits and meetings. Mr. Putin's Delhi visit was, hence,



M.K. Narayanan
Former Director, Intelligence Bureau, former National Security Adviser, and former Governor of West Bengal

invested with far greater interest than might otherwise have been the case. An earlier summit between the Indian and Russian leaders had taken place in Tianjin (in China), where Mr. Putin and Mr. Modi had displayed a great deal of warmth towards each other. This had, however, been anathema to the West.

The Joint Statement

Relations between Russia and the West have, if anything, deteriorated further ever since. Some in the West were possibly anticipating a shift in the content of the India-Russia relationship given the current flux in global politics, U.S. President Trump's heightened tariffs on India for continuing to purchase Russian oil in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine, and other aspects. However, this has been belied, as the optics of the latest visit indicate.

The West, especially the U.S. and countries of the European Union, are certain to be disappointed at the outcome. Apart from the public display of warmth by the Indian Prime Minister and the Russian President on the latter's arrival in Delhi, the relationship between the two countries, often touted as a relationship carved in stone, remains unaffected.

The Joint Statement issued following the 23rd India-Russia Annual Summit makes this clear. Support for a further strengthening of the Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership between India and Russia (marking the 25th Anniversary of the Declaration of Strategic Partnership between India and Russia), for instance, remains unchanged. The statement reiterates the special nature of the longstanding time-tested relationship characterised by mutual trust and respect for each other's core national interests. The Joint Statement further envisages exploring new avenues for cooperation, while strengthening cooperation in traditional areas.

The optics of the visit were, hence, excellent. The media coverage exceeded expectations. The body language demonstrated by the two principals left nothing to be desired. There were more than the usual references to connectivity, and cooperation on transport corridors, especially on the Northern Sea route through the Arctic, and the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor. Technology and industrial collaboration also found prominent mention.

Leaving out defence matters

Yet, defence matters, which had so far provided the main spark as far as the relationship was concerned, were conspicuously absent from the Joint Statement. This has been a core item during the Putin era – and unless there was a deliberate decision to maintain diplomatic silence on supposedly controversial aspects and subjects, it would appear that the essence of the India-Russia relationship was changing. The reasons for this have yet to be explained, and give room for deep

thought, especially during a period of global flux. The defence relationship and cooperation had always been seen and accepted as the bedrock of India-Russia relations; in this instance, however, it has been pushed into the background as of now. This is not merely significant, but could mark a shift in India's attitude and approach, which has so far been (at least in defence matters) largely pro-Russian in outlook.

India has, of late, diversified its defence purchases to include countries such as Israel and France. Nevertheless, Russia has over the years provided the main sinews for India's defence. It has been India's most consistent ally in conflicts with countries such as Pakistan, with the latter being consistently backed by the West. It is not merely the consistency of Russian support, but also the quality of many of the items that Russia has been willing to supply India that has added a great deal of heft to India's defence capabilities. At present, as was amply proved during Operation Sindoar in May 2025, Russia's S-400 air and missile defence system (which has acquired a near mythical status and is widely credited with India's success during the conflict), the Brahmos missile that India has jointly developed with Russia, and is a critical part of India's arsenal, apart from items such as the Sukhoi SU-30 MKI, the T-90 Tanks, and transport helicopters, form an integral part of India's defence structure. Considerable advances have also been made with regard to joint manufacturing and future collaboration between India and Russia in the arcane area of defence.

While India, no doubt, has certain new options to enlarge its military stockpile, Russia has historically been its largest most reliable and significant supplier of state-of-the-art weaponry on land, sea, and air. Of late, Russia has offered more of the same. A shift towards Western sources, given the current state of global politics, could therefore prove detrimental to India's interests. While this might bring about greater European and U.S. endorsement of India's policies, the actual costs need to be weighed carefully. It should be evident that little scope for a change exists, given that the West has never been a reliable partner while Russia has been.

To provide verisimilitude to what has been mentioned here about the less-than-friendly ties between India and the U.S., the U.S. Administration has recently notified Congress of a \$686 million sustaining and modernisation package for Pakistan's F-16 fighter jet fleet. The package would include avionic upgrades and cryptographic modules, mission planning software, simulators and logistical support from contractors. The latest notification comes on top of the \$400 million upgrade programme, announced earlier in 2025. This is notwithstanding a recent Washington Declaration that has averred that U.S.-India ties are the defining relationship of the 21st century.

Putin's visit to India and the aftermath

Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to India (December 4 and 5) for the India-Russia Annual Summit had sparked a great deal of interest across the world, apart from India itself, though for different reasons. The West, which since the Ukraine conflict in 2022, has boycotted the Russian President, was keen to see how the visit would turn out, and whether it would undermine the embargo they had imposed on him for reasons that are well known. The Elephant and the Bear, however, managed to adroitly handle the situation, and in a manner that gave little reason for satisfaction to the West, even while maintaining a veneer of strategic autonomy.

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India and Russia adroitly handled the situation, and in a manner that gave little reason for satisfaction to the West, even while maintaining a veneer of strategic autonomy

Right to Disconnect: Drawing the line after work

The Right to Disconnect Bill has been introduced as a private member's bill, a form of legislation that is rarely enacted. It comes in the context of India's recent consolidation of labour law through the four labour codes, which regulate working hours, overtime, and employer control. Against this background, the Bill marks a pivotal moment in Indian labour law. In this age of digital technologies, work increasingly extends beyond the physical workspace. Therefore, it is only prudent for the legislature to reconsider how labour law responds to constant connectivity. However, it does so in a framework that regulates work primarily through time-based constructs.

Indian labour law is yet to define what constitutes as 'work' in a digital economy. While the Bill regulates after-hours communication, it does so without clarifying the scope of 'work'. This omission becomes crucial when the Bill is read alongside other codes governing working time and employer control. Therefore, we examine unresolved questions concerning the definition of 'work', the scope of the proposed right, and its potential constitutional character, while drawing a comparison as well.

Some ambiguity
The Bill provides employees the right to not respond to work-related calls or mails beyond the prescribed working hours. However, it fails to address whether such after-hours engagement falls within the legal constructs of work.

This ambiguity is particularly obvious in the interaction of the Bill with the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020, which continues governing working hours and overtime in Indian labour law. However, the Bill does not clarify whether after-hours digital



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Until the Bill directly addresses how digital labour complies with existing labour laws, it continues to rely on a framework designed to regulate physical workplaces

engagement amounts to "work" under the Code. This inadvertently creates a conceptual gap where communication is regulated without being integrated in the legal framework governing working time. As a consequence, the right to disconnect operates more as a behavioural norm than a labour standard.

Approach of other jurisdictions

The gaps become apparent when compared with jurisdictions that have already imbibed the right to disconnect in their legal regimes. In the European Union, employer control became a key parameter for assessing working time. Through judicial precedents, an expansive definition was adopted, which included on-call time, standby periods, and other forms of availability, even where no active work is performed but the employer continues to exercise control. This principle further evolved through decisions such as *SIMAP*, *Tyco*, and *Jaeger*, where the European Court of Justice equated employer's control with work. Similarly, France does not try to redefine work. Instead, its labour law demarcates working time and rest time. Periods of availability under employer control are considered working time, and digital communication is integrated into this framework through collective bargaining.

Germany enforces strict working time and rest period regulations as well. These comparisons are not offered for replication in India, but to engage with an unresolved legal question: when does an employee's time belong to the employer? The Indian labour code contains mandatory rules, prescribing limits on working hours, and contractual terms negotiated through employer policy and agreements. The Right to Disconnect Bill does not specify whether the given right is a mandatory labour standard or its term can be

modified via a contract.

Another question concerns the Bill's constitutional character. The freedom to disengage bears an evident relationship with Article 21 of the Constitution. Yet the Bill neither traces its constitutional lineage nor articulates how these guarantees are to be realised within the workplace. The Bill leaves unresolved whether the right to disconnect is purely statutory or indicative of a deeper constitutional engagement between work and individual autonomy.

Conclusion

The Bill recognises that digital work has blurred the traditional boundaries between working time and personal time, but it does not explain how this transformation is to be accommodated within the legal framework which governs working hours, overtime and employer control.

A comparative study reveals that the right to disconnect becomes effective when an employee's time is treated as working time. This gap is yet to be filled. Until the Bill addresses how digital labour complies with existing labour laws, it will continue to rely on a framework designed for regulating physical workplaces.

The Bill leaves open whether the right has a constitutional character. Although there is an evident connection between Right to Disconnect and individual autonomy under Article 21 of the Constitution, this is not made apparent by the legislature. The Bill neither identifies this gap nor acknowledges it, which leaves it open to divergent interpretations.

For these reasons, the Bill is best seen as the beginning of a broader conversation, one that the Indian labour law jurisprudence will eventually address.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Crisis next door

The unrest in Bangladesh is unsettling ("Keeping a close watch on Bangladesh events: India", Dec. 22). The deaths of the two student leaders, Sharif Osman Hadi and Motaleb Shikder, need to be investigated. It is very worrying that Hindus are being persecuted and that a man was killed so brutally. The Jamaat-e-Islami clearly wants the rift between the

India and Bangladesh to deepen. The interim government led by Muhammad Yunus needs to course correct. It is time for Bangladesh to hold elections with the participation of all the political parties.

Kirti Wadhawan
Kanpur
Jumbo tragedy
The death of an elephant

calf, the eighth killed in the Sairang Rajdhani Express train tragedy in Central Assam's Hojai district, calls for urgent measures ("Elephant calf injured in Assam train collision dies; Centre seeks report", Dec. 22). Drones could be used to detect elephants near railway tracks. There must be a mandatory speed limit for trains in these areas. Also, reducing train

operations through elephant migration routes is needed. It is very sad that we are losing these beautiful animals.

Monita Sutherson

Nagercoil

Toxic air

Despite having adequate laws and abundant technical know-how, it is clear that India lacks the political will to tackle air

pollution in Delhi-NCR and elsewhere ("Lessons from China on tackling air pollution", Dec. 22). The situation is so bad that doctors are urging people with respiratory problems to leave the city when the AQI worsens. The crisis has dragged on for over a decade. It is tragic that in the world's largest democracy, leaders either remain locked in election

mode or take up non-issues to debate, even as pressing problems like this continue to take a toll on our health.

V. Nagarajan

Chennai

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Death knell for the rural job guarantee

The Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G RAM G), 2025 Act, which replaces the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), received the President's assent on Sunday.

Article 21 of the Constitution guarantees the right to life. The Supreme Court in *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* in 1985 ruled that "if there's an obligation upon the State to secure to the citizens an adequate means of livelihood and right to work, it would be sheer pedantry to exclude the right to livelihood from the content of the right to life."

MGNREGA, arrived at through sustained social movements and passed unanimously in Parliament, envisions the right to work as a necessary condition for the right to life. It is, therefore, a departure from earlier public works programmes as MGNREGA's provisions amount to justiciable rights – the right to work on demand, the right to unemployment allowance if work is not provided within 15 days, the right to payment of wages within 15 days and payment of delay compensation otherwise, gender parity in wages, minimum wages, among others. The Act also envisaged relief from ecological distress through the creation of long-term sustainable assets. As an engine to implement the 73rd Constitutional Amendment, MGNREGA strengthened the panchayat raj institutions.

Five broad positive outcomes of MGNREGA can be identified as (a) it is universal and not targeted, (b) it resulted in an increase in rural incomes, (c) it counters gender and caste inequalities, (d) it creates quality assets and (e) it empowers communities. Within a few years of MGNREGA, studies showed that incomes of workers increased, overall poverty fell and school enrolment increased. According to an India Human Development Survey, reliance on



Rajendran Narayanan

teaches in Azim Premji University, Bangalore and is affiliated with LibTech India. Views are personal

money lenders decreased by 21%. About 45% of female MGNREGA workers were either not working or worked only on family farms before the Act. Women's participation has been around 58% in MGNREGA over the last five years. In the face of mounting evidence, even the World Bank changed from referring to it as a "barrier to development" in 2009 to calling it a "stellar example" of rural development in 2014. MGNREGA's role during the COVID pandemic is widely known.

Many issues

Perhaps the chronicle of death was foretold over the last decade. Chronic underfunding has resulted in persistent wage payment delays, a fact acknowledged by the Ministry of Finance. Budget constraints have meant that officials have resorted to rationing work. Activists and researchers routinely brought up exclusions leading to denial of rights arising from opaque technocratic initiatives such as a photo-based attendance app and complex payment systems. Such initiatives gave new ammunition for corruption as these widened the gulf between workers and officials. Staff shortage exacerbated corruption. Built-in principles to mitigate corruption like social audits have been underfunded.

The VB-G RAM G Act was steamrolled in Parliament in such a scenario. Section 5(1) of this Act gives arbitrary, discretionary powers to the Union government to decide where, what and how public works will happen. According to Section 4(5), the Union government will determine and prescribe "State-wise normative allocations" of funds based on "objective parameters". Instead of demand-driven, as MP Manoj Jha put it, this makes it "command-driven" rendering it to a centrally sponsored allocation based model, putting States at the mercy of the Centre. Local autonomy ideas of MGNREGA stand compromised.

The MGNREGA envisions the right to work as a necessary condition for the right to life

In the *Swaraj Abhiyan* case in 2018, the Supreme Court ordered the Union government to pay compensation for delays in payment caused by it. The new Act places no obligation on the Union government for payment delays. Roughly 90% of the MGNREGA expenditure is borne by the Union government and 10% by the States. As per Section 22 of the new Act, barring some States, the Centre to State ratio of funds has been altered to 60:40. Further, the new Act states that "expenditure by a State in excess of its normative allocation shall be borne by the State government". Taken together, these clauses might lead to political favouritism towards some States and victimisation of others.

Forced to be fiscally prudent, States are likely to stifle work demand leading to increased unemployment and distress migration.

The opportunity to work anytime in the year is vital, especially for the landless and women. However, the proposition (Section 6(2)) in the new Act to not provide any employment for 60 days during the agricultural season, will only ossify the entrenched land, caste and gender inequalities. Despite support for MGNREGA from farmers' platforms and evidence pointing to farmers benefiting from MGNREGA, the new Act attempts to legally pit farmers with labourers. The new Act claims to provide 125 days of employment per household per year. However, if in the current funding situation, average days of work per year per household was around 50, the claim of 125 days of employment in a year is a red herring. Finally, the new Act has no new provisions to mitigate corruption.

MGNREGA combines Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of local governance with B.R. Ambedkar's spirit of empowering citizens with rights. By formalising the decade-long slow poisoning of the MGNREGA, the new Act undermines both Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Himachal needs a financial boost

The State needs more money to protect and preserve its vital forest cover

STATE OF PLAY

Archana Vaidya

Growing up in Himachal Pradesh in the eighties, I have often heard my civil engineer father lament about the lack of adequate budget with the State government to make a good hill road while also containing and managing the damage to the mountain slope. He understood the importance of forests but always spoke of the disproportionate burden on the State. He thought that since the forests provide many important services which benefit the entire country, the State should be provided more resources to protect and preserve them. His ideas stayed with me and when the concept of ecosystem services gained currency much later, it instantly resonated.

Similar thoughts were expressed in a letter written by the Constitutional Conduct Group, a group of former civil servants, to the chairman of the 16th Finance Commission. The letter refers to a 2025 report of the Institute of Forest Management Bhopal. It pegs the total forest wealth of Himachal Pradesh at ₹9.95 lakh crore. It calculated the annual total economic value of Himachal's forests at ₹3.20 lakh crore; this includes ₹1.65 lakh crore for carbon sequestration, ₹68,941 crore for ecosystem services, ₹32,901 crore as the value of bio-diversity, ₹15,132 crore for water provisioning and ₹3,000 crore for regulatory services such as flood control and sediment retention. These contributions benefit the entire country.

The regulatory system understands the importance of forests for the ecological security of the country, and the



costs mountain States incur and the support they need to pursue an eco-centric developmental model. Despite the understanding, till date, most regulatory instruments in the country do not comprehensively address these issues or adequately compensate the mountain States so that they are not unduly encumbered.

Himachal Pradesh has been a Special Category State since its inception in 1971, because of its geographical and climatic conditions resulting in limited resource generating capacity. This got the State some preferential financial treatment from the Centre till it was abolished by 14th Finance Commission (FC) in 2015 due to increase in allocation from the Central taxes devolved to the State. Himachal Pradesh like other States had to enact the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act in 2005, which imposed limits on its fiscal and revenue deficits, and influenced its expenditure patterns without adequately taking into account the limitations of its largely agrarian economy and higher developmental costs.

Some amends have been made over the years to accommodate the special circumstances of the State.

The FCs specifically evolved a mechanism to compensate the States which maintain, protect and preserve forests but the same has fallen short on delivering the

intended results in Himachal Pradesh. It started with 12th FC when a total of ₹1,000 crore was allocated as Green Bonus to be distributed among States on the basis of their share of the country's total forest area. This was changed to an incentive-based grant by 13th FC to reward States for maintaining and improving forest covers, focusing on canopy density. The 14th FC went a step ahead and incorporated "forest cover" as a criterion in its formula for horizontal tax devolution, assigning it a weight of 7.5%.

The 15th FC increased both the scope and weightage of this criterion to "forest cover and ecology" and 10% respectively, which needs to be further enhanced significantly to make any meaningful contribution. The present methodology for calculating the area under "forests and ecology" is also flawed as it only uses the data regarding dense forest, despite there being a separate mention of ecology. About a third of the State's geographical area is permanent snow, glaciers, cold deserts, and alpine pastures where no vegetation grows but has a tremendous amount of ecological value. While calculating area under forest in the State, this area should either be deducted from the total area to arrive at the effective forest cover in the State or this area should be recognised in its own right under the head ecology.

The 16th FC needs to look into these issues. Higher allocations are needed to protect the forest and ecology of the State for the benefit of the entire country.

The writer is a Natural Resource Management/Environment Law consultant and an advocate in the High Court of Himachal Pradesh. Views are personal.

India tops global doping list for the third consecutive year

Global comparisons show that despite more rigorous testing regimes, the doping rate is much lower in many other countries

DATA POINT

Devyanshi Bihani

India has recorded the highest number of doping offenders globally for the third consecutive year, according to the latest World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) report. According to the WADA's 2024 report, India recorded 260 positive doping cases from 7,113 samples (Chart 1A) – a 3.6% positivity rate (Chart 1B). This figure is more than double of any other nation's numbers, as no other country exceeded a 1.75% positivity rate in 2024.

Norway documented the second-highest proportion of positive cases at 1.75%, followed by the U.S. at 1.15% (Chart 2). In terms of absolute figures, France registered the next highest volume of violations in 2024 with 91 cases, followed closely by Italy with 85. Russia and the U.S. reported 76 cases each, while Germany and China recorded 54 and 43 cases, respectively.

Crucially, these nations recorded fewer positive results in both absolute and percentage terms than India, despite maintaining much more rigorous testing regimes. China, for example, conducted over 24,000 tests in 2024 (Chart 3), more than triple India's volume, yet reported fewer than one-fifth of the violations.

The findings have come at a time when India is positioning itself as a credible global sporting host. The country is preparing to host the 2030 Commonwealth Games, seen as a stepping stone towards its larger ambition of hosting the 2036 Olympics.

Sport-wise data from India shows that athletics recorded the most positive results in absolute terms. Of the 260 positive cases in 2024, as many as 76 came from athletics, followed by weightlifting (43) and wrestling (29). Boxing and powerlifting recorded 17 cases each, while kabaddi accounted for

10 cases. (Table 4) These figures reflect a pattern that has held over several years, with endurance and strength-based sports dominating the list of violations. In July, under-23 wrestling champion and Paris Olympics quarter-finalist Reetika Hooda tested positive for banned substances and was provisionally suspended, drawing attention to doping risks even among elite athletes.

At the grass-roots level, enforcement itself appears to be a deterrent. During India's University Games earlier this month, there were reports of several athletes skipping track and field events after anti-doping officials arrived at venues, in some cases leaving only a single competitor to participate.

India's National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) has defended its record, arguing that higher numbers reflect improved detection rather than rising drug use. In a statement issued on Wednesday, the agency said India had "significantly strengthened" its anti-doping framework in recent years.

However, global comparisons suggest that India's problem is not merely one of testing volume. Several countries with comparable or higher testing numbers continue to report far lower positivity rates.

The WADA report comes months after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) expressed concern over the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs in India and urged authorities to "set their house in order". In response, the Indian Olympic Association constituted a new anti-doping panel in August.

The government has also moved to tighten the legal framework. Parliament recently passed the National Anti-Doping (Amendment) Bill, 2025, incorporating changes sought by WADA to bring India's anti-doping regime in line with global standards. The Bill prohibits doping in sports, and provides a framework for testing, enforcement, and adjudication of violations.

Playing it dirty

The data for the charts were sourced from the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) Anti-Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) Report 2022, 2023 and 2024

CHART 1A: The total number of samples tested in India over the past four years

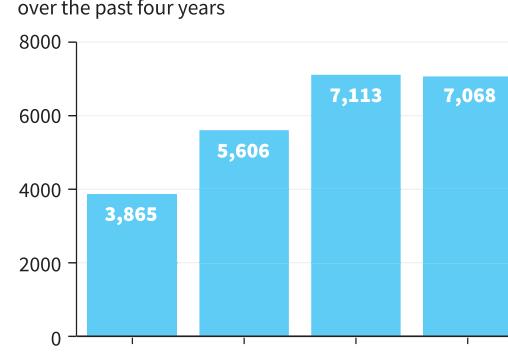


CHART 1B: The positivity rate (in %) of the tests conducted in India over the past four years

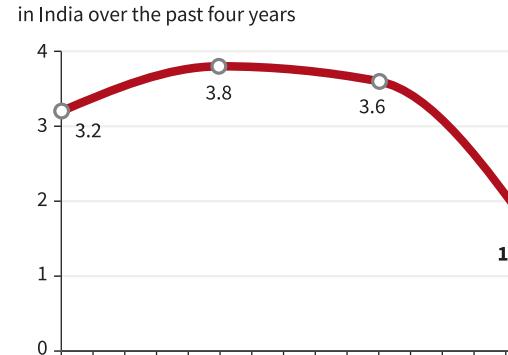
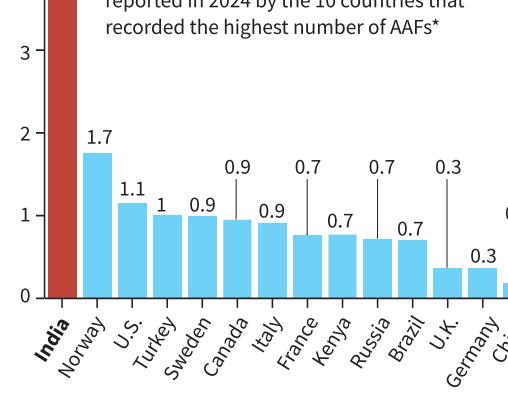


CHART 2: The positive doping rate (in %) reported in 2024 by the 10 countries that recorded the highest number of AAFs*



Note: An Adverse Analytical Findings (AAF)* is a laboratory report identifying the presence of a prohibited substance or its metabolites or markers (including elevated quantities of endogenous substances) or evidence of the use of a prohibited method, in line with WADA standards



CHART 3: The number of doping tests conducted in 2024 by the 10 countries that recorded the highest number of AAFs*



TABLE 4: The total number of samples collected, total AAFs, and the corresponding positivity rate across the 10 sports that recorded the highest number of AAFs* in India

Sport	Total Samples	Total AAFs	Positivity rate (in %)
Athletics	1,862	76	4.1
Weightlifting	664	43	6.5
Wrestling	414	29	7
Powerlifting	54	17	31.5
Boxing	413	17	4.1
Kabaddi	181	10	5.5
Bodybuilding	12	8	66.7
Judo	186	6	3.2
Wushu	111	5	4.5

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu.

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 23, 1975

Auto Industry's exports fetch Rs. 30 crores

New Delhi, Dec. 22: Export utilisation of India's road motor vehicle industry aggregated to Rs. 30.2 crores in 1974-75. Besides growing overseas supply of automobile equipment and accessories, the industry has now emerged as a significant supplier of buses and trucks, says an official press release.

India exported during the year 430 buses valued at Rs. 3.64 crores. The importers were Zambia, Uganda, Iran, Guyana, Arab Republic of Egypt, Bahrain Islands, Mauritius, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sri Lanka. The maximum number of buses were bought by Zambia (75 buses at Rs. 75 lakhs) Mauritius bought 47 buses, Guyana 39 buses, Arab Republic of Egypt 37 buses, Iran and Uganda 36 each, Bahrain Islands 44 buses, Afghanistan 34 and Sri Lanka 24 buses.

India's licensed capacity for the production of commercial vehicles including jeeps is about 110,000 a year. Of

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The steady growth in India's IT hiring market this year

16 In per cent. India's IT sector showed signs of recovery in 2025, with total job demand touching 1.8 million roles, marking a 16% increase over the previous year and highlighting renewed momentum in hiring across the industry, a report said on Monday. PTI

Number of farmer activists booked in Muzaffarnagar

100 A case has been registered against more than 100 persons in connection with the incident that took place on Sunday. The police said activists assembled at the Jagahedi toll plaza and staged a sit-in, alleging misbehaviour by toll plaza employees with farmers. PTI

The duties imposed by China on dairy products from the EU

42.7 In per cent. The "duty deposits", which range from 21.9% to 42.7%, come into effect on Tuesday. They hit a range of items including fresh and processed cheese, curd, blue cheese and some milk and cream, the commerce ministry in Beijing said in a statement. AFP

Institutional investments in Indian real estate in 2025

10.4 in \$ billion. The institutional investments in Indian real estate are estimated at \$10.4 billion as against \$8.878 billion last year. JLL India data showed that domestic investors contributed 52% of the total institutional investment in Indian real estate in 2025. PTI

The fine imposed on Apple by Italy over app privacy feature

98 in million euros. The Italian Competition Authority said that Apple had violated privacy regulations for third-party developers in a market where it "holds a super-dominant position through its App Store". Apple said it would appeal. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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On the right to a healthy environment

Amid rising air pollution, legal interpretations linking environmental rights to the right to life and explicit constitutional provisions to enforce environmental protections, emphasising the state's responsibility, is the need of the hour

LETTER & SPIRIT

C.B.P. Srivastava

Some winter and the national capital wakes up with thick smog and severely low air quality, which cripples the city and poses serious health challenges. The directions given by the Delhi government and the Directorate of Education to ensure work from home and to run classes in schools in hybrid mode respectively do not bring much succour, as possible health hazards continue to haunt Delhites and those living in the National Capital Region (NCR) districts.

Some of the major causes of air pollution include the burning of fossil fuels, transport, industrial processes, waste management, demolition and agriculture. However, particulate matter is the most deadly of them all causing major health hazards like stroke, heart and lung diseases which kill large number of people every year.

Severity of particulate matter

Particulate matter is defined for the purpose of quality regulations. Particles having a diameter of 10 microns or less (PM 10) may enter the body through breathing and adversely affect health. On the other hand, fine particulate matter includes particles having a diameter of less than 2.5 microns (PM2.5). Particles emitted from the burning of diesel called DPM (Diesel Particulate Matter) are mostly less than 1 micron in size and constitute a sub-category of PM2.5. These cause severe health hazards, even in children. In this context, the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has amended the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) and made it mandatory to close schools in Delhi and NCR districts under Phases 3 and 4 of the plan. Earlier, the decision to implement these measures was at the discretion of the State government. Moreover, as an additional directive under Phase 3 of the GRAP, State governments will now have to stagger the timings of public offices and municipal bodies in Delhi and NCR districts.

Constitutional provisions

Though the original Constitution did not mention any provisions for environmental protection, the concepts of natural justice and protection of nature were enshrined in the entire constitutional scheme. This is the reason why, by way of literal interpretation, the Supreme Court gave its opinion that clean environment shall be included in the meaning of life under Article 21 in *Maneka Gandhi versus Union of India, 1978*.

However, over the years, especially after growing demands for proper safeguards for the protection of the environment and sustainable development, India has adopted policies for which it needs proper and effective constitutional provisions. This led to the insertion of Articles 48A and 51A (g) as responsibilities of the state and citizens respectively. A significant aspect of Article 48A is that the Constitution intends to make agriculture and environment compatible. In *Subhash Kumar versus State of Bihar, 1991*, the Supreme Court read Articles 48A and 51A (g) with Article 21, and inferred that the state is constitutionally obliged to take steps to protect and improve the environment so that every citizen is able to enjoy his right to pollution-free air and water, which are necessary for a meaningful life.

However, since the mid-1980s,



Intense pollution: A layer of smog seen over moving traffic near the ITO area, in New Delhi on December 22. SUSHIL KUMAR VERMA

increasing privatisation and economic liberalisation have degraded the environment on a large scale due to which the judiciary had to step in to provide guidelines to strike a balance between economic development and environmental protection. The judiciary's commitment to social good in general, and environmental protection in particular, has resulted in the innovative use of Public Interest Litigations (PILs) under Articles 32 and 226 of the Constitution, as a tool for social and environmental justice.

Moreover, a healthy environment is also one of the elements of a welfare state. Under Section 2(a) of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, 'environment' includes water, air and land, and the interrelationship which exists between the three and human beings, other living creatures, plants, microorganisms and property. The right to live in an environment free of danger of disease and infection is an important attribute of the right to live with human dignity.

The right to live in a healthy environment as part of Article 21 of the Constitution was first recognised in *Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra versus State of U.P., 1985*. In 1987, the Supreme Court in *M.C. Mehta versus Union of India* treated the right to live in a pollution-free environment as part of the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Constitution.

Disasters and environmental protection

During times of disasters and calamity, whether natural or man-made, the issue of protecting the environment assumes greater significance. The concept of 'absolute liability' was introduced for disasters arising out of the storage, leak or use of hazardous substances such as in the Oleum Gas Leak case. While strict liability is the concept that makes a defendant responsible for the consequences of an action, even if he did not intend to cause harm or was not at fault, absolute liability is the imposition of legal responsibility on a party for damages caused, regardless of fault or

negligence, but with certain exceptions. Moreover, strict liability is used in both criminal and civil law.

Two more principles that assume significance in cases of disasters which affect the environment include the 'precautionary principle' and the 'polluter pays principle'. These concepts were explained in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum versus Union of India, 1996*. The precautionary principle is an approach wherein states should adopt precautionary measures if there are serious threats to the environment. According to the United Nations, this principle needs to be widely adopted by nations according to their own capabilities. In cases where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, a lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures which could prevent environmental degradation. The precautionary principle is a part of the law of the land and should be applied when there is a threat of serious or irreversible environmental damage. The traditional concept that development and ecology are opposed to each other, is no longer acceptable. Sustainable development should be prioritised.

On the other hand, the polluter pays principle is the commonly accepted practice that those who are responsible for the pollution should bear the costs of managing it to prevent damage to human health or the environment. For instance, a factory that produces a potentially poisonous substance as a by-product of its activities is held responsible for its safe disposal. The polluter pays principle is part of a set of broader principles to guide sustainable development worldwide.

Public trust doctrine

Another major idea behind the principles of environmental protection is the public trust doctrine. In *M.C. Mehta versus Kamal Nath*, the Supreme Court explained the doctrine as a reflection of a social contract between the state and the people, in which the state serves as the trustee while the people or the communities own the resources.

Although the state holds certain rights over said resources, it shall not utilise them for personal gains and shall be used only for the benefits of the people.

In India, Clause (b) of Article 39 provides that material resources shall be owned by the community and Clause (c) of the Article says that the state shall have the responsibility to prevent any concentration of the means of production. Further, when the state takes steps for the welfare of the people, the citizens have a duty to allow the state to do so. Thus, the relationship of the state and citizens is guided by *jus publicum*, or public law. It also refers to the right, title or dominion of public ownership which means that the government has the right to own resources for the benefit of the public. This is very well articulated in the Constitution, especially in the Directive Principles.

For example, in *Radhey Shyam Sahu*, the Supreme Court held that the doctrine of public trust emanates from the provisions of Article 21 of the Constitution protecting the life of the people and put the state under the obligation to maintain public parks for the citizens.

So far as the effects of climate change are concerned, the top Court in *M. K. Ranjitsinh versus Union of India, 2024* recognised the right against adverse effects of climate change as being part of the right to life under Article 21 and also with the right to equality under Article 14 of the Constitution.

Despite the fact that national and foreign governments have claimed to have taken steps for the protection of the environment, their claims have been far from satisfactory. Moreover, as judicially recognised rights cannot be directly claimed unless linked to any of the rights provided in Part III of the Constitution, the state may also become reluctant to take steps with concern. It is therefore, the opportune moment to expressly include the right to a clean and healthy environment in the Constitution to make both the state and the citizens equally responsible.

The author is President, Centre for Applied Research in Governance, Delhi

THE GIST

The directions given by the Delhi government and the Directorate of Education to ensure work from home and to run classes in schools in hybrid mode respectively do not bring much succour, as possible health hazards continue to haunt Delhites and those living in the National Capital Region (NCR) districts.

During times of disasters and calamity, whether natural or man-made, the issue of protecting the environment assumes greater significance.

Despite the fact that national and foreign governments have claimed to have taken steps for the protection of the environment, their claims have been far from satisfactory.

Regeneration in axolotls, flatworms, is a whole-body event, studies find

When an axolotl loses a limb, the cells at the stump gather and multiply into a mound of tissue that becomes an engine of new growth; for decades, scientists believed this small structure contained a major part of the regenerative programme; new studies say the whole body itself joins in the act

Anirban Mukhopadhyay

Planarian flatworms are small, unassuming creatures with an astonishing talent. Cut one into pieces, and each fragment can regrow a complete animal. This seemingly magical ability comes from their prolific stem cells, known as neoblasts, which can produce every tissue in the body.

In most animals, such regenerative stem cells grow under the care of nearby niche cells, small micro-environments that signal when to divide. But planarians, despite their extraordinary powers of renewal, appear to lack any such neighbourhoods, leaving biologists puzzled about where their stem cells get their cues.

In a new study in *Cell Reports*, researchers at the Stowers Institute for Medical Research in Missouri, USA, found that the missing niche might not be local at all, but comes from the gut. They combined a powerful gene-mapping tool called Slide-seqV2 with electron microscopy to chart where thousands of stem cells sit and which genes they switch on. The maps revealed that neoblasts rarely stay in contact with nearby tissues, yet their activity depends on chemical messages sent from the intestine. When key intestinal genes were turned off, the usual post-injury burst of cell division disappeared and regeneration faltered; even day-to-day cell replacement changed.

The planarian gut functions as a central regulator for whole-body regeneration," the study's corresponding author Alejandro Sánchez Alvarado, a molecular biologist at the Stowers Institute, said. He added that the same gut signals may also help guide routine tissue renewal across the body.

The findings don't put the intestine in charge. Instead, they point to a cooperative system in which many tissues, including the gut, help steer stem cells through shared chemical cues. Because stem and intestinal cells sit only a few micrometres apart (roughly a single cell's width), their conversations are likely carried by molecules such as small proteins, fats or other metabolic signals rather than direct contact.

That is to say, in planarians, regeneration seems to depend on a diffuse web of nearby chemical signals rather than a single, fixed neighborhood.

Poised to heal

In another species, that same kind of long-range communication runs through the nervous system rather than the gut.

When an axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*) loses a limb, the cells at the stump gather and multiply into a mound of tissue called the blastema, which becomes an engine of new growth. For decades, scientists believed this small structure contained a major part of the regenerative programme. But a new study in *Cell* by a group at the Harvard Stem Cell Institute in Massachusetts, USA, has reported that the body itself joins the act.

After amputation, a burst of activity in the animal's stress response nerves briefly drives cells throughout the body to reenter the cycle of division. This organism-wide systemic activation seems to prime the animal for repair. When a previously uninjured limb is later amputated, its blastema is noticeably



A composite image of a planarian flatworm regrowing itself from a truncated form. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

larger by two weeks.

The response was found to be carried by special proteins on cells that sensed stress signals. In distant tissues, one group of these proteins switched on a growth control system called mTOR, putting the body into a temporary state of readiness. At the injury site, another group kept the new limb growing. In both places, the same stress hormone, norepinephrine, a close chemical cousin of adrenaline, acted as the messenger.

When the researchers blocked the animal's stress nerves, regeneration slowed down. But when they used common blood pressure drugs to mimic or block those stress signals, they could dial the response up or down, showing that the body's repair mode could be switched on and off chemically. The primed state itself faded after about four weeks, suggesting that regeneration is not a permanent condition but a short-lived 'repair mode' under the nervous system's control.

The group also expressed suspicion that the system actively shut down this



A close-up view of planarian flatworms. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



The studies reveal a more complex, coordinated response where the entire organism is involved in the regenerative process

NADIA ROSENTHAL
IMPERIAL COLLEGE OF LONDON

state rather than letting it fade, perhaps through a surveillance mechanism that reined in cell growth once the injury response had served its purpose.

Rethinking regeneration

The same signalling machinery exists in mammals, so scientists are now wondering if mammals could have such abilities, too. However, regenerative biologist and associate professor Jessica Whited, who led the Harvard group, strongly emphasised that any parallels to humans remain speculative.

"It could be possible that humans have latent regenerative abilities that need to be coaxed out with the proper molecular instructions, in a specific sequence," she said, stressing that such hypotheses still require direct testing.

Her team is considering whether mammals could even trigger a similar adrenergic response after severe injury but become "stuck" before the process can proceed, a failure that could reflect molecular brakes blocking the later steps of regeneration.

Even in axolotls, she noted, regeneration is tightly confined to the wound.

"Systemically activated cells don't grow new limbs all over the body," she said. "They appear to be held in check by brakes that limit where and how regeneration proceeds."

Some of these cells near the stump may themselves become blastema

precursors while others might act indirectly, signalling to their neighbors to initiate growth. In both cases, she said, the process depends on communication across tissues rather than within a single compartment.

Even so, the way this global coordination works is not the same in every animal. Ken Poss, a biologist at Duke University in North Carolina in the USA, said evolution seems to have invented several ways to achieve that coordination.

"Innate regeneration as a whole certainly uses different architectures," Mr. Poss said. "Nerves and their signals can have major, minor or no role in regeneration, depending on the species and tissue. Finding commonalities and differences helps us piece the puzzle together."

However, those differences don't contradict the idea of body-wide coordination; they refine it.

These studies address an outstanding question: how local is the regenerative response to injury?" Nadia Rosenthal, a researcher at Imperial College of London, said. "They reveal a more complex, coordinated response where the entire organism is involved in the regenerative process."

Salamanders may rely on neural signals and flatworms on metabolic cues, but both, she added, expose "a dynamic balance between local responses and whole-body governance of tissue repair."

Together, the two studies recast regeneration as a team effort, not a solo act. Whether driven by gut signals or nerve impulses, the process depends on a dialogue between the wound and the rest of the body. The next challenge is to learn how those conversations start, and how the body knows when to stop them.

(Anirban Mukhopadhyay is a geneticist by training and science communicator from New Delhi. anirban.genetics@south.du.ac.in)



A NASA illustration depicting the MAVEN spacecraft orbiting Mars. AP

NASA loses touch with MAVEN craft which reached Mars just before Mangalyaan

Vasudevan Mukunth

NASA has lost contact with its Mars Atmosphere and Volatile Evolution (MAVEN) spacecraft, the Mars orbiter that has worked for more than a decade to study how the planet's atmosphere is escaping into space. The spacecraft went silent in early December, and engineers are still trying to re-establish communication.

MAVEN's job at Mars has been to measure the thin upper atmosphere and the ionosphere (charged particles high above the surface), and to watch how sunlight and the solar wind interact with them. Those measurements help scientists estimate how Mars went from a planet that once had flowing water to the cold, dry world we see today.

Beyond science, MAVEN also carries a relay radio that can pass messages between the earth and rovers on the ground, including NASA's Curiosity and Perseverance.

On December 4, MAVEN sent its last full set of routine "health" data about its systems. Two days later, it passed behind Mars from the earth's point of view. This kind of temporary blackout is normal: when a planet blocks the line of sight, radio signals can't get through. But after MAVEN was expected to reappear, NASA's Deep Space Network didn't detect its usual signal. NASA publicly described the problem on December 9 and said it was investigating.

In an update on December 15, NASA reported a small clue: during an ongoing radio science campaign, the team recovered a brief fragment of tracking data from December 6. From that fragment, NASA said MAVEN appeared to be rotating in an unexpected way when it emerged from behind Mars. The signal's frequency also suggested MAVEN's orbit may have changed.

MAVEN orbits Mars and repeatedly samples different heights above the planet, which is useful because the upper atmosphere changes with time of day, season, and solar activity. Its instruments measure gases and ions as well as the solar wind and magnetic environment around Mars. When it serves as a relay, MAVEN receives short UHF

MAVEN appeared to be rotating in an unexpected way. The signal frequency also suggested its orbit may have changed

(ultra-high-frequency) transmissions from a rover, then sends the data back to the earth using a high power radio link.

With MAVEN having gone silent, NASA has shifted more relay work to other orbiters, including the Mars Reconnaissance Orbiter and Mars Odyssey, and has coordinated with European orbiters as needed as well.

NASA launched MAVEN in November 2013 from Cape Canaveral in Florida. After a months-long cruise through interplanetary space, it reached Mars and entered orbit in September 2014. MAVEN was designed for a two-year primary mission but has continued operating on an extended mission since, building a long record of how Mars's upper atmosphere responds to the Sun.

India's Mars Orbiter Mission (MOM), or Mangalyaan, entered Mars orbit on September 24, 2014, days after MAVEN arrived. The Indian Space Research Organisation framed MOM as a technology demonstrator, with five instruments added for basic imaging and atmospheric studies.

Many in India often compared MOM to MAVEN at the time using their headline costs – about ₹450 crore for MOM v. \$671 million for MAVEN – but the missions were built for different goals and payloads. MAVEN was also the more technically ambitious science mission.

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

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

Life and times of the transistor

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

On December 23, 1947, John Bardeen, Walter Brattain, and William Shockley demonstrated the first transistor at Bell Labs. The facility picked the name "transistor" to ensure the device was easily marketable, and is a combination of two words. Name the words.

QUESTION 2

In the late 1950s, scientists at Bell Labs invented the MOSFET, a transistor design that was compact and cheap to produce en masse – the first of its kind – and thus set the electronics revolution in motion. What does MOSFET stand for?

QUESTION 3

Dennard scaling is the idea in

semiconductor electronics that shrinking the transistor size lets engineers lower the voltage and current, so the transistor can still switch currents fast while keeping the _____ roughly constant. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 4

A _____ is a new kind of transistor whose electrical resistance depends on the history of voltage or current through it, so it 'remembers' past states. Researchers are exploring its use in new kinds of computers where the CPU and the memory are closer together, reducing the distance data has to move. Fill in the blank.

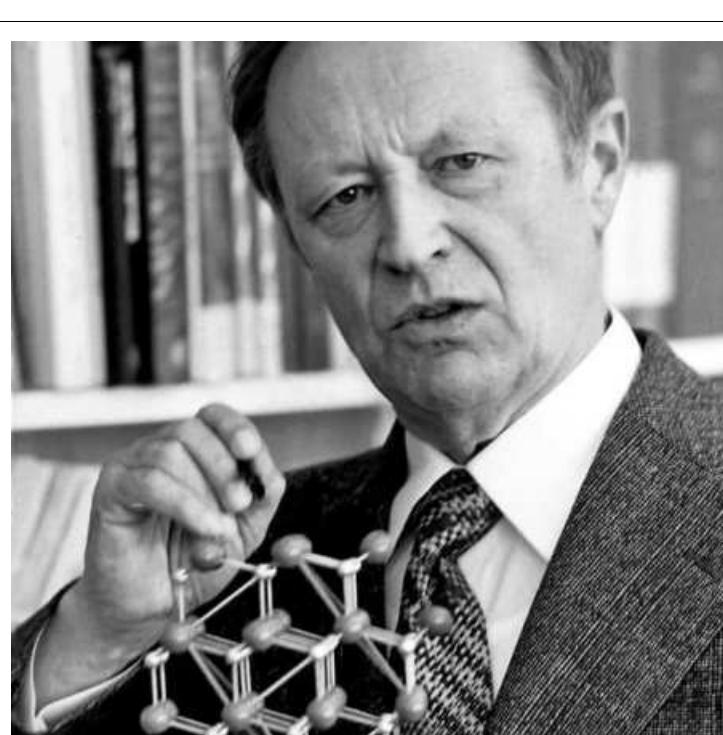
QUESTION 5

X are transistors whose channel is a thin vertical fin of semiconductor, with the gate wrapping around multiple sides.

This geometry allows X to maintain better electrostatic control than flat transistors, reducing current leaks and better supporting miniaturisation. Name X.

Answers to December 18 quiz:

- American astronomer who found Epimetheus – **Ans: Richard Walker**
 - Moon whose orbit Epimetheus shares – **Ans: Janus**
 - Epimetheus, Janus do this as they exchange momentum – **Ans: Swap orbits**
 - Name for Epimetheus, Janus for 'sweeping' their orbits – **Ans: Shepherd moons**
 - Material in which Epimetheus's terrains are rich – **Ans: Water ice**
 - Visual: **Prometheus**
- First contact: K.N. Viswanathan | Tamal Biswas | Mohammad Sohail | Rohit Koli | Anmol Agrawal



Visual: Name this German physicist who along with Herbert Matzner independently invented the transistor in 1948. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

Gulf winds

Oman FTA will help in export markets' diversification

India's recently concluded free trade pact, or Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, with Oman has several takeaways: improved market access to labour intensive exports, mobility for services professionals and a cementing of ties with a country where 7.5 lakh Indians reside and remit \$2 billion every year.



Improved trade and diplomatic engagement becomes important with a country that is strategically located at the entrance to the Persian Gulf — a geo-political hotspot through which over half of India's crude imports is routed. There is also a larger context at work here — of India working out alternative export destinations to the US in particular, as it seeks to stitch FTAs across the world. This would help its price elastic, labour intensive exports, which may not account for a very large share in value terms but provide a livelihood to millions. So, numbers may not fully reveal the true import of the FTA with Oman. As a bilateral trade partner, Oman is hardly among the top few — as bilateral trade amounts to \$10.6 billion in goods and \$0.9 billion in services, with a trade surplus of \$2.5 billion or so in Oman's favour with respect to goods, and a surplus of \$0.5 billion in services in India's favour. But a scrapping of tariffs on 98 per cent of India's exports, most of which were entering Oman at 5 per cent rates, is expected to provide a fillip to India's textiles, garments, footwear, gems and jewellery, agriculture products and electrical and engineering goods where the MSMEs are dominant. Besides, pharmaceuticals, medical devices and automobiles are expected to gain.

This notwithstanding the fact that the bilateral trade is heavily biased towards petroleum products. Petroleum products account for 35 per cent of India's exports to Oman, processed minerals another 9 per cent, while basmati rice accounts for just under 4 per cent. Similarly, petroleum products account for nearly 40 per cent of India's imports. Meanwhile, India has dropped tariffs on nearly 78 per cent of its lines, which is expected to lead to cheaper access to a few petrochemical products. Oman's opening of its doors to India's services professionals is particularly significant. Stay for contractual service suppliers has been extended from 90 days to two years, while the quota for corporate staffers employing their own staff too has been raised. Liberalised entry for medical, taxation and accountancy professionals is another major feature.

Oman's \$110 billion economy becomes one country in a patchwork of alternative markets to offset trade turbulence. In fact, India's pitch for more FTAs is also perhaps motivated by the need to secure alternative destinations for its services exports, particularly when they involve movement of professionals — given the rise in anti-immigration sentiment across most developed economies. The outreach to Jordan and Ethiopia too should be seen as part of this larger plan to carve out or consolidate regions of influence.

POCKET



RAJASEKHAR VK

Nearly a decade after the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code ushered in a new era of creditor rights and time-bound resolution, it is time to reassess the institutional machinery that sustains it. The Code reshaped commercial expectations, influenced lending behaviour, and created a structured pathway for resolving financial distress. Yet the effectiveness of any legal framework ultimately depends on the quality and capacity of the forum that applies it. It is in this context that the present structure of the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) warrants closer examination.

The NCLT was originally conceived as an adjudicatory body for disputes under the Companies Act, 2013. However, within six months, it was decided as a matter of policy to make the NCLT the adjudicatory body for corporate insolvency under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC). Over time, the sheer volume and complexity of these two jurisdictions have resulted in an imbalance in the present arrangement. Matters that require speed jostle with those that require detailed judicial engagement. The strains of this dual mandate have reached a point where reconsideration is necessary.

The NCLT handles everything from corporate resolution to oppression and mismanagement, capital reduction, and mergers. The result has been unsurprising: heavy backlogs, overlapping jurisdictions, and delays that impair rather than enable the objectives of both statutes. Company law, by contrast, involves corporate governance disputes, shareholder remedies, questions of fairness, valuation, and capital structure. These require sustained attention and cannot be compressed into the timelines the Code prescribes. Insolvency is not just another species of company law.

Data from the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Board of India's Q2 2025-26 Newsletter underscores this. The average time from commencement to approval of a resolution plan now stands at 821 days, and even after removing excluded periods, the timeline remains 688 days. Of the 1,898 ongoing CIRPs, 78 per cent have crossed the statutory 270-day limit, and nearly 61 per cent have exceeded two years. These numbers reveal an organisational inability to meet the Code's foundational requirement of timeliness. A Tribunal obliged to divide its attention between insolvency and company law is ill-equipped to deliver the pace the Code assumes.

India needs a National Insolvency Tribunal

RECALIBRATE. The growing mismatch between the NCLT's dual mandate and the Code's demand for speed makes a National Insolvency Tribunal a necessity

The recent report of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance reviewing the working of the Code acknowledges many of these concerns. It notes persistent delays before the NCLT and NCLAT, highlights shortages of members and benches, and recommends tighter timelines and capacity augmentation within the existing framework. While these are necessary and pragmatic interventions, the report nevertheless proceeds on an implicit assumption that the present adjudicatory architecture is itself settled, and that delay is primarily a problem of resources and process.

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN
What remains unaddressed is the more fundamental question of institutional design: whether a time-sensitive insolvency regime can continue to share a common forum with slower-moving company law disputes without impairing the objectives of either. It is in that context that the case for a dedicated National Insolvency Tribunal must now be examined. The IBC was drafted with speed, certainty, and consistency as its animating principles. For these objectives to hold, adjudication must be swift and specialised. Prolonged delays affect value, influence creditor recoveries, and put the very purpose of the Code at risk. The Tribunal as at present constituted has struggled to meet the turnaround times necessary to preserve enterprise value.

A dedicated National Insolvency Tribunal would address this basic flaw. Its benches would focus exclusively on insolvency and bankruptcy matters, allowing specialised expertise to develop and stabilising jurisprudence. Comparable jurisdictions demonstrate the value of such specialisation. The United States Bankruptcy Courts illustrate how a dedicated judicial ecosystem improves consistency and outcomes. A forum conceived solely for insolvency is better placed to preserve enterprise value and deliver on the Code's promise of predictability.

A National Insolvency Tribunal would create a more efficient, consistent, and predictable insolvency ecosystem. Creditors would have clearer expectations, companies in distress would undergo restructuring within a transparent and expedited framework, and the insolvency market would respond positively to a system where predictable timelines are normative. The Code's effectiveness depends on speed. An adjudicatory body devoted entirely to insolvency is a necessity and not an embellishment.

Creating such an Insolvency Tribunal inevitably raises the question of the destination of company law matters. Company law matters, especially oppression and mismanagement proceedings, involve detailed factual examination and the shaping of doctrine. These cases are too intricate to be hurried and too complex to be relegated to the margins. Transferring them to forums equipped for sustained commercial adjudication ensures better outcomes and frees the insolvency ecosystem from avoidable congestion.

TRANSFER TO COURTS
Fortunately, India already has suitable institutional pathways. These matters can be transferred to the commercial divisions of the High Courts, which

adjudicate high-value disputes under structured timelines. This would reduce the pressure on the NCLT and ensure that company law disputes receive the judicial time they require.

Transitioning to such a regime requires amendments to sections 408 to 434 of the Companies Act and corresponding rule changes. None of these steps is unprecedented. India managed the shift from the Company Law Board and the High Courts to the NCLT in 2016 through a phased transition that avoided disruption. A similar approach can be adopted here.

The case for reform is, in many respects, ineluctable. When an adjudicatory forum is given responsibilities that pull in divergent directions, it becomes difficult to meet the demands of either. A clear restructuring of jurisdiction avoids strain on the institution and restores clarity of role. Allowing matters to continue in their present state risks consigning the Code to the category of a great law hobbled by poor execution.

The statutory framework remains coherent and sound; the challenge lies in aligning the adjudicatory system with the demands of the framework. If India adopts the reforms necessary to create a dedicated Tribunal, the insolvency ecosystem will be positioned to achieve comprehensive improvement in terms of efficiency and consistency.

By recalibrating the Tribunal system now, India moves closer to ensuring that its insolvency framework delivers what it was designed to achieve. The case for reform is strong. The benefits are clear. A National Insolvency Tribunal is the next logical step in India's insolvency evolution. The Q2 2025-26 data is not just a warning; it is the final proof. The moment for such recalibration is now.

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

How to interpret IPO booms

IPOs do not crash markets, but they provide fairly reliable signals that a cycle is maturing

Puneet Gupta
Siddharth Shekhar Singh

India is in the middle of an extraordinary IPO wave. By the first half of 2025, India had already recorded more than 60-65 mainboard IPOs, raising in excess of ₹80,000 crore. The momentum extends beyond sheer volume. The country has seen an unusual concentration of marquee listings — Hyundai Motor India, Pine Labs, Groww, WeWork India, and Lenskart, among others — all choosing to go public within a relatively tight window. Large, well-known companies typically come to market when valuations are buoyant and investor appetite is strong. In most cycles, such clustering of prestige issues tends to occur late, when confidence and capital are both plentiful.

This dynamic raises an important strategic question for investors, boards, founders, and policymakers: are IPO booms signs of economic strength, or are they symptoms of a late-cycle market? Global financial history offers a consistent answer. IPO waves rarely occur in the middle of sober, fairly valued markets. They emerge when liquidity is abundant, valuations are stretched, and risk appetite is elevated. IPO markets, in that sense, have long served as reliable late-cycle indicators of sentiment rather than signals of durable fundamental strength.

The US provides a historical lens. The dot-com boom of 1999-2000 saw spectacularly high IPO issuance and massive first-day listing gains. That frenzy crested in March 2000, just before the NASDAQ entered a multi-year decline. More recently, 2021 became the largest global IPO year ever recorded, with more than 2,000 IPOs raising around \$594 billion. The US market alone accounted for nearly 400 IPOs raising \$142 billion, its highest level since the bubble era. When inflation surged and liquidity tightened in 2022, US IPO proceeds fell by more than 90 per cent, collapsing to roughly \$7-8 billion, and speculative growth sectors suffered severe corrections. The pattern was not accidental. It reflected a long-observed reality: companies prefer to list when markets are at their most optimistic, not at their most reasonable.

DISTINCTIVE CYCLE
India's own IPO cycles echo this rhythm. The exuberant issuance of 2007 was followed by a dramatic contraction during the 2008 global financial crisis. The active cycle of 2017-18 preceded significant corrections in mid- and small-cap valuations. In 2021, India joined the global IPO surge with richly priced tech and internet listings, many of which now trade well below their issue price as liquidity has normalised. Academic literature supports this pattern, showing that IPO waves typically coincide with periods of high

trailing returns, elevated sentiment, and peak valuations. IPOs do not crash markets, but they reliably signal that a cycle is maturing.

What makes the current cycle distinctive is the divergence between India and the rest of the world. Global IPO markets remain subdued. In 2025, the US had roughly 190 IPOs raising about \$35-36 billion — a recovery from the softness of 2022-23 but far from euphoric. Europe and China remain cautious. India, by contrast, continues to operate at near-record velocities in both count and capital raised. Several structural factors explain this resilience: strong domestic SIP inflows, high retail participation, steady GDP growth, and a rapidly formalising economy that is expanding the universe of IPO-ready firms. Additionally, unlike the tech-heavy 2021 class, many of India's recent issuers are profitable industrial, financial, and services companies with tangible cash flows.

Yet signs of froth are visible beneath



IPO WAVES. Emerge when liquidity is abundant, risk appetite is elevated

the surface. SME and small-cap IPO segments — which contribute heavily to India's headline issuance numbers — have seen aggressive valuations, thin floats, and momentum-driven over-subscriptions. Historically, such pockets have acted as early-warning indicators of overheated sentiment. Meanwhile, India's major indices have often been range-bound even as the primary market has run hot. This combination, where a euphoric primary market sits atop a fatigued secondary market, has been observed in past late-cycle environments in both India and the US.

Does the present surge signal an impending correction? The most realistic interpretation is more nuanced. The 2024-25 IPO cohort is likely to produce mixed or subdued forward returns, particularly among aggressively priced small-cap or concept-driven companies. Broader indices may not experience a dramatic crash, but they could face valuation compression, sideways consolidation, or intermittent corrections as global liquidity conditions evolve. A two-speed market appears plausible, where high-quality large caps continue to compound while richly valued recent IPOs re-rate downward over the next one to three years.

Gupta is an adjunct professor, IMT Ghaziabad, and Singh is an associate professor of marketing, Indian School of Business. Views are personal

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

Women in leadership roles

Apropos 'Indian women rank high in AI skills globally, but top roles held by men' (December 22), the major hurdles on the path of skilled women to the senior management roles are institutional as well as cultural. In spite of significant increase of the women at the entry level to about 40 per cent, their progress to the managerial position steeply falls to less than 25 per cent and at the senior levels, their presence drastically plummets to 1-8 per cent. It is time companies adopt broader thinking, relinquish patriarchal

notions, provide adequate opportunities for advancement of skilled women, adopt outcome-based evaluations and assign managerial and leadership positions, without succumbing to any kind of biases, to leverage the potential of their women employees and make rapid strides in business growth.

Kosaraju Chandramouli

Hyderabad

Democracy and growth

NK Singh, Chairman of the 15th Finance Commission, has observed

that 'Democracy and development are compatible' (December 22). But the fact that inequalities of income and wealth are widening in India suggests that democracy suits the privileged classes more than the common man. What we want here is growth with justice. It is not happening, sadly.

S Ramakrishnasayee

Chennai

Insurance cover

Apropos 'Not enough cover' (December 22), the editorial rightly cautions against viewing higher FDI

limits as a cure-all for India's insurance gaps. Legal consolidation and stronger regulatory powers are welcome steps, but capital alone cannot fix weak demand, uneven pricing, and fragile trust among policyholders. Life insurance remains largely a savings product, while general insurance struggles with mispriced risk and patchy claims experience. These structural issues explain why earlier FDI relaxations drew only modest foreign interest. Global insurers will look beyond ownership caps to see whether

products are transparent, underwriting is data-driven, and pricing reflects risk rather than regulation. Equally important is a regulator willing to use its expanded authority consistently to protect consumers and enforce discipline. The real task, therefore, is to align incentives across insurers, agents, and customers. Gradual tariff reform, better data use, and clearer consumer outcomes would make the sector genuinely investible.

A Mylsami
Coimbatore

Defiant but careful

Trump stuck to the script in his special address

Sridhar Krishnaswami

Too many in America there was nothing out of the ordinary in 18-minute special address to the nation by President Donald Trump — all about what his administration has so spectacularly done in the last 11 months and a continuing rant on what he had inherited from President Joe Biden.

"One year ago, our country was dead. We were absolutely dead. Our country was ready to fail. Totally fail", the President said going on to speak of all the things that have been done to make America "the hottest country in the world". But aides in the White House must have heaved a sigh of relief when the whole thing was over. At least for once the Commander-in-Chief did not say "the hell with the teleprompter" and stayed with the prepared script.

The fact checkers were quick to point out the vast differences between what the President had said and the realities in place especially as it pertained to the economy on inflation and prices of essentials including price of gas at the pumps.

In fact statistics show that only four states in America have the average price of a gallon of gas at \$2.50 and that the national average was at \$2.90 a gallon, not below \$2 per gallon as claimed by the President. But to Trump it was all the fault of Biden and his team who were on the side of career criminals, corporate lobbyists and terrorists. "They flooded your cities and towns with illegal aliens", was the refrain.

In all the finger pointing on Wednesday night, Trump was also quite careful in staying with the script and not wandering off as he normally does on campaign trials. And one area that many of his advisors hoped he would not get strayed into but one that would have been gleefully welcomed by Democrats was any discussion of affordability.

AFFORDABILITY 'CON'
Picked up as a theme during the course of his 2024 election campaign and flagging it at every available opportunity, a few weeks ago Trump contemptuously spoke of affordability as a Democratic scam, con job and a hoax. Suddenly a realization in the President's camp that they could have wandered into a political minefield that would prove costly in the Mid Terms of November 2026.

The Wednesday prime time



TRUMP. Rankings plummet REUTERS

address has not in any way diminished the perception of Americans on who to blame for the current economic situation. The approval rating for Trump is at an all time low of 36 per cent; and a latest Quinnipiac University poll shows 57 per cent holding the President more responsible for the current state of the economy and 34 per cent pinning it on Biden.

REPUBLICAN PUSH BACK

The recent electoral setbacks in New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Georgia aside, moderate Republicans have shown a willingness to break away and side with Democrats on issues like the Epstein Files and Obamacare. And this is not to forget Republicans in red states like Indiana refusing to cave into demands of White House and agreeing to re-drawing districts ahead of the November 2026 elections.

For a person who is deeply interested in foreign policy, Trump stayed away except for a brief mention of brokering peace by settling "eight wars in ten months" or that the Biden administration had "caused war". There was no discussion of Venezuela either where the administration is facing domestic heat with 63 per cent in a recent survey saying they are against any military action against Caracas. And now Washington is upping the ante saying that President Nicolas Maduro must return all the oil and land taken from the United States, whatever this means!

To all those wondering what the historic occasion was for Trump to hit the air waves, there are strategists like David Axelrod reminding the current occupant of the White House to follow the dictum "The Buck Stops Here" as opposed to the Buck Stops There!

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



MACROSCAN. CP CHANDRASHEKHAR, JAYATI GHOSH

Asset price inflation has never worried analysts and policymakers as much as inflation in the prices of goods and services. And among assets, inflation in the price of gold has been the least disconcerting because of the faith that its prices reflect some notion of intrinsic value. But with gold prices denominated in dollars having risen by around 60 per cent during 2025, and more than doubled over the last two years, there are some signs of discomfort.

While a part of this rise reflects the depreciation of the dollar in recent times, the inflation in gold prices denominated in euros was also at a high of more than 40 per cent in 2025 and above 90 per cent over the last two years (Chart 1). The Bank of International Settlements (BIS) has cautioned that this is reflective of intensified speculation in asset markets in general and that can unwind and deliver investor losses with damaging external effects.

Gold price inflation is by no means new. Under the Bretton Woods arrangement that linked the dollar to gold (\$35 per troy ounce) and other currencies to the dollar, inflation in the dollar price of gold as well as its price in many other currencies was ruled out. That changed in 1971 when the US under President Nixon broke the link between the dollar and gold fearing excess demand for converting the greenback into the yellow metal. Once gold had formally stopped being the anchor for global currency values, inflation in its price denominated in those currencies was a possibility.

In principle such inflation could be significant since the supply of gold is constrained by limited reserves and the difficulty of extracting it in pure form, while the demand for it was elastic since it is the preferred store of value asset. The metal did not erode with age and was seen as being a relatively liquid asset. However, there were factors that tempered demand. To start with, crucial among the sources of demand for the metal were central banks that held their reserves partly in gold, besides in other safe and liquid assets like US Treasuries. At the end of 2024, close to a fifth (17 per cent) of the global stocks of gold were being held by central banks (Chart 2).

CENTRAL BANK HOLDINGS

In general, central banks do not sharply raise reserves or change the structure of their portfolios. It also helped that, despite the end of the Bretton Woods arrangement and the deficits that the US began recording in the current account of its balance of payments, the dollar continued to hold ground as the world's principal reserve currency. That made dollar denominated financial instruments safe assets and dampedened safe-haven demand for gold.

Second, even though around two-thirds of gold stocks are held by private sources (individuals and private institutions), both as a store of value and a hedge against inflation and uncertainty, increases in such demand was limited by the difficulty and cost of storing the yellow metal. In the event, despite the limits on raising supply, demand too was not completely elastic, reining in explosive increases in the price of the metal.

However, in the post-World War II era, ever since the end of the Bretton Woods agreement, there have been periods when gold has been a go-to asset for central banks and wealth holders looking for a safe investment of their reserves or surpluses.

Demand for gold rises in times of

The growing popularity of gold-backed ETFs among retail investors and gold being used as a backing by the issuers of stablecoins are the likely factors behind the gold price spike

Gold: Another fatal financial attraction?

Financial system shifts have made it easier for retail investors to speculate in gold markets. That possibly explains the recent sharp spike in gold prices

CHART 1

Rising gold

Gold prices in USD and Euro (Units per troy ounce)

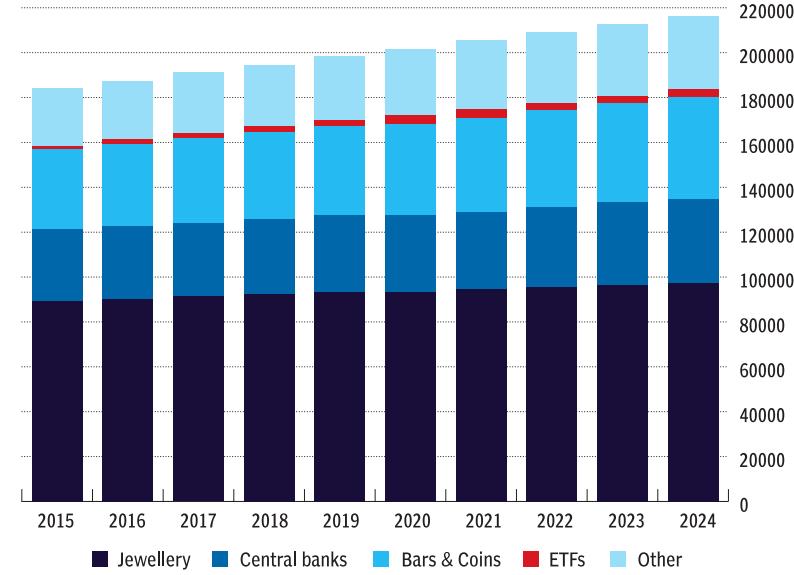


Source: World Gold Council

CHART 2

Gold holdings

Trends in the above-ground stocks (tonnes)

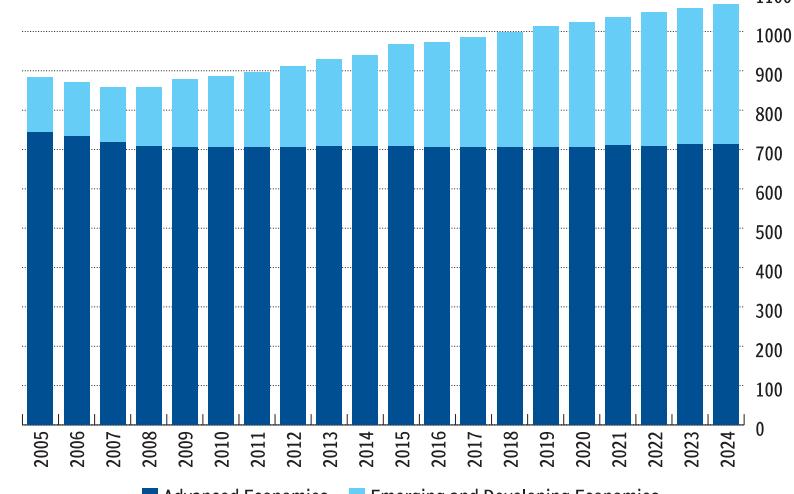


Source: World Gold Council

CHART 3

Secular trend

Gold in official reserve assets by country grouping (million troy ounces)



Source: IMF

banks. The holdings were "roughly equal" to those of the central banks in Korea, Hungary and Greece. Tether's purchases of gold were estimated at 2 per cent of global demand and 12 per cent of that of central banks in the third quarter of 2025. That would again at the margin alter the demand-supply balance and therefore price of gold.

But this is not the only form of integration of gold and financial assets. The other is the effort of stablecoin issuers to use gold as a backing for their stablecoin assets. According to figures from Jefferies quoted by the *Financial Times*, at the end of September 2025, stablecoin issuer Tether, with 116 tonnes of gold reserves, was the second largest holder of gold outside of central

tend to rise for all the conventional reasons like increased uncertainty or shifts in the portfolio choices of central banks, retail investors expecting the price rise to continue could rush to gold in the expectation that prices would only continue to rise.

That is what has happened recently and underlies the spike in prices. But that makes gold price spikes more speculative than they used to be, creating the possibility of a sharp downturn. The BIS has a point.

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 23, 2005

WB, Rajasthan, HP allow 7 cos to choose power distributor

Gujarat Ambuja's Himachal Pradesh unit, Aditya Cements' and Hindustan Zinc's Rajasthan units and West Bengal-based Indal Ltd are among the first set of consumers in the country to have been permitted to select the power utility of their choice.

StanChart acquires Rs 1,300-cr NPAs from ICICI Bank

Standard Chartered Bank announced on Thursday that it has acquired bad loans to the tune of Rs 1,300 crore from ICICI Bank. The acquisition of this non performing loan portfolio, carried out by Standard Chartered Bank's Alternate Investment Group, is one of the largest distressed asset transactions ever carried out in India. It is also the biggest for Standard Chartered Bank, a spokesperson for the bank said.

Govt committed to sugar decontrol: Pawar

The Government is committed to decontrolling the sugar sector at the right time, according to the Union Minister of Agriculture, Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, Mr Sharad Pawar. However, he did not give a timeframe for the process.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2851

EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Marxist (9)
- 05. Animal foot (3)
- 07. Florence's river (4)
- 08. Material for burning (8)
- 10. Soccer (8)
- 11. Measure, wingtip to wingtip (4)
- 13. Made a quick run (6)
- 15. Sacred beetle in Egypt (6)
- 18. Blackleg (4)
- 19. Not forthcoming (8)
- 22. With love interest (8)
- 23. Speed event (4)
- 24. Conifer (3)
- 25. Podded vegetable (5,4)

DOWN

- 01. Bantered (7)
- 02. Tropical fruit (5)
- 03. Frozen water drips (6)
- 04. Shoe stiffener (4)
- 05. Succeed materially (7)
- 06. Get broader (5)
- 09. Ecclesiastical building (5)
- 12. Pungent, bitter (5)
- 14. Speech impediment (7)
- 16. In position, interposed (7)
- 17. Fine-wooled Spanish sheep (6)
- 18. Short line ending letter-stroke (5)
- 20. Dodge (5)
- 21. Cobbler, shoemaker (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 01. In cost, Mum may find it different if red (9)
- 05. Cat's legend for a light breeze? (3)
- 07. It runs in Italy in a particular notorious setting (4)
- 08. Sack-trees may be put to the flame (8)
- 10. Association of infantry going to a dance (8)
- 11. Greatest width of aircraft may enable one to put it across (4)
- 13. Hurried out a jolly old expletive (6)
- 15. Academician accepted by 18 Ac was sacred in Egypt (6)
- 18. One blacked over hurt (4)
- 19. Not being volatile, it makes comeback in the not-long-ago (8)
- 22. Italian capital's spasmodic twitch may be fictitious (8)
- 23. Swift pursuit of ginger rootstock (4)
- 24. A cone producer to start 8 (3)
- 25. Wide between the ears? This is vegetable! (5,4)

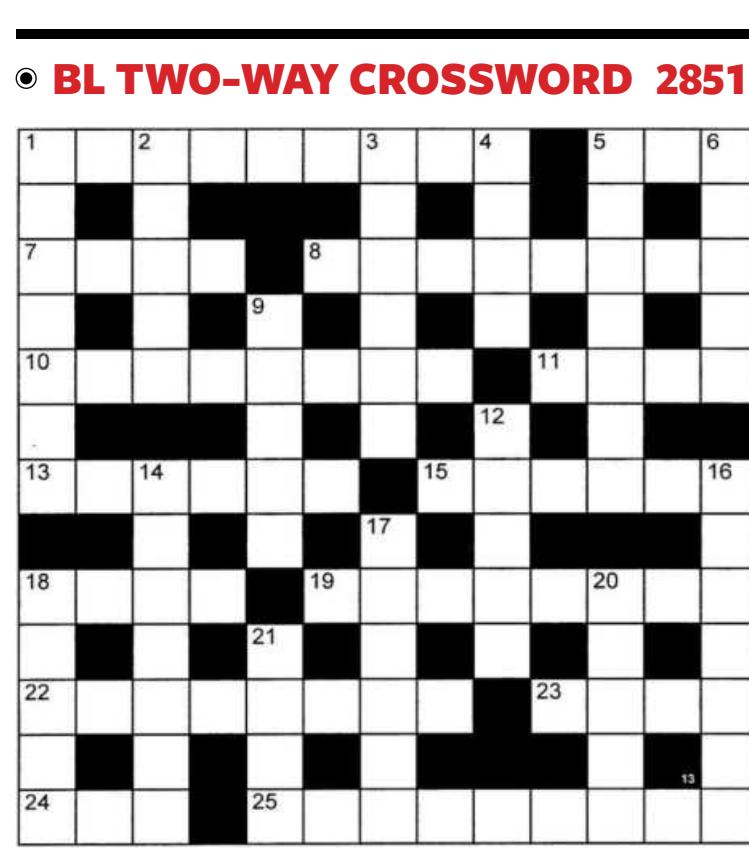
DOWN

- 01. Was bantering corny, or husky? (7)
- 02. Person getting the green light where fruit is concerned (5)
- 03. Arrested motion (downward) seen when it's freezing (6)
- 04. Such as 24 may show one's pedigree (4)
- 05. Do well to be a traveller going back after professionals (7)
- 06. West One haunt of vice will not be so constricting (5)
- 09. Baby upset about the East in which monks are concerned (5)
- 12. It is pungent right in the middle of LSD (5)
- 14. One cannot easily say it, so to speak (7)
- 16. With one either side of beet, new variety is found (7)
- 17. Sheep in more mobile form (6)
- 18. A bit of a stroke where type-designer is concerned (5)
- 20. Wartime nurse, east first and last, might shirk duty (5)
- 21. The shoemaker is a townsman of Cambridge (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2850

ACROSS 1. Candle 4. Ambles 9. Arrowed 10. Thumb 11. Glow 12. Liar 13. Hot 15. Show 16. Hang 19. Row 21. Bolt 22. Asti 24. Orion 25. Control 26. Speedy 27. Sticky

DOWN 1. Changing rooms 2. Narrows 3. Lawn 5. Material 6. Laugh 7. Substantially 8. Admit 14. Combined 17. Gastric 18. Place 20. Whine 23. Knit





OUR VIEW



India can't expect to go into nuclear overdrive

Conditions have been created for a ramp-up of nuclear energy. While it can help clean up the country's electricity grid, government policy will need to go by a complex cost calculus

With the passage of a law that not only opens the door for private participation in India's nuclear power industry but also promotes it, the government hopes to meet its target of 100GW in generation capacity by 2047. Currently, it accounts for a mere 2% of our grid capacity, and given India's demand projection for 2047 and the electricity required to meet it, that goal implies a share of 5% by then. Today's tiny share is explainable. Nuclear plants have a notoriously long gestation period before they can supply power. They often face resistance on the basis of safety concerns, with accidents such as Chernobyl and Fukushima embedded in public memory. And India's indigenous technology has made little progress, with the second of our three-stage programme yet to fructify before it can transition to the use of thorium, which is easier to find in the country than the right kind of uranium.

Interest in nuclear power has seen a global revival for the role it could play in climate action. Plants that house nuclear reactors produce carbon-free electricity around the clock, unlike solar and wind projects that are subject to the vagaries of weather. A reactor design rethink spurred by the power-guzzling needs of AI—aided by investments from Big Tech firms to meet their climate goals—has resulted in the development of small modular reactors (SMRs), which claim to overcome the legacy drawbacks of nuclear plants. Big reactors, despite their limitations, are also back in vogue for the same reason. Even though India's 2047 target represents a modest share of total power capacity, the volume of electricity would be significant; our per capita consumption is currently half the

world average and we aspire to be a developed nation by then. This larger goal demands that electricity tariffs remain low enough for our industry to compete globally. This requires us to get the power sector's cost calculus right. While nuclear energy offers large volumes of reliable green supply, given the pace at which battery storage costs are dropping, solar panels and wind turbines backed by batteries are likely to be more cost competitive. Fiscal incentives could help nuclear power get more competitive, provided we also develop the 'muscle memory' of project rollouts that can compress both construction costs and timelines as we go along to enable lower tariffs. Solar tariffs, for example, have fallen sharply over the last decade-and-a-half, thanks to the large-scale production of key parts in China. Unlike wind and power, reactors use nuclear fuel and thus have variable costs beyond the money invested in setting up plants, but they take up significantly less land that could otherwise be used for food cultivation. On the other hand, the safe storage of spent fuel can be costly too. All these factors will have to be taken into account.

Broadly, the government needs to undertake resource-adequacy mapping across sectors for the deployment of an optimal energy policy. Trade-offs must be borne in mind. For example, our green ambitions should not be at the expense of the economy. We need to count on efficiency gains, carbon markets and climate finance from the rich world. The Centre must also develop the institutional capacity needed to oversee and manage the growth of nuclear energy. Globally, SMRs have over 80 designs, but just about four plants have been set up so far, and that too, only recently. All considered, we can't expect to go into nuclear overdrive.

DANI RODRIK



is a professor of international political economy at Harvard Kennedy School, and the author of 'Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy'.

The post-neoliberal consensus is here, but don't look for it in US President Donald Trump's policies. After a decade of backlash, it is time to accept not only that neoliberalism is dead, but also that a new consensus is taking its place. Remarkably, significant segments of the left and the right in America have come to agree on the broad outlines of economic policy. Discussions in universities and think-tanks are driven today by a common understanding that departs significantly from the neoliberal orthodoxy of the last 50 years.

The first element of the new consensus is a recognition that the concentration of economic power has become excessive. The concern is expressed in different forms by different groups. Some complain directly about inequality in income and wealth and its corrosive effects on politics. Others worry about market power and the adverse implications for competition. For yet others, the key problem is financialization and the distortion of economic and social priorities that

it produces. The remedies on offer also vary, from wealth taxes to vigorous antitrust enforcement to campaign-finance reform. But the desire to curb the economic and political power of corporate, tech and financial elites is widespread, uniting progressive supporters of US Senator Bernie Sanders with populists like the podcast host and former Trump advisor Steve Bannon.

The second element of the new consensus is the importance of restoring dignity to people and regions that neoliberalism left behind. Good jobs are essential to this agenda. Jobs are not just a means of providing income. They are also a source of identity and social recognition. Good jobs are what underpin a robust middle class, which is the foundation of social cohesion and a sustainable democracy.

Dislocation is inevitable in a world of economic change. Until the 1990s, plenty of safeguards—job protections, trade restrictions, price controls and regulations that kept finance in check—limited the impact on workers and communities. For neoliberals, these safeguards were inefficiencies that had to be removed. They overlooked the economic and social distress that job losses arising from technological change, globalization or economic liberalization would produce.

The Shanti Act opens a nuclear pathway: Let's proceed with care

It can make nuclear energy integral to India's climate plans if we get the executional aspects right



AMIT KAPUR & SUGANDHA SOMANI

are partners, JSA Advocates & Solicitors.

The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Technology for India (Shanti) Act of 2025 is a watershed moment in making nuclear power part of our decarbonization strategy. It paves the way to achieve a target of 100GW of nuclear energy capacity by 2047 by removing hurdles that constrained investment and kept the sector technologically insular. How much the move helps will depend on how well the Act is implemented, from framing and enforcing effective rules through capable and empowered institutions to the balance achieved between the sector's growth and concerns of safety and environmental protection.

The Act heralds three transformative shifts. *First*, it opens the door for private sector participation in nuclear power generation, equipment manufacturing and fuel-cycle services. *Second*, it attempts to rationalize India's nuclear liability regime that deterred foreign suppliers and investors. *Third*, it makes space for advanced nuclear technologies, such as modular reactors (SMRs) and next-generation reactors.

So far, nuclear power has been the preserve of public sector entities like Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL). Rooted in national security considerations, this policy constrained India's access to capital and innovation. Now private players would be able to forge partnerships, form joint ventures

and play manufacturing roles, while the state retains control over sensitive aspects of the fuel cycle. This calibrated liberalization acknowledges that public finance alone cannot support the scale of nuclear capacity required for a low-carbon economy. From a private investor's perspective, this legislative change is welcome but not sufficient. Nuclear projects are capital-intensive with long gestation periods. Their viability depends on predictable tariffs, long-term power purchase agreements and the assurance of contract enforcement. Subordinate legislation on pricing mechanisms, offtake guarantees and dispute resolution would help attract private investment. An important concern would be how robust the tariff determination mechanism is.

A politically sensitive aim was to undo the disproportionate and open-ended deterrence introduced by the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act of 2010, which allowed plant operators to sue suppliers over mishaps. The new law seeks to rationalize supplier exposure with the objective of aligning India's liability regime more closely with global practices while preserving safeguards and the rights of victims. This is a delicate balancing act, as perceptions of diluted accountability could provoke public resistance. The government needs to communicate clearly how the revised framework would hold operators accountable and how it is designed to protect citizens and ensure prompt compensation through insurance pools and other mechanisms.

The Act recognizes technologies like SMRs, which promise lower upfront costs, enhanced safety features and flexible deployment. Prospects of SMR deployment near load centres (like industrial clusters) open up exciting possibilities for integrating nuclear power with our industrial decarbonization agenda. Indigenous technology efforts must be kept up too.

SMR optimism must be tempered by the fact that these reactors are still new.

Regulatory capacity, supply chains and human resource skills will need strengthening for SMR deployment. Our nuclear regulatory framework was designed for large reactors operated by a single public entity. A future involving multiple reactor designs and private operators will require us to not just empower the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), but ensure its autonomy. It must have the resources it needs to oversee a far more complex and diversified nuclear ecosystem.

Without strengthening the AERB, the whole mission to multiply our nuclear generation capacity could come apart.

From a climate policy perspective, nuclear energy offers low-carbon power that can complement intermittent renewables and strengthen grid stability. The Act takes India's net-zero goal into view, but nuclear energy would benefit from clearer integration with broader power sector reforms. For nuclear reactors to be treated as climate infrastructure, they must fit clearly into climate finance frameworks, so that projects can compete for patient capital and green funding.

Finally, we cannot overlook the social dimension of nuclear energy. Many projects in India have faced resistance on account of perceived opacity. International experience suggests that early community engagement, safety disclosures and benefit sharing are essential for popular acceptance. These principles should inform regulation. Perhaps an office of public advocacy could disseminate information, address apprehensions and take up credible concerns with policymakers and regulators. This would go a long way in enlisting public support for nuclear projects.

The Act's success in making nuclear power integral to India's clean-energy transition will depend on investment and innovation. But execution—regulatory certainty, contractual clarity and institutional capacity—will be key. It can prove transformative if what's on paper unfolds well on the ground.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

We must not let ourselves be swept off our feet in horror at the danger of nuclear power.

Nuclear power is not infinitely dangerous. It's just dangerous, much as coal mines, petrol repositories, fossil-fuel burning and wind turbines are dangerous.

DAVID J. C. MACKAY

THEIR VIEW

A post-neoliberal consensus seems to have crystallized

DANI RODRIK



is a professor of international political economy at Harvard Kennedy School, and the author of 'Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World Economy'.

The post-neoliberal consensus is here, but don't look for it in US President Donald Trump's policies. After a decade of backlash, it is time to accept not only that neoliberalism is dead, but also that a new consensus is taking its place. Remarkably, significant segments of the left and the right in America have come to agree on the broad outlines of economic policy. Discussions in universities and think-tanks are driven today by a common understanding that departs significantly from the neoliberal orthodoxy of the last 50 years.

The first element of the new consensus is a recognition that the concentration of economic power has become excessive. The concern is expressed in different forms by different groups. Some complain directly about inequality in income and wealth and its corrosive effects on politics. Others worry about market power and the adverse implications for competition. For yet others, the key problem is financialization and the distortion of economic and social priorities that

it produces. The remedies on offer also vary, from wealth taxes to vigorous antitrust enforcement to campaign-finance reform. But the desire to curb the economic and political power of corporate, tech and financial elites is widespread, uniting progressive supporters of US Senator Bernie Sanders with populists like the podcast host and former Trump advisor Steve Bannon.

The second element of the new consensus is the importance of restoring dignity to people and regions that neoliberalism left behind. Good jobs are essential to this agenda. Jobs are not just a means of providing income. They are also a source of identity and social recognition. Good jobs are what underpin a robust middle class, which is the foundation of social cohesion and a sustainable democracy.

Dislocation is inevitable in a world of economic change. Until the 1990s, plenty of safeguards—job protections, trade restrictions, price controls and regulations that kept finance in check—limited the impact on workers and communities. For neoliberals, these safeguards were inefficiencies that had to be removed. They overlooked the economic and social distress that job losses arising from technological change, globalization or economic liberalization would produce.

The third component of the emerging consensus is that government has an active role to play in shaping the economic transformation that is needed. Markets on their own cannot be trusted to produce economic resilience, national security, innovation for advanced technologies, clean energy or good jobs in distressed regions. Government must prod, twist arms and subsidize. Industrial policy has moved from the disreputable fringe of economic discussion to its very centre.

Taken together, these three tenets provide a new understanding of the goals and instruments of economic policy that is both novel and, on the whole, laudable. But the devil is always in the details. Actual outcomes will be determined by specific policies that are chosen and implemented.

Consider the good-jobs objective. Here the left and the right seem to have reached a consensus on the desirability of reshoring and reinvigorating manufacturing. Histori-

cally, the industrial labour force played a pivotal role in producing equitable, middle-class societies. But automation and other technological forces have turned manufacturing into a labour-shedding sector. Even China has been losing manufacturing employment by the millions in recent years. So, even if manufacturing investment and output is revived in the US and Europe, the impact on employment is likely to be minuscule.

Whether we like it or not, the future of employment in services—care, retail, hospitality, logistics, the gig economy and so on. Any approach to good jobs that does not focus on organizational and technological innovations in these services will necessarily

disappoint. There are of course other important reasons for supporting manufacturing. Advanced manufacturing, along with the digital economy, plays an outsize role in innovation and national security. It makes sense to deploy industrial policies that focus

on these economic activities, in addition to policies that focus on labour-absorbing services. But here, too, the 'how' matters as much as the 'what'.

Caveats apply to industrial policies as well. These can go badly wrong when they foster corruption or serve narrow corporate interests. Unfortunately, Trump's approach provides little comfort on this score. The US president's trade policies and dealings with tech companies have been erratic, transactional and devoid of a coherent long-term strategy that would serve the public interest.

The post-neoliberal tenets of economic policy provide us with a broad checklist for evaluating actual agendas—and Trump's fails miserably. It pays lip service to good jobs and industrial policy in the service of economic transformation, while fostering greater concentration of wealth and power. A model of crony state capitalism that tries to resuscitate a long-dead industrial economy is hardly an antidote to neoliberalism.

The best that can be said of Trump's approach to the economy is that it is an experimental phase in the post-neoliberal transition. The good news is that future policymakers will not have to look far for new guiding principles. The new consensus is already here.

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THEIR VIEW

Cooperatives can redefine their future by embracing technology

India's collective enterprises could serve as a grassroots growth engine for the economy by effecting digital transformations



S. MAHENDRA DEV & K. K. TRIPATHY
are, respectively, chairman and joint secretary, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister.

India has about 850,000 cooperatives with over 290 million members relying on these collective enterprises for their livelihood. Cooperatives are pillars of India's grassroots economy. Yet, in a rapidly evolving world, many struggle to stay relevant due to resource constraints, operational inefficiencies and limited technology adoption. The Prime Minister's clarion call for 'Sahkar se Samridhhi'—prosperity through cooperation—can become a reality only when cooperatives embrace Industry 4.0 tools that promise efficiency, transparency and sustainable growth. By aligning with the fourth Industrial Revolution, cooperatives are poised to reclaim their role as crucial contributors to inclusive economic growth.

Emerging technologies are reshaping the global marketplace. Indian cooperatives can no longer afford to lag behind. They must embrace Industry 4.0 technologies and adopt innovative business models. The task ahead is clear: they must adopt Internet-of-Things (IoT), big data and smart systems to ensure efficiency, competitiveness and sustainability. This will turn them into engines of inclusive growth as we aim for Viksit Bharat—a developed India—by 2047.

Agricultural cooperatives can use modern farm techniques to optimize production, harvest processes, storage, transportation and distribution. Cooperative culture promotes the development of supply chains that reach far and wide across a diverse ecosystem, with farmer members, staff, vendors, associates, consumers, *et al*, united by the common purpose of serving everyone's interests. With the help of trained human resources, this spirit could unite all involved in modernization efforts to remain relevant in today's highly competitive business environment.

The Industry 4.0 imperative: Cooperatives must close their technology adoption gaps. Since at least 2008, digital systems have been driving transitions across production systems, with data analytics and widespread networks linking people and processes to enhance productivity. Cooperatives need to harness the same benefits. Timely data sharing would optimize coordination across the value chain from sourcing and production management to quality control and distribution. While our multinational cooperatives in the dairy and fertilizer sectors, Amul and Iffco, have gone far ahead in adopting modern technology, the need of the hour to encourage and enable 177,000 credit and 677,000 non-credit cooperatives to do likewise.

Globally, cooperatives are embracing technology and innovation to improve their efficiency, transparency, productivity and profitability. Smart-farming cooperatives of the EU have adopted precision tools such as sensors, connected devices and data platforms to enhance yields and

reduce waste. Sweden has witnessed the rise of a robust housing cooperative movement that delivers affordable and eco-friendly urban housing.

Indonesia has redesigned its farm cooperatives to improve member service efficiency through better governance and market integration.

The tech application challenge: We already have success models for cooperatives to learn and adapt lessons from. Amul, which stands out as a global cooperative dairy brand, has adopted analytical tools and IoT solutions to automate various key functions, ranging from milk production and processing to cold-chain management, logistics and distribution.

Consumer-facing cooperatives can leverage big data and cloud platforms to gain deeper insights into customer preferences. The integration of IoT and cloud-based analytics is vital for consumer cooperatives to manage large-scale self-service system technology and point-of-sale networks. The usage of virtual reality tools is also gaining prominence as a way to enhance product demonstrations, communication, content delivery and consumer engagement.

Agrarian cooperatives in general and sugar cooperatives in particular could benefit from cloud and IoT technologies that support storing, processing and analyzing large volumes of data. On the ground, radio frequency identification and drones coordinated by artificial intelligence (AI) are emerging as key enablers of precision farming, value addition and efficient resource management. Machine learning and AI applications can support decision making for improved productivity.

Machine learning and AI applications can support decision making for improved productivity.

These are the authors' personal views.



ISTOCKPHOTO

Credit cooperatives are witnessing a digital shift as India's credit sector comes to increasingly rely on technology solutions. Big data analytics, AI and blockchain-based systems are being encouraged to strengthen creditworthiness assessments, credit management and customer relationships.

In industrial cooperatives, AI and IoT, coupled with robotic automation, are considered critical to boost productivity and profitability. New technologies also have a role in ensuring regulatory compliance and elevating customer satisfaction.

Fishery cooperatives could use analytical tools, GPS, cloud computing, machine learning and remote sensing to improve outcomes and enhance income opportunities.

Service cooperatives may find significant value in deploying cyber-physical systems, cloud computing platforms, IoT and AI to achieve greater operational efficiency through cost optimization and streamlined business processes.

Globally, cooperatives are reinventing themselves through modern technology, effective governance and active member engagement. Indian cooperatives must not only keep up, but aim to go further. To go digital effectively, they should set simple goals and follow step-by-step and flexible strategies. Industry 4.0 tools can drive efficiency and sustainability, while simple goals and flexible strategies would help cooperatives make a step-wise transition to a digital future. By embracing change, our cooperatives can register profit with purpose and help power India's journey towards Viksit Bharat.

These are the authors' personal views.

MINT CURATOR

Mexico's tariffs signal that it is prepared to build Trump's wall

Trump wanted to wall off America and Mexico seems ready to help



MIHIR SHARMA
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist.



Sheinbaum's barriers are widely seen as a concession to Trump's agenda. REUTERS

When the Mexican Senate voted last week to approve a 50% tariff rate on a swathe of countries—China, India, Brazil, South Korea, Vietnam, and Taiwan among them—politicians from President Claudia Sheinbaum's ruling Morena party pretended they did it for their own reasons. Nobody in Asia believes this is a bold declaration of economic independence, however. It's seen instead as opening a new and unexpected front in Donald Trump's trade war on the world.

The vote waived the senators' usual right to discuss amendments in committees and it passed 76-5; the opposition abstained. Officials grandly delivered the usual lines that accompany measures cutting off trade: That they would protect local industry, that revenue would increase by almost \$3 billion, that there would be more money to spend on supporting the unemployed.

But the real reason is that Sheinbaum is spooked by the deadline, six months away now, for reviewing the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The speed with which she pushed the legislation through and its timing are no coincidence: Trump said earlier this month that he might let NAFTA's successor expire or "maybe work out another deal" that ensured the US wasn't "taken advantage of." Nobody wants that of worms reopened.

About 80% of Mexico's exports cross its northern border and more than 80% of those are tariff-free under the USMCA. The country depends upon US markets for 30% or so of its output. Mexican politicians are clearly scared enough that even acts of economic self-harm, like 50% tariffs, seem worth trying.

For the countries affected by the new rates out of Mexico City, this is a sobering reminder that they have more than just the US president to deal with. Trade is a complicated, disaggregated affair, which is why we have multilateral arrangements like the World Trade Organization. For much of 2025, we could pretend that wasn't the case, with everyone scrambling to conclude their own bilateral deal with the US. But Sheinbaum shows that the trade conflicts Trump has launched are a cascading war, not some controlled confrontation.

Some will be hit particularly hard. One of the few industries in India that has carved out a successful export niche for itself is auto components. New tariffs may render them uncompetitive inputs for the giant factories along the US border serving America's insatiable appetite for cars.

But a significant proportion of Indian exports to Mexico aren't about the US at all.

It is consistently among the top three or four destinations in the world for small, fuel-efficient cars, for example. These aren't meant for Americans, but they've been hit with tariffs anyway. Sheinbaum is paying Trump protection money, but she's taking it from the pockets of Indian producers.

And from her own citizens, of course. Opposition lawmakers pointed out that official modellers had given up on trying to estimate the effects of such a drastic change to Mexican trade policy. Citigroup's economists think that this will keep domestic inflation above 4% next year. All the other downstream (and predictable) effects of tariffs will apply: loss of competitive advantage, factories that face supply crunches, retaliation in fields where you don't expect it.

And what happens if Trump decides that he doesn't care about such expensive professions of loyalty and shuts down the USMCA anyway? Mexico City will have to rebuild trade relations with the rest of the world from scratch, but capitals from Brasilia to Beijing may not be particularly warmly disposed at that point.

Many Asian countries had hoped the America-first trade policy—even if disruptive—might end up forging a united front against Chinese dominance of manufacturing. Sheinbaum's surrender shows us a different path. In this alternative world, some countries will quietly enact the US president's policies for him. The others will, perhaps with China in the lead, find a multilateral path to isolate collaborators.

Countries across Asia and beyond now know that it isn't just their relationship with the US that is threatened, but with multiple other nations as Trump tries to push everyone into his dreamworld of high tariffs. He has already asked the European Union, for example, to impose 100% tariffs on China and India. It is unlikely to agree. Some countries will raise high and unpredictable trade barriers against each other and the world, while the rest will seek security and prosperity by integrating faster and further. Sheinbaum may have picked the wrong side.

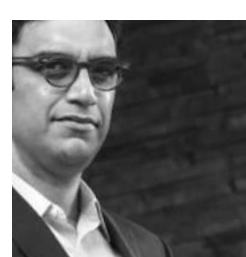
In his first term, Trump had promised to have Mexico pay for his wall. Now, in his second term, he has succeeded. So what if this new wall is one made of tariffs and not bricks?

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MY VIEW | IT MATTERS

The 2026 AI opportunity for India's IT services sector

SIDDHARTH PAI



is co-founder of Siana Capital, a venture fund manager.

In 2026, artificial intelligence (AI) won't just be something companies talk about in press releases. It will become part of how everyday work gets done. Instead of being tested in small pilot projects or used in flashy demos, AI will be built into the core of how businesses operate. People are calling this shift 'The Great Integration,' and it's already taking shape. It's not about creating new AI models, but about using the ones we already have to make real work faster, smarter and more efficient. And for Indian IT service firms, this new phase could be a huge opportunity—if they can rise to the challenge.

There are three main types of AI that will become common in workplaces. Generative AI helps create content, such as writing emails, reports or code. Predictive AI looks at data to forecast things like sales trends, inventory needs or customer behaviour. Agentic AI is a newer kind that can take a goal, like scheduling a meeting or ordering supplies, and carry out the steps to make it happen without a human guiding every

move. Each of these will start showing up in the software tools that employees use every day, helping them save time, reduce errors and make better decisions.

To make all this work, businesses will need to connect these AI tools with their existing systems. That's where services come in. Setting up AI isn't just about plugging in a chatbot. It involves linking AI to a company's databases, making sure it understands business rules, keeping it secure and checking that it gives reliable results. This is complex, behind-the-scenes work—and it's exactly what Indian IT services firms have been doing for years.

These firms have long experience tailoring technology to suit the unique ways different companies operate. They've managed large, complicated tech systems for global clients across industries. Now, as those clients try to induct AI into every part of their operations, they're turning to the same IT partners for help. Whether it's automating HR processes, upgrading supply chains or adding AI to customer service tools, Indian IT firms are in the decision-making room.

But while the opportunity is real, so are the challenges. Many Indian IT firms are big and successful, but that can make it hard for them to move quickly. AI is evolving fast and

clients want more than just help using new tools. They want a real transformation: new ways of working, smarter operations and better outcomes. To deliver that, IT firms need more than just technical skills. They need people who understand the client's industry and can design solutions that actually solve problems.

There's also a chance for Indian IT firms to grow beyond offering services. With AI, they could create their own products or tools that can be reused across different clients. Some have started building these platforms, but turning them into business success will take new thinking, long-term investment and the ability to market and scale like a product rather than a services company.

Competition is heating up. Global consulting firms are expanding their AI offerings. Big cloud companies are adding AI features to their platforms and offering support directly to clients. Startups with small teams but strong AI expertise are building niche solutions that are winning business. Indian

IT firms won't just be competing on price or scale anymore. They'll have to show that they can lead in an AI-powered world.

These firms do have strong foundations. They know how to deliver large projects across time zones and wait through 14-month request-for-proposal cycles. They have long-term client relationships and are trusted to keep systems running smoothly. While others talk about the future, Indian IT firms are used to quietly building it. They know how to take a complicated plan and turn it into working software that runs reliably.

In 2026, success will require them to go beyond just offering AI features. They must become experts in helping clients deploy AI across all operations. That means learning more about each industry, building reusable tools and partnering with startups or research labs. It would also mean hiring and training the right kind of talent. It won't be easy. Indian IT firms are good at structured, well-defined work. But AI projects often start with uncertainty. The

answers aren't always clear and the path to success might involve testing, failing and adjusting quickly. That's a big cultural shift.

These firms will need to experiment more, take smart risks and focus on results instead of just effort. They'll also have to be honest with themselves. Just renaming an automation team as an 'AI Centre of Excellence' won't fool anyone. Clients want capability, not rebranding. They're looking for partners who can think creatively, act quickly and take ownership of outcomes.

Still, if any group is equipped to take on the Great Integration, it's probably the people who once managed to upgrade a 30-year-old billing system written in Cobol without crashing the company's entire network. They may not always be flashy, but they're dependable, skilled and now at the starting line of one of the biggest technology shifts we have seen lately.

In 2026, AI will stop being something extra and become essential. The companies that know how to weave it into the way businesses really work—the messy, complex and often illogical systems that run the world—will be the ones that come out ahead. Indian IT service firms have a shot at leading that change if they're willing to evolve, invest and step out of their comfort zones.



Happening today

• EAM S JAISHANKAR will visit Sri Lanka as special envoy of the PM. This comes amid India's ongoing relief efforts in the country after Cyclone Ditwah.

• BOMBAY HIGH COURT has directed BMC Commissioner Bhushan Gagrani to personally appear and explain "inaction" in mitigating the poor air quality in Mumbai and its surrounding areas.

• A DELHI COURT is likely to deliver its verdict on a plea by Christian James Michel seeking release from custody in a CBI case related to the alleged AgustaWestland scam.

• AFTER AN 8-WICKET win over Sri Lanka Sunday, Indian women's cricket team will look to extend their dominance in the second game of the T20I series. Match starts at 7pm.

TRACK THESE AND MORE ON WWW.INDIANEXPRESS.COM

IN 2017, STATE GOVT HAD 'VEHMENTLY' OPPOSED BAIL TO THE ACCUSED

UP govt had opposed key claim of Akhlaq murder accused, now cites same to withdraw case against them

HC had in 2017 noted inconsistencies in witness statements, but did not comment on the merits of the case

Kaunain Sheriff M
New Delhi, December 22

IN ITS application to withdraw the case against the men accused of lynching Mohammad Akhlaq, the Uttar Pradesh government has made essentially the same argument that two of the accused had presented when they applied successfully for bail more than eight years ago, court records show.

The government had "veh-

emently" opposed the grant of bail to the accused at the time, the records show.

While granting bail to the accused Punit and Arun in April 2017, the Allahabad High Court put on record the key argument of the defence: that there were inconsistencies and contradictions in the statements of the main prosecution witnesses on which the prosecution had built its case.

Counsel for defence had re-



Mohd Akhlaq was killed over rumours of cow slaughter in 2015

lied in particular on the statements of Akhlaq's wife Ikraman, which were recorded on September 29, 2015 and October 13, 2015. "...In the said statement also she did not disclose the name of applicant as

assailant," the court noted in its order, referring to the argument put forward by the lawyer for Punit and Arun.

The court also recorded the argument of the defence that

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

NEW VISA PATHWAY FOR 5,000 INDIAN PROFESSIONALS

India, NZ wrap FTA talks, aim to double trade in five years

As part of deal, New Zealand commits \$20 bn investment over 15 years

Ravi Dutta Mishra & Divya A
New Delhi, December 22

AIMING TO double bilateral trade over the next five years, India and New Zealand Monday announced the conclusion of negotiations on a free trade agreement. Bilateral trade between the countries in 2024-25 was \$1.3 billion.

Officials in New Delhi said while talks have concluded, the deal is expected to be signed in 2-3 months after "legal scrubbing", a process where lawyers and trade experts from both sides finalise the agreement's text. The implementation itself could take over six months once it is passed by the New Zealand Parliament. In India, the Cabinet has already given the deal a green light.

In a post on X, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, "Completed in just nine months, this historic milestone reflects a strong political will and shared ambition to deepen economic ties between our two countries... The India-NZ partnership is going to scale newer heights. The FTA sets the stage

• India-New Zealand trade

	India's exports	Imports	Trade surplus
2024-25	\$711 mn	\$587 mn	\$123 mn
2023-24	\$538 mn	\$335 mn	\$203 mn
2022-23	\$547 mn	\$477 mn	\$70 mn
2021-22	\$487 mn	\$374 mn	\$112 mn

E EXPLAINED

Diversifying exports

AT A time when a bilateral trade agreement between India and its biggest export

QUOTA of temporary employment visa for 5,000 professionals and 1,000 work and holiday visas.

DESPITE New Zealand being one of the largest exporters of dairy products, India has kept dairy in the exclusion list.

dia's scale and growth trajectory, noting that the agreement provides New Zealand exporters improved access to a market of over 1.4 billion consumers.

Details released by the government showed that New Delhi has agreed to reduce tariffs on 95 per cent of products exported from New Zealand. Wellington would eliminate tariffs on 100 per cent of its

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

AFTER VISA OPS HALTED IN CHITTAGONG

In counter move, Bangladesh puts visa ops on hold in India



Security personnel outside the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi on Monday. TASHI TOBGYAL

Divya A
New Delhi, December 22

A DAY after Indian visa operations in Chittagong were suspended indefinitely, the Bangladesh High Commission here "temporarily suspended" consular and visa services on Monday.

PTI reported that the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Tripura had also suspended visa services.

Citing "unavoidable circumstances", a notice issued by the Bangladesh High Commission here said: "All consular and visa

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



Business as Usual

By EP UNNY



Capital Meet

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, Deputy CM Samrat Choudhary and Union Minister Rajiv Ranjan Singh in New Delhi on Monday. Earlier, the Bihar CM, who arrived in the Capital Sunday for a two-day visit, met Union Home Minister Amit Shah. PTI REPORT, PAGE 8

91 NOTICES FLAGGING OVER 1,100 URLs IN 20 MONTHS

'Disturbing public order' accounts for 50% of takedown notices to X

May 13, 2024 saw most takedowns of 115 links for 'influencing poll process'

Sohini Ghosh
New Delhi, December 22

SINCE THE Centre launched the Sahyog portal in March 2024, pitching the platform as a tool to combat cybercrime, 91 takedown notices were issued in nearly two years by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to X Corp, red-flagging over 1,100 URLs.

Records reviewed by *The Indian Express* show that over half (566) of these URLs were flagged for the offence of "dis-

turbing public order", followed by 124 for targeting political and public figures.

According to a compilation of these notices from March 20, 2024 to November 7, 2025, which was filed by the MHA before Delhi High Court this month, 58 takedown notices were issued to X last year, including 24 for provisions related to violating public tranquility and promoting enmity

— three other notices in 2024 flagged content deemed as threats to national integrity and

sovereignty.

Only 14 of the 91 notices issued across the 20-month span alleged criminal activity, such as promotion of betting apps, impersonation of official handles with potential to cause financial fraud, and circulation of child sexual abuse material.

Of the entire lot, the most number of URLs (115) figured in a single notice issued on May 13, 2024, for an allegedly doctored video "spreading misinformation with the intention to influence ongoing electoral processes".

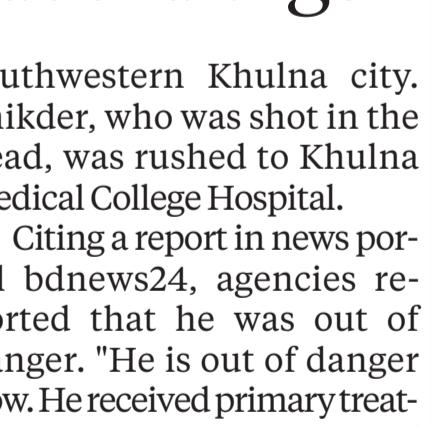
Amid the Lok Sabha polls during April and May 2024, a total of 761 URLs were

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Press Trust of India
Dhaka, December 22

DAYS AFTER the killing of prominent youth leader Sharif Osman Hadi, unidentified gunmen on Monday shot at Motaleb Shikder, another leader of Bangladesh's student-led uprising last year.

The attack took place in



southwestern Khulna city. Shikder, who was shot in the head, was rushed to Khulna Medical College Hospital.

Citing a report in news portal bdnews24, agencies reported that he was out of danger. "He is out of danger now. He received primary treatment in the dressing room of

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

The captain, who scored 246 runs in five games at the World Cup in Sri Lanka with a blistering 91 from 58 balls against Australia in the semifinals, now hopes her team's win will become a catalyst of change for her village — in more ways than one.

The Indian Express visited Deepika's village of 45 families, almost all of them from the Yadav community primarily engaged in farming. It found that the roads were not the only problem here. "The families living there still follow regressive practices targeted at women," Deepika said, speaking to this newspaper separately over phone.

"Women are still asked to sleep outside their homes, either in the farms or under a tree, during their menstrual cycle. Pregnant women, too, are not allowed to stay at home. It is also quite common to see girls getting married at a young age," she said, adding that these restrictions are due to "lack of education". "Class 4 is where



education ends in our village," Deepika's brother Girish said. Deepika's own journey, her father Chakthamappa (60) said, started with a costly mishap when she was "five months old" leading to loss of vision in one eye. "She accidentally poked her finger into her right eye. Since there were no facilities nearby, we took her to two hospitals, one was 30 km away and another around 68 km. They kept her in the hospital for two months. They have said they cannot do much. It cost Rs 3000, and it was like Rs 3 lakh to us at that time," he said.

Chakthamappa and his wife Chithamma (45) were daily farm labourers, earning Rs 800 together on the days they got work. When they didn't, sometimes "for a few days in a row, the family went to sleep on an empty stomach". Chakthamappa also grew tamarind on two acres of land he owned, but incurred losses and went into debt.

Cases piling up, ED moves to fast-track investigations, also push for speedy trial

Not just 'political', ED chief calls for focus on crypto, terror financing

Deeptiman Tiwary
New Delhi, December 22

AMID CRITICISM that the Enforcement Directorate's cases take years to reach logical conclusion and only 50-odd money laundering cases in its 20-year-long PMLA (Prevention of Money Laundering Act) journey have seen completion of trial, the agency is now learnt to have decided to focus on completing investigations and fast-tracking trials.

Sources said ED Director Rahul Navin has directed all officials to focus on completing investigations and filing prosecution complaints rather than just registering more cases. He has also asked officials not to devote all their time and re-

sources to "political cases" alone, but to focus on contemporary crimes such as cyber frauds, crypto scams and terror financing.

Meanwhile, the agency is also engaging with the judiciary to establish more special courts for adjudication of money laundering cases.

Pending trials and slow investigations have been one of the drawbacks of the agency. Since the PMLA came into force in 2005, the ED has registered 8,327 cases (up to November 2025), attached assets worth over Rs 1.85 lakh crore and arrested more than 1,100 people. It has, however, completed probes and filed prosecution complaints in only 1,927 cases

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Ex-Punjab IGP shoots himself, is critical; letters say 'duped of Rs 8 cr in cyber fraud'

Kamaldeep Singh Brar & Raakhi Jagga
Amritsar, Patiala, December 22

FORMER PUNJAB IGP Amar Singh Chahal was in "critical condition" Monday after allegedly shooting himself with his gunman's rifle at his Patiala residence. Following the incident, local police said they recovered two purported handwritten letters in which the retired IPS officer claimed he was under severe financial distress after being duped of Rs 8.10 crore in a cyber fraud.

According to police, Chahal suffered a gun wound to the chest and was rushed to Park Hospital in Patiala.

The incident occurred at Chahal's residence in the 26 Acres colony near the new bus stand in Patiala. At the time, police said, Chahal's wife, son, daughter-in-law and grandson were present in another room.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

• DEEPIKA, 23, HOPES TO DRIVE CHANGE FOR WOMEN IN HER VILLAGE IN ANDHRA PRADESH

From fighting hunger to winning World Cup for Blind: Andhra cricketer's journey

Tanishq Vaddi
Tambalhatti (Andhra Pradesh), December 22

AFTER WINNING the Women's T20 World Cup for the Blind title in November, the Indian team visited the Prime Minister's residence, Rashtrapati Bhavan and the BCCI's headquarters in Mumbai even as a steady stream of VIPs lined up to meet them.

For the team's captain, T C Deepika, one interaction made a "real difference".

While meeting Andhra Pradesh Deputy CM Pawan Kalyan, Deepika raised an issue affecting her village,

PAGE 1
anchor



education ends in our village," Deepika's brother Girish said. Deepika's own journey, her father Chakthamappa (60) said, started with a costly mishap when she was "five months old" leading to loss of vision in one eye. "She accidentally poked her finger into her right eye. Since there were no facilities nearby, we took her to two hospitals, one was 30 km away and another around 68 km. They kept her in the hospital for two months. They have said they cannot do much. It cost Rs 3000, and it was like Rs 3 lakh to us at that time," he said.

Chakthamappa and his wife Chithamma (45) were daily farm labourers, earning Rs 800 together on the days they got work. When they didn't, sometimes "for a few days in a row, the family went to sleep on an empty stomach". Chakthamappa also grew tamarind on two acres of land he owned, but incurred losses and went into debt.

"Many times when I was young, my brothers and I used to roam around the village searching for fruits fallen on the streets. If we found anything, we picked it up and ate it," Deepika said. Girish said the financial situation was so dire that their "grandfather died of starvation" and their father "got food only once a day when he was young". After studying till Class 4 at a school near her home, Deepika moved to the School for the Blind at Kunigal in Karnataka till Class 7, and later went to the Ranga Rao Memorial School for the Disabled in Mysuru till Class 10, where she picked up cricket. The school offered free education and

hostel accommodation for visually-challenged children.

But the distance between her home and school meant that every time her father wanted to visit her, he had to borrow money and work on the farm of the money lender. "He used to come and visit me once every six months. He used to borrow Rs

The Editorial Page

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2025

The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAM NATH GOENKA

◆ IN 1932 ◆

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Amid unrest, Yunus government is flailing

WHAT IS the task of an interim ruling arrangement? It seems that the government led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus has not even seriously asked itself the question. In the aftermath of the tumultuous students' movement in Bangladesh and Sheikh Hasina's ouster on August 5, 2024, the interim government's role had seemed clear: To bring back the rule of law, and lay the ground for a free and fair election in order to ensure that the gains Bangladesh has made in recent years in economic, social and diplomatic terms are protected. The recent deaths of two student leaders and attacks on the country's minorities point to a regime that has failed to step up to its task.

Yunus, who was in de facto exile at the time of the student uprising last year, was reportedly chosen to lead the interim government because of his status as a Nobel laureate, the fact that he was seen to have been persecuted by the Hasina government, and because he appeared to be above the political fray. Yet, under his watch, the Awami League (AL) — which, despite Hasina's excesses, remains one of the primary poles in Bangladeshi politics — has been barred from contesting the polls in February. As recently as September, thousands of AL workers and supporters protested the ban, an indicator that it is not a spent force. Banning the leading opposition party is not the only way in which the interim government has mimicked the mistakes of the Sheikh Hasina regime in its later years. The "International Crimes Tribunal" that sentenced Hasina to death was widely seen as partisan, composed only of Bangladeshi judges.

The current juncture is volatile. The killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, one of the key figures in the anti-Hasina quota stirs, sparked a fresh wave of protests and attacks on minorities. Another student leader, Motaleb Sikder of the National Citizen Party, was shot this week. In this turmoil, India has become a convenient scapegoat. The Yunus government, if it wants to maintain a modicum of credibility, must be seen to calm the situation rather than fanning the flames, as it has done over the last year. It must ensure order and allow the AL to contest the elections. It is for the people to reject the party, or not, through the ballot. Protection must be given to the country's besieged minorities. The Yunus government must know that the stakes are high, it cannot afford to fail.

'Epstein class' cuts deep across political divide

WEALTHY, POWERFUL men exploiting the powerless with impunity is not a new phenomenon. But the sordid photographs and correspondence released by the US Justice Department on Friday underline an uncomfortable truth for American politics and intellectual life: Exploitation of vulnerable women may not be confined to one party or ideology; it is a recurring feature of elite social networks that close ranks and make possible the rehabilitation of men such as Jeffrey Epstein, financier, power broker, underage sex trafficker. This is what happened after his 2008 plea deal, up until his eventual arrest, incarceration and suicide in 2019. The latest tranche of the disclosures has shifted the story towards what California Democrat Ro Khanna has termed the "Epstein class" — the ecosystem that protected his transgressions till it couldn't.

For the so-called liberal-progressive elites, the "Epstein class" poses an especially uncomfortable question. The recurring appearance of figures such as former US president Bill Clinton, intellectual Noam Chomsky, Microsoft founder Bill Gates and former Harvard president and treasury secretary Larry Summers in the documents poses a challenge to claims of moral seriousness and weakens the reflex to treat these disclosures primarily as ammunition against political opponents. These are intellectual and political giants whose careers have been built, in part, on analysing power; who straddle government, business, academia and philanthropy and who pride themselves on liberal values. The "Epstein class" is corrosive precisely because of the diversity of its composition. The indictment is not partisan, and for progressives who claim the language of justice, it cuts deep. It exposes a blind spot: A tendency to critique systems in abstraction while granting individuals within one's own milieu the benefit of endless contextualisation.

The idea of an "Epstein class" ultimately matters not as a taxonomy of villains but as a demand for accountability across party lines. If there's one thing the redacted documents have revealed, it is this: When consequences are rare and reputations endlessly salvageable, abuse finds cover. This has consequences for victims, whose experience of exploitation ought to be at the centre of any moral accounting. Otherwise, it is performance, not justice.

He nudged Malayalis to look within, and laugh

IF SREENIVASAN had only ever written *Sandesam* (1991), a satire about ideological hypocrisy in Kerala politics, or played one half of the jobless duo in *Nadodikkattu* (1987), which drew on the unemployment crisis driving out the state's youth, or made *Vadakkunokkianthram* (1989), a sharp send-up of the Malayali man's insecurities, he would have earned a place among the icons of Malayalam cinema. But the actor-writer-director, 69, who died last week, combined his rapier wit with remarkable productivity, writing and acting in over 200 films. This helped him become a key figure, along with filmmakers like Priyadarshan and Sathyam Anthikad and actors Mohanlal and Mammootty, in the "golden age" of Malayalam cinema (1980s-90s), when films became the prism through which Malayali society understood, and acknowledged, its own contradictions.

A gifted actor, Sreenivasan was widely admired for his understated style and pitch-perfect delivery in both comic and dramatic scenes. Arguably, though, his most lasting impact comes from his work as a writer. Sreenivasan had a rare ability to express bitter truths in the most palatable way. Humour was his preferred format, his mordant turns of phrase packing shrewd observations about Malayali life, poking fun at the obsession with global politics even as problems fester at home — "polandine kurichune oraksharam mindaruthi! (don't you utter a word about Poland)!" — or the English-language snobbery of the aspirational class, "How many kilometres from Washington, DC to Miami Beach?"

While Sreenivasan directed only two films, *Vadakkunokkianthram* and *Chinthavishayaya Shyamala*, for which he won a National Award, both became instant classics for their pitiless albeit hilarious examination of the male ego. At a time when films across the country are loudly proclaiming their machismo and ideological rigidity, Sreenivasan's oeuvre is a reminder of the quiet power of humour and sensitivity.

In Bangladesh, fake promises and a false enemy

SOMETIMES IT is better to take a long-term view of crises, especially when it comes to the life of nations. This seems to be the best way to make sense of what is happening in Bangladesh. Power transfers have never been smooth there. When, on rare occasions, the transfer has taken place through the ballot, the pattern has been that the winner takes all, assumes absolute control, and drives the opposition into the dust.

Since the brutal assassination of Sheikh Mujib Rahman in 1975, the people of Bangladesh have been hostage to a fight to the finish between the widow of a military dictator, Khaleda Zia, and the daughter of a freedom fighter, Sheikh Hasina. A rare exception was when they joined hands to bring down another military dictator, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, in 1991. They, however, did not bay for his blood. He was allowed to live and participate in the country's political life for 28 years till his death in 2019. This looks like a far cry from the retribution in the air today.

Hasina is not the only leader to deprive the Bangladeshi people of their democratic rights. She followed a line of military dictators. Khaleda Zia could not stay in power beyond her term, not because of lack of effort, but because of abuse of power and corruption, the price for which had to be paid by her son, who was forced by the army to leave the country. Indignation over

Hasina's abuse of power, notably in certain Western capitals, does not square with the well-known record of governance in Bangladesh over the past 50 years. The country has hardly been a paragon of democracy. The exaggerated vilification of Hasina and the glorification of Muhammad Yunus as the messiah of democratic values, tolerance, and inclusion has few takers in India.

Amid a clash of personalities and the resultant preoccupation with settling scores, there are two gainers: Right-wing forces led by the Jamaat-e-Islami and Pakistan. Both are taking full advantage of the post-August 2024 political vacuum and the worsening chaos. The losers are the people, or more importantly, the youth of Bangladesh, who are being fed a mix of fake promises and a false enemy. One can debate whether an Islamic society is the solution to Bangladesh's challenges surrounding development and identity, but blaming India is certainly not.

It is an attempt to mislead the people. Luckily, regardless of the images on social media, the majority of the people in Bangladesh do not buy this proposition, and are desperate to move on with the real issues in their lives. This will be possible only if Pakistani mischief allows them to do so.

Yunus and his set of advisers have proved to be part of the prob-



PANKAJ SARAN

lem, not the solution. The past 16 months have seen the capture of all institutions by right-wing Islamists, who are embedded in the ruling coterie and enjoy immunity. Much of this is under the surface, but not all — for example, the media, which is frightened to report any contrarian view. Mob rule and instant justice have returned to the streets.

One way out of this morass is to hold elections. India is watching the various reform measures underway in Bangladesh to strengthen democratic institutions. This is a positive fallout of the previous experience but the spirit of those reforms has to be translated into practice.

The weeks ahead are going to be crucial.

For one, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rahman is set to return after 17 years in exile.

We may expect to see another massive show of force on the streets of Dhaka to welcome him.

Add to this the likely reaction in case of a precipitate development relating to his mother's health.

From being allies battling a common enemy (the Awami League), the BNP and the Jamaat will compete for power, both believing that this is their moment.

The Jamaat has an early-mover advantage and would like to seize power without an election.

Given the fragility of state capacity and multiple other faultlines, further extreme events

cannot be ruled out.

Any credible election requires a strong and impartial government machinery. This looks like a tall order today. Further, an election without the participation of the Awami League can never be regarded as fair and inclusive. Yet, Delhi has signalled that it is ready to deal with any new political formation. It is sophisticated enough to see through Pakistan's game, sensitive enough to respect the genuine sentiments of the Bangladeshi people, and seasoned enough to realise the stakes involved.

One last thought. India is not to blame for the political processes in Bangladesh. If the country throws up a political dispensation that desires good relations with it, as it did in the recent past, India is not going to rebuff it.

There is a lot of sensitivity in Bangladesh about India's comments on its relations with Pakistan. If Bangladesh has the agency it claims it has, certainly more than it did 50 years ago, it should stay away from the India-Pakistan rivalry. Spiting India, for example, by turning a blind eye to, if not enabling, brutal attacks on minorities is, first and foremost, a threat to the stability of Bangladesh. And in the midst of this jockeying for power, we should not forget the silent majority. They are waiting for their turn.

The writer is former deputy national security adviser and high commissioner to Bangladesh, and convenor, NatStrat

Parliament spoke on Vande Mataram, did not listen to it



KAUSHIK DAS GUPTA

SUJALAM SUPHALAM malaya sheetalam/Sasya shyamalammataaram/Shubhra jyotsna pulakita yaminim/Phulla kusumita druma madala shobhinim/ Suhasinim sumadhabra bhasinim/Sukhadam varadam mataram." Gushing streams, cool winds, lush fields — the national song, "Vande Mataram", evokes nature as a life-giving force. It's ironic, however, that when the song, rich in environmental imagery, was being passionately debated in Parliament — and in the weeks preceding and following it — Delhi and its surrounding areas were blanketed in thick layers of soot.

The debate, and especially Parliament's proceedings in the days that followed, could have been an occasion to introspect — initiate a conversation on ways to confront a scourge that has been playing havoc with the health of people, not just in Delhi but in large parts of the country. The ruling BJP framed the proceedings as an exercise in historical clarification. Sections of the Opposition, led by Congress, questioned the need for parliamentary time to be allotted to the exercise. Air pollution was mentioned a few times during the Winter Session. But even as Parliament commemorated the 150th anniversary of the national song, it failed to take the right inspiration from its verses. The references to unclean air in the just-concluded session were desultory, they did not lead to meaningful discussions.

The demands of geopolitics, economic imperatives, and even cultural quests do require nations to engage with the past to find new ways forward. Similarly, the questions asked by nature today, climate change and pollution, require new ways of joining the dots between ecology and economy. In a rightful hurry to catch the developmental bus — create more jobs, build better infrastructure, eradicate poverty — India must take a route that doesn't injure its forests and mountains or pollute its air and waters. That's not an easy task — a single session of Parliament isn't enough for it. Yet, it's the complexity of this environmental reckoning which demands that the endeavour to address it be owned and led by those chosen by citizens to represent them in the country's highest decision-making body.

Instead of being an exercise in cultural posturing that, at times, tended to flatten historical complexities, the commemoration of a song that describes the country as a thriving ecosystem could have been an occasion to renew India's tryst with ecology. At a time when people in Delhi

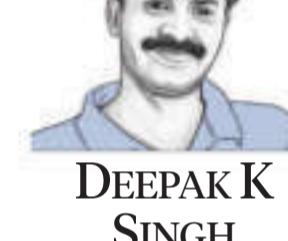
had taken to the streets to demand clean air, Parliament could have sent a message for much-needed accountability in environmental governance. A beginning could have been made by asking the most obvious questions: Why are several pollution control boards short-staffed? Why aren't air quality monitoring gadgets positioned at the right places, even in the national capital? Why do a large number of thermal power stations in Delhi, as pointed out by this newspaper, operate without systems that are critical to reducing sulphur dioxide emissions? What would be required to give meaningful effect to the electric vehicles policy?

Postponing answers to such questions will not just mean intensifying the health risks of the present generation but also severely imperil the right of future generations to live in a clean environment — a right recognised in unmet Supreme Court verdicts as integral to the Right to Life. Study after study has pointed out how poor air affects the quality of people's lives in the country. Last year, a report in the *Lancet* concluded that no one in India lives in an area where the yearly average pollution levels meet the WHO norms. A growing body of scholarship has also shown that a large number of municipal officials in India do not recognise the seriousness of the air crisis. But the failure of Parliament to have a meaningful discussion on pollution, at a time when it had assumed crisis proportions, invites even more worrying questions: Is the gravity of the situation eluding parliamentarians as well? Has the government registered the sobering message underlined in several studies — Viksit Bharat cannot be built by a population choking on poor air?

Union environment minister Bhupender Yadav has reportedly issued an AQI-improvement ultimatum to Delhi's environmental authorities. That might help in lifting the haze in about 10 days. However, if there's one thing that the capital's long-suffering citizens know, it's this: Fiats and emergency responses, at best, provide temporary relief. The anti-pollution protests in Delhi have pointed this out. A few hundred kilometres away, ecological well-being is also at the core of agitations to protect the Aravallis. When it convenes in the new year, Parliament should course-correct — find ways to give expression to such voices.

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Is the Court turning its back on the Rohingya?



DEEPAK K SINGH

IN TODAY'S India, there appears to be no place for Rohingya refugees, one of the most vulnerable, disenfranchised, and stateless groups in the world. Long derided as "illegal foreigners" by the BJP regime, they have now been branded "intruders" by the country's highest court. On December 2, a two-judge Supreme Court Bench led by Chief Justice Surya Kant made a series of shocking oral remarks about the Rohingya. The case arose in a habeas corpus petition filed by renowned academic and activist Rita Manchanda regarding the unexplained "custodial disappearance" of five Rohingyas last held by the Delhi Police. From reportedly calling them "illegal intruders" who allegedly entered by "digging a tunnel" and "cutting the fence" to asking "what is the problem in sending them back" if the Centre has not declared them "refugees", the bench was unsparing in its comments. It wondered whether the Rohingya deserve "a red-carpet welcome" when Indian citizens grapple with poverty. Completely missing in these remarks is an awareness of the conditions under which they crossed international borders.

This was not an isolated instance of the SC adopting a harsh stand. On May 16, during a hearing on another petition that accused the Centre of forcibly deporting 43 Rohingyas by abandoning them in international waters, a two-judge bench of Justices Kant and N Kotsiwar Singh declined to issue an interim order to halt further deportations. The bench described the allegations as "fanciful". Such disappearances have actually been credibly documented by both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International and have also been widely reported in Indian and international media.

The legal fraternity and civil society groups drew attention to the problematic nature of such remarks in an open letter to the CJI on December 5. They condemned the "unconscionable remarks", which dehumanise Rohingya refugees and run contrary to core constitutional values. Given that both the SC and the Ministry of Home Affairs have refused to recognise the refugee status of the Rohingya, the letter reminds the CJI that "refugee status determination is declaratory in nature: A person does not become a refugee because of recognition, but is recognised because he or she is a refugee". It further cautions that "invoking the plight of the poor in India to justify denying protections to refugees is a dangerous precedent, being contrary to the principles of constitutional justice". The signatories also emphasise that deportation or detention without individual assessment contravenes the principle of non-refoulement, which Indian courts have consistently interpreted as inherent in Article 21 of the Constitution.

Although the CJI's oral remarks are not legally binding, they risk shaping national public opinion in a harmful way and may further embolden the current regime to treat brutally those it categorises as "infiltrators/ghuspaithiya". The regime's treatment of the Rohingya is driven more by political narratives than by demonstrable security threats. The Rohingya are clearly not "intruders" but asylum seekers fleeing genocidal violence in Myanmar. When such desperate people are forced to abandon their homes, the last thing they seek is "a red-carpet welcome." What they look for is simply the hope of survival in a place of temporary refuge. Before the next scheduled hearing on January 13, it might be useful for Chief Justice Kant to recall the observations of the well-known refugee expert, Costas Douzinas: "The refugee is the representative of the non-representable; she has no state or law, no nation or party to put forward her claims."

The writer teaches at the department of political science, Panjab University, Chandigarh

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Mahanta is new Assam CM

THE ASOM Gana Parishad president, Prafulla Mahanta, was appointed the new Chief Minister of Assam by the Governor,

Bhishma Narain Singh. A Raj Bhawan communiqué said the Governor appointed Mahanta the Chief Minister "by virtue of the provision vested in clause (1) of Article 164 of the Constitution". Earlier, after being unanimously elected the leader of the AGP legislature party, Mahanta met the Governor and staked his party's claim.

AGPL seats tally 7

THE ASOM Gana Parishad captured the last Lok Sabha seat declared in Assam's elections, taking its tally to seven. The AGP, which contested 10 of the state's 14 parliamentary seats, took the vacant Lakhimpur seat where its candidate, Gokul Saikia, emerged victorious from a ten-cornered fray.

40 YEARS AGO

December 23, 1985



USSR for wider Asian security

THE SOVIET Union has proposed a wider concept of Asian security which includes the renunciation of support for subversive and terrorist groups, and the creation of nuclear free zones with regard to the use and manufacture of nuclear weapons. The concept, to which there was a cursory reference in the joint communique issued after the visit of the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, to Moscow in May 1985, has now been elaborated to include the five principles of Panch Shila, earlier formulated by India and China, the 10 principles of the Bandung Conference, and also the initiatives advanced

• **WHAT THE OTHERS SAY**
The plan to mobilise Russia's frozen assets is morally compelling... its enemies will never see it that way
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The Ideas Page

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2025

11

A public debate on 'Does God exist?' takes us away from real issues of religion, religiosity

**DESHKAAL**

BY YOGENDRA YADAV

LAST WEEK, I declined an invitation to an unusual debate between poet and public intellectual Javed Akhtar and religious scholar Mufti Shamaile Nadwi on "Does God exist?" Not just because I happened to be busy at that time, but because I found the very idea of such a debate pointless. I must be in a hopeless minority as that unusually civil debate, moderated deftly by Saurabh Dwivedi of *The Lallantop*, has gone viral online.

Popularity, though, is no proof of relevance. I have not known Mufti *sahib* and am sure a religious preacher had good reasons for such an exchange. But I cannot fathom why Javed *sahib*, who I have known and admired, wishes to spend his creative energies in this secular crusade against God. And that too, at this juncture in history.

I admire Javed *sahib*, not just for his ever-green film lyrics, but also for his poetry. He is, today, among the finest representatives of the tradition of progressive writers who walked across Urdu and Hindi. His is also among the most powerful voices against the ongoing campaigns of hatred and division. I draw strength and inspiration by reciting his anthem for our times, "Ek hamari aarek unki/ Mulk mein hain awazain do". He is among the few public intellectuals who have consistently and courageously spoken against Muslim bigotry as much as against Hindu supremacism.

Hence my disappointment — more intense as I belong to his tribe, the community of non-believers. Like him, I am a second-generation agnostic. My father was a nonsense rationalist who never invoked God or did anything remotely religious in his life. My mother rebelled against religion, in reaction to the miserable fate of her own overly religious mother, who never missed a *avara* or *pooja*. So, there was no trace of religion in



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

my upbringing. Over 30 years of being married to a believing and practising Hindu has not diluted my deep-seated agnosticism.

Yet I do not see the point of a public debate on "Does God exist?" in today's India. It is, at best, a relic of a bygone age. More often than not, such a polemic is a display of two pathologies of our time — defensive dogma of the believer on the one hand and a deadly mix of ignorance and arrogance of the atheist on the other. Worse, such a debate takes us away from the real issues about religions and religiosity that deserve to be discussed in today's India.

Debates on the existence of God are not always trivial. This question has triggered some of the deepest philosophical reflections in history. What does "existence" of God mean? If God exists, why do we have evil? How does God manifest itself — *saguna* or *nirguna*? In ancient India, debate between the Samkhya and Nyaya schools or the critique offered by Charvaka raise some of the foundational questions of philosophy. In Europe, the rationalist interrogation of God and

We need to debate not God but godmen. And, of course, we should be debating the deadly mix of religious identity and politics

religious orthodoxy opened the way for modern social and political thought. What made these disputes enlightening and meaningful were the shared philosophical assumptions of those who disagreed with each other. A debate where the two sides do not share something deeper — as in the exchange between modern believers and non-believers — generates a lot of heat and TRPs but little light.

Such a verbal duel could, however, be revolutionary at some points in history. Galileo's refusal to accept the Church-ordained belief in the centrality of Earth or Jyotiba Phule's questioning of the existence of Hindu gods or Ramasamy Periyar's challenging of God were radical acts of defiance that undermined an established and oppressive religious and social authority. An attack on God serves no such purpose today. Religious authority carries little social power or a monopoly over truth. Faith in contemporary times desperately seeks to justify itself in the name of science and rationality. A critique of God is no longer a critique of an oppressive establishment or an un-

just social and political order.

This tirade against God takes our attention away from the real and pressing issues about religions and religiosity in our times. We need to debate not God but godmen. The fact is that the intellectual and moral quality of religious leadership is fast declining across major religions in India. We should be debating why various religious orders do not attract high-quality leaders, leaving the field open for babas, saints and preachers of rather dubious calibre, when not outright thugs. We should be debating an overt and obscene rise in religious festivals and rituals, detached from their original meaning and significance. We should be debating how religiosity is becoming a display of wealth.

And, of course, we should be debating the deadly mix of religious identity and politics, again across all religions. Our real problem is not religious centred around a love of God but a religiosity centred on love of state power. The most pressing issue of our times is not why people believe in God but why those who do so carry out all forms of ungodly things in real life, why they seek to deny someone else's love for God in a different name. What we need, therefore, is not a debate between believers and non-believers but a conversation between and among believers of different faiths. A polemic between believers and non-believers is at best irrelevant, if not a distraction, for these critical debates of our times.

Such a debate does disservice to the cause of secular India as it conflates secularism with atheism. Now, atheism or agnosticism is a perfectly legitimate belief. That does not mean that every secular person must be or should ideally become an atheist. On the contrary, Indian secularism works only if it is accepted by a vast majority of believers.

Proponents of secularism must learn to give up their contempt for religion and realise that much of their hubris is grounded in their ignorance of the vast ocean that is called religion. Religion is a language and God is a concept. The best way to counter its misuse is not to quarrel with it, but to use it creatively. The idea that religion is nothing but blind faith, irrationality and superstition is itself a modern-day superstition.

The writer is member, Swaraj India, and national convenor, Bharat Jodo Abhiyan

For a choking capital, going electric is the way out



AMITABH KANT

EVERY WINTER, Delhi becomes a stark warning to the world. Children breathe air that would trigger emergency responses in any global city. Hospitals fill with respiratory cases. And we return to the same short-term playbook: Emergency orders, traffic restrictions, school closures and the ritual invocation of GRAP. These ad-hoc measures manage symptoms, not the disease.

Transport is the single largest controllable source of Delhi's air pollution. Multiple scientific studies confirm that tailpipe emissions, congestion, and idling and ageing vehicles together account for 25–40 per cent of PM2.5. Yet instead of accelerating action, the city appears to be slowing down at precisely the moment when pollution peaks.

Delhi was once India's fastest-growing EV market, but that leadership is slipping. In 2025, the city recorded no electric-auto registrations, compared to 1,426 e-autos in 2024. Electric two-wheeler registrations have also declined, with 35,909 so far in 2025, lower than 37,472 in 2023. The Fleet Aggregator Scheme, designed to push large commercial fleets toward electrification, has not been fully operationalised. This does not appear to be a market failure but a policy vacuum. With the new EV policy still awaited, incentives have disappeared and consumers are left in limbo.

What Delhi needs is a permanent clean-transport war room and a unified five-year mission, anchored in predictable funding, clear accountability and enforceable targets. Clean mobility must be recognised as essential public-health infrastructure. A credible strategy must rest on four pillars.

First, go all electric and accelerate EV adoption, while phasing out new sales of non-electric two-wheelers and three-wheelers starting in 2026. Promote the sale and adoption of EVs across segments through stable incentives, clear policy signals and consumer confidence.

A firm deadline creates certainty for manufacturers, financiers and consumers and sends an unmistakable signal that public health will not be compromised. Predictable transitions are how cities across the world have cleaned their air.

Second, build a world-class electric bus system. No global city has cleaned its air without a strong, reliable bus network. Delhi currently operates only 7,000–8,000 buses for nearly 30 million residents. While around half are electric, bus ridership is falling. Services are being scrapped faster than new buses are procured, steadily weakening the backbone of clean mobility. Delhi needs a public transport revolution, not a token electric fleet. The city must commit to at least 20,000 electric buses over the next five years, with buses every five to seven minutes on major routes and seamless last-mile connectivity. When public transport becomes safe, dignified and predictable, people shift naturally. Every electric bus removes thousands of kilometres of daily tailpipe emissions. Nothing reduces pollution faster.

Third, phase out old polluting vehicles and restrict the entry of non-BS IV/VI vehicles year-round. Delhi cannot breathe clean air while its dirtiest vehicles remain on the roads. It needs an aggressive scrappage and replacement programme combining incentives, strict enforcement and firm deadlines.

Fourth, build charging and swapping infrastructure that stays ahead of demand. Electric mobility cannot scale without accessible and reliable charging. Delhi needs thousands of new charging and swapping points across residential areas, markets, industrial hubs, office districts and transport corridors. Yet the city has not issued a single major state-level tender in recent years to deploy new public charging or swapping infrastructure. The result is a fragmented network with weak monitoring, uncertain uptime and non-functional chargers. For many users, there is little confidence that a charger shown on a map will actually be operational, discouraging EV adoption. Scaling up will require upgraded distribution systems, transparent pricing, real-time uptime dashboards and strict accountability for operators. Charging infrastructure must be treated as a public utility.

A five-year clean-transport transformation can change the lives of millions. It can restore Delhi's leadership in electric mobility. Most importantly, it can give citizens the basic dignity of clean air. Delhi has the will, the policy instruments and the institutional capacity to take up this challenge. What is required is a clear choice and sustained execution.

The writer is senior adviser to Fairfax and former G20 sherpa and CEO, NITI Aayog, Government of India. Views are personal



The illusion of gentle living in a predatory world



AREFA TEHSIN

RECENTLY, A *bhai sahib* very nearly scrunched up his nose when he saw me break a chicken leg, politely warning me that "you become what you eat". If that were true, I almost told him, half of India would have turned into samosas by now.

I've run into this often — our favourite yoga posture: Moral superiority. Many among us look down upon meat-eaters who supposedly contaminate not just their stomachs but their souls. It all comes from old spiritual lines of thought where food wasn't mere fuel but personality programming: Sattvic foods made you serene, rajasic made you ambitious and tamasic made you sluggish or sinful. Meanwhile, we've spent centuries eating rice and wheat, which have no qualities whatsoever except silently putting up with all our theories.

For many Indians, vegetarianism is not just diet — it's identity, hierarchy, morality, sometimes even politics. Yet, this belief that a "gentle diet" equals non-violence is a pleasant myth. We love discussing it between spoonfuls of ghee sourced from an industry that treats calves as collateral damage. The hypocrisy runs deeper than a single industry. We draw a moral line at the individual act of killing, yet we'll cheerfully destroy their homes for roads, farms, minerals and malls.

Now imagine, for a reckless moment, a day on Earth when the invisible scissors of predation go

still. Nothing stalks, hunts, pecks, gulps, stings, snaps or digests. A day when every creature, including you and me — the universe's tiniest residents — gets a ceasefire from the oldest war of all: Life eating life.

It sounds peaceful, like an interlude in a nature documentary. But peace isn't innocent. A world without predation isn't kinder; it's bursting at the seams, collapsing within days. If, for one ordinary Tuesday, every frog, bird, bat, fish, lizard, centipede and other insect-eater shut their mouths, the insect world would burst like a shaken soda bottle. A housefly can lay hundreds of eggs, mosquitoes can double their numbers in days and aphids can produce dozens of young in a week without mating. With an estimated 10 quintillion insects alive at any given moment and billions normally disappearing each hour into the bellies of geckos, frogs and bulbuls, a single day without predators would tip the balance in spectacular fashion.

While this is happening, if even 0.1 per cent of insect species take advantage and reproduce unchecked, we'd end the day with roughly 100 quadrillion new insects. Nature never allows these explosions because predators are quietly doing their work every second. And we haven't even considered the larger animals yet.

Every creature is living on borrowed life. Predation is simply the returning of that loan. In nature, being eaten isn't always a tragedy. Often, it's recycling. Transformation.

Continuation

Continuation

The most dramatic consequences of turning off predation would begin inside you. Your gut

is a crowded city of some 39 trillion microbes, many of them lactobacilli — the friendly bacteria that help digest food and keep bad guys in check. They multiply fast but survive only because immune cells, other microbes and stomach acid are constantly cutting them down. Without this nonstop internal predation, their numbers would explode to astronomical levels.

If this internal chaos sounds abstract, consider an experience most of us have had: Taking antibiotics. It is like unleashing a controlled massacre inside your gut, a biochemical carpet bombing. The friendly microbes that have worked overtime for your well-being die along with the villains, leaving your gut barren. It's internal predation outsourced to a pill and your stomach takes weeks to negotiate the peace.

Every creature, from a lactobacillus to a leopard, is living on borrowed life. Predation is simply the returning of that loan. In nature, being eaten isn't always a tragedy. Often, it's recycling. Transformation.

A day without predation isn't utopia. It's a reminder that life on Earth rests on ancient, delicate balance. That life depends, paradoxically, on death. The oldest mercy in the universe is simple: Something dies so everything else can live. Even if that something is a bacterium, a beetroot, a beetle — or a belief.

Tehsin is a Colombo-based writer and environmentalist



KUNAL SHAHDEO

JHARKHAND'S SMAIDEN Syed Mushtaq Ali Trophy (SMAT) title appears, at first glance, a cricketing fairytale. In PUNE, Ishan Kishan's blistering century powered a young side to the highest total in a SMAT final and a decisive win over Haryana. Yet, like most moments that seem sudden, this triumph was decades in the making. Jharkhand's rise to the summit of domestic T20 cricket is not merely a story of form or fearless batting, but of institutions, migration, industrial modernity, sporting cultures, and the uneven social geography of Indian cricket.

That a small state, often associated with forests, minerals, political complexity, and

administrative fragility, now leads domestic T20 cricket raises a question: How did Jharkhand do it? The disbelief echoes the response to the arrival of a long-haired wicketkeeper from Ranchi two decades ago. When M S Dhoni entered Indian cricket in 2004, he was seen as an exception. Jharkhand's SMAT victory should finally lay that myth to rest.

Cricket in Jharkhand neither began with Dhoni nor with statehood in 2000. Its roots lie in the colonial period, when sport functioned as both discipline and distinction. Christian missionaries promoted hockey and football, particularly among Adivasi communities. Cricket followed a different route. From the early 20th century, industrial towns such as Jamshedpur, and later Bokaro, Dhanbad and Ranchi, drew clerks, engineers, and middle-class employees from across India. These steel

and mining townships, with company grounds, institutional patronage, and secure livelihoods, provided fertile ground for the imperial game.

Founded in 1936 in Jamshedpur, the Bihar Cricket Association reflected this early cricketing depth. Ranchi and Jamshedpur were central to this story, forming the region's cricketing core. Steel cities and PSU townships produced a sporting habitus

marked by structured coaching, access to grounds, inter-departmental tournaments, and employment-linked incentives.

Dhoni's emergence was not miraculous. He

came from a state with a functioning cricket infrastructure and a lineage of nationally respected but little-remembered domestic professionals such as Pradeep Khanna, Anwar Mustafa, and Adil Hussain.

Statehood in 2000 marked a decisive institutional rupture. Continued affiliation with the BCA became untenable as it slid into institutional decline. By the early 2000s, the BCA was derecognised, leaving Bihar without formal representation in Indian cricket.

The Jharkhand State Cricket Association

filled this vacuum, securing full BCCI membership in 2003. It aligned a new state's aspirations with national cricket governance.

The writer is an academic fellow and visiting faculty at NLSIU, Bengaluru

Jharkhand's T20 victory was long in the making



KUNAL VERMA

Jabalpur

CEPA with Oman

THIS REFERS to the article, 'In

West Asia, India's diplomacy has

delivered dramatic gains'

(IE, December 22). The CEPA with Oman

bolsters India's "Act West"

policy, offering economic, strategic, and

societal benefits such as duty-free

access on tariff lines, FDI in Omani

services, and supply

resilience via Omani ports. However,

increased competition for Indian

MSMEs

warrants safeguards such as tariff

rate quotas to limit duty-free im-

ports, balancing national interests

with global ties.

Prafull Chandra Sockey,

Hazaribagh

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EDUCATION

Higher education Bill puts focus on simplifying governance

Abhinaya Harigovind
New Delhi, December 22

INDIA HAS several official bodies tasked with regulating, accrediting and establishing quality standards for its 1,168 higher education institutions. Last week, the government introduced a Bill in Lok Sabha that seeks to form a single higher education commission with three councils to manage these functions for a large number of these institutions. The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, now referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee, will merge the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), and the National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE).

Proposal to simplify

The Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan will coordinate among three councils—the Regulatory Council (Viksit Bharat Shiksha Viniyaman Parishad), the Standards Council (Viksit Bharat Shiksha Manak Parishad), and the Accreditation Council (Viksit Bharat Shiksha Gunvatta Parishad).

They will authorise institutions to grant degrees, set learning outcomes for courses, and supervise a framework for accreditation. The Bill will apply to institutions like the IITs, IIMs, NITs, and IISERs, Central and state universities, but not medical, legal, dental, and other universities regulated separately.

Appointments to these bodies will be made by the President on the recommendation of the Central government.

Complex web

Various bodies currently govern higher education. The UGC authorises institutions and sets standards for courses, while the AICTE does this for engineering courses, and the NCTE for B.Ed courses. Central universities like the University of Delhi were established under Acts of Parliament and determine their own standards of instruction.

The Bill proposes to bring all of this under one body. While UGC and AICTE could disburse grants, the regulatory council will not have that power, and the Education Ministry will now do so. The council can impose penalties ranging up to 2 crore.

Centralisation concerns

This idea of a single body and a simpler regulatory system has been floated as far back as the '80s. Previous iterations of the Bill also drew criticism for excessive centralisation.

Former AICTE Chairman SS Mantha told *The Indian Express*: "As far as UGC and AICTE are concerned, there are overlapping provisions... Bringing them together might bring in a set of rules that are not overlapping, and provide direction and clarity." But, details need to be worked out. Since technical education has grown over time, with several specialisations, combining its governance with general education could be an issue, he said. "Administratively, there could be different verticals under that regulatory framework," Mantha said.

Ashok Thakur, former Secretary in the Ministry of Human Resource Development, also pointed out that institutions like the IITs are currently under separate Acts. "They have their autonomy, and there might be resentment if they are brought under the regulatory body," he said.

The Federation of Central Universities Teachers' Associations said in a statement that direct control of funding by the Education Ministry could increase the scope for government control over universities and the "undermining of their autonomy". "The fact of the matter is that the provisions of the Bill are designed to guarantee that the entire regulatory structure will be subject to the control of the Central Government," it said.



GLOBAL

Bangladesh violence: In run-up to polls, who stands to gain, who loses?



BASHIR ALI ABBAS

A WAVE of political violence has gripped Bangladesh since the killing of student leader Sharif Osman Hadi, who was closely affiliated to the National Citizen Party (NCP), on December 11.

The upheaval has resulted in anti-India demonstrations (student leaders blame New Delhi for sheltering Hadi's killers), arson against two prominent Bangladeshi newspapers, mob lynchings, and vandalism. On Monday, another student leader, Motaleb Shikder, was shot dead.

Unprecedented polls

Bangladesh, which is slated to go to polls on February 12, 2026, has remained on a razor's edge for months, with the constant risk of post-revolutionary violence harming political stability. Such stability is crucial for Bangladesh's elections to be free,

fair, and secure, and thus, legitimate.

These are the first elections since Sheikh Hasina's ouster last August, which ended 15 years of Awami League rule. Adding to the stakes is the inclusion of a referendum on the July Charter, a set of constitutional changes drafted by the Interim Government. The effort is to bring in a new government and a new system this February, one that upends the older Awami League-era 'establishment'. For this too, stability is imperative.

However, there is strong uncertainty over how Bangladeshi view their current options. A limited voter survey by the BRAC Institute in August 2025 showed that about 50% of Bangladesh's electorate was undecided about their political choice, a 10% point jump from October 2024.

New political rivalries

Leading up to the polls, all prominent political leaders in Bangladesh have been suspicious of the process.

Parties like the NCP and Jamaat-e-Islami have long been averse to elections being held in early 2026; both have consistently called for the polls to be pushed back. In particular, the NCP, formed in February by student leaders who led the movement

to oust Hasina, is less than a year old. It feels that elections in February 2026 provide insufficient time to credibly gain a foothold among the electorate.

On the other hand, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the country's only remaining legacy party, has consistently sought to have elections as soon as possible. Eager to leverage the vacuum left by Hasina with its large cadre, experience, and superior organising capacity, the BNP has con-

sistently pressured Muhammad Yunus's Interim Government to not give in to the NCP. As the party that suffered greater agency in shaping the new system, which it can only do while in power (and thus after the polls).

The Interim Government too has a lot at stake. Apart from prosecuting Hasina and her allies, it was formed with two specific aims: to implement an ambitious multi-pillared domestic reform agenda as

well as oversee the conduct of free, fair, and secure polls. On the former, progress has been sluggish, with all actors—the BNP, Awami League, NCP and Jamaat—accusing it of bias. This makes it even more important for the Interim Government to succeed in overseeing a peaceful election.

Hadi's death and after

In this context, Hadi's death acted as a hair-trigger. Declaring a day of mourning, Yunus categorically said that the killing was perpetrated by forces that do not want Bangladesh to hold a peaceful election. Regardless of who was responsible for Hadi's killing—the NCP has blamed the Awami League's student wing—this is true. The arson, vandalism, and murder, all represent a broken windows effect with the dam of post-revolutionary chaos bursting.

In this context, whipping up a mob becomes easy for any whipping actor. For NCP leaders, most of whom are in their late 20s, anti-India rhetoric is a particularly low-hanging fruit to garner populist credentials; leaders such as Hasnat Abdullah have long been rhetorically trigger happy. Apart from anti-India rhetoric, they have also sought to delegitimise any institution deemed to be

part of the older establishment. This naturally includes old, liberal, papers such as *Prothom Alo* and *The Daily Star*.

The BNP occupies an interesting position. The tumult comes on the eve of BNP de facto chief Tarique Rehman's return to Bangladesh after an 18-year exile. Like the Interim Government, the BNP has a strong interest in ensuring stability prevails. It is a part of the older political establishment and is cast as such by Bangladesh's newer political actors. (BNP usually leads pre-poll surveys.)

Bangladesh today has many elements of contention among powerful actors who have little to lose and much to gain through carelessly inflammatory rhetoric. It is up to the Interim Government and the Bangladesh Army to ensure the violence does not spill over. However, post-revolutionary chaos is a centuries-old global trend. With Bangladeshi leaders effectively remaking the term 'revolution' for the July 2024 uprising, predicting the course of events is difficult.

India's best option is to be tolerant, patient, and observant.

Bashir Ali Abbas is a Senior Research Associate at the Council for Strategic and Defense Research, New Delhi

ENVIRONMENT

Aravalli benchmark could have effects beyond mining



JAY MAZOOMDAAR

AMID PROTESTS and criticism over the government's new definition of the Aravalli Hills, the Union Environment Ministry said in a statement Sunday that there was "no imminent threat to the Aravallis' ecology" and that the hills "remain under robust protection". Separately, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said on Sunday as well as Monday that mining would be permissible in only 0.19% of Aravalli's "total expanse of 1.44 lakh sq km".

Under the new definition, proposed by a committee under the Environment Secretary and approved by the Supreme Court on November 20, any landform that is at an elevation of 100 metres or more above the local relief will be considered as part of Aravalli Hills along with its slopes and adjacent land. But the 100-metre benchmark and the use of "local profile", the immediate surroundings of a hill, as the measuring base rather than a standardised baseline such as the state's lowest elevation would result in a very significant part of the Aravalli range not being counted as Aravalli any more.

Sunday's Environment Ministry statement also said no new mining leases would be allowed until a detailed study is undertaken according to the November 20 order.

But government statements do not address the ministry's contested submissions to the apex court or the threats facing the Aravallis other than mining, all of which have severe environmental ramifications. It is important to note that the new Aravalli benchmark does not exclude all landforms under a 100-metre elevation from the range. It identifies all landforms rising at least 100 metres from the local profile as Aravalli Hills. And it is only when two such hills are less than 500 metres apart that the intervening stretch—irrespective of its elevation—will also be counted as part of the range.

What remains protected

Parts of Aravallis are designated as tiger reserves, national parks, sanctuaries, eco-sensitive zones around these protected areas, wetlands and plantations under the compensatory afforestation scheme. These areas remain out of bounds for mining or development, unless permitted specifically under the relevant wildlife and forest Acts, irrespective of their status as Aravalli Hills.

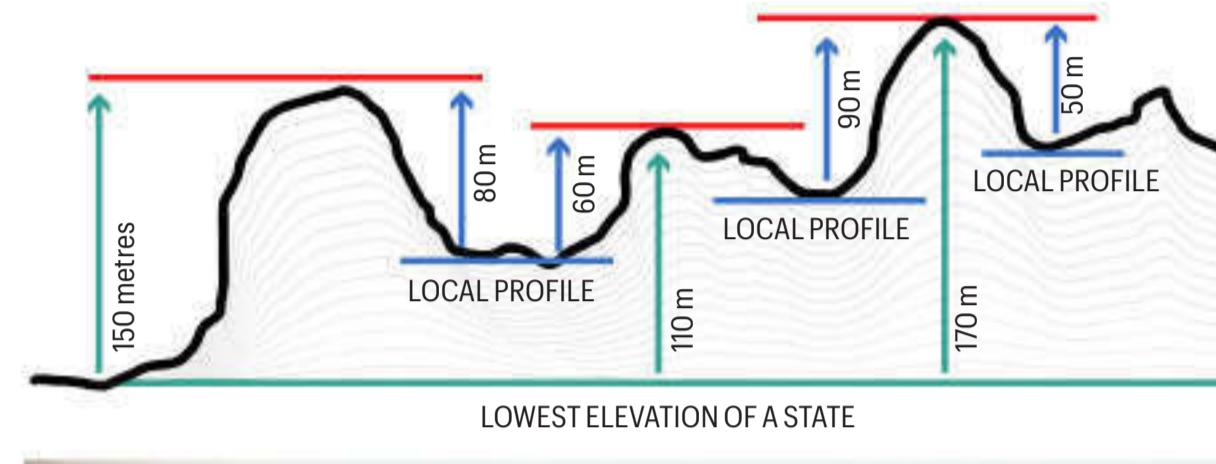
Even such protection is not necessarily permanent. As reported by *The Indian Express* on June 22, 2025, the ministry and Ra-

MEASURING A HILL'S HEIGHT: LOWEST ELEVATION VS 'LOCAL PROFILE'

LOCAL PROFILE
refers to the immediate surroundings of a hill

LOWEST ELEVATION
refers to a state's lowest point in relation to sea level

FOR A HILL to be considered part of the Aravallis, the government says it will measure the 100-metre elevation from the local profile and not from a standardised reference point such as lowest elevation.



IN RAJASTHAN, for example, the FSI recommended measuring hills from the state's lowest elevation of 115 metres above sea level as a single benchmark.

ADOPTING LOCAL
profiles as baseline for height measurement will result in exclusion of many 100-metre-tall or higher hills in the Aravalli range if the surrounding areas are of relatively higher elevation

Illegal mining is a major concern in the Aravalli range. TASHI TOBYAL/FILE

jareshan attempted to "rationalise" the boundaries of the Sariska tiger reserve, which would have allowed mining now barred in the vicinity of the reserve limits, until the Supreme Court intervened.

It is important to note that the new Aravalli benchmark does not exclude all landforms under a 100-metre elevation from the range. It identifies all landforms rising at least 100 metres from the local profile as Aravalli Hills. And it is only when two such hills are less than 500 metres apart that the intervening stretch—irrespective of its elevation—will also be counted as part of the range.

What is excluded

The new parameters will leave out large tracts identified as part of the Aravalli range under the Forest Survey of India's (FSI) 3-degree slope formula which counts all areas above the minimum elevation of an Aravalli state—115m in case of Rajasthan—with a slope of at least 3 degrees as Aravalli. Rajasthan accounts for nearly two-thirds of the mountain range.

Besides, a number of districts have been dropped altogether from the list of 34 Ara-

valli districts—across Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi—submitted by the Environment ministry to the Supreme Court.

For example, Rajasthan's Sawai Madhopur district, famous for the Ranthambore tiger reserve located at the convergence of the Aravalli and the Vindhya hill ranges, is not in the list. Also missing is the district of Chittorgarh, famous for the fort built on a high Aravalli outcrop and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Rajasthan's Nagaur district, where the Forest Survey of India identified 1,110 sq km as Aravalli, is also excluded. The minister said that mining areas make up only 0.19% of the Aravalli's "1.44 lakh sq km" span. But the extent of the Aravallis he cited is overstated as 1.44 lakh sq km covers almost the entire landmass of all 34 Aravalli districts on the ministry's list.

Under the FSI's 3-degree slope formula, the Aravallis cover 40,483 sq km in 15 districts of Rajasthan—roughly 33% of these districts' total area of 1,23,086 sq km. The 100-metre definition would exclude 99.12% (1,17,527) of the 1,18,575 Aravalli hills, with their slopes and surroundings, identified by the FSI in these 15 districts. The 100-

metre definition would exclude 99.12% (1,17,527) of the 1,18,575 Aravalli hills identified by the FSI in these 15 districts.

What the Centre told top court

As reported by *The Indian Express* on November 26, the FSI flagged these concerns to the ministry. But the ministry told the Supreme Court that the 100-metre definition would lead to the inclusion of a larger area under the Aravalli range compared to the FSI's 3-degree formula.

The ministry told the top court that the average slope in 12 of 34 Aravalli districts (across four states) on its list was under 3 degrees, implying that these districts would be excluded from Aravalli if the FSI's 3-degree slope formula was accepted. It glossed over the fact that most parts of these districts are plains and, taken as a whole, the average slope of such a district would naturally be far lower than the slope of its hilly areas.

The ministry also said the 100-metre elevation would be measured from the local profile and not from a standardised single reference point, such as the FSI's use in Rajasthan of the state's lowest elevation: 115 metres above sea level.

Adopting local profiles as baselines for height measurement will result in exclusion of many 100-metre or higher hills from the Aravalli definition if the surrounding areas (saddles) are of relatively high elevation (see graphic).

Inclusion vs exclusion

On Sunday, the minister underlined the relatively smaller scope for legal mining in Aravallis, but questions remain over the extent of illegal mining, the future scope of mining in the areas excluded under the 100-metre definition, and the impact of every mining block on the surrounding landscape.

And there are activities besides mining that can lead to environmental harm. The 100-metre definition will derecognise most hilly tracts as Aravalli in Delhi NCR where the end ranges significantly lose their height. This could unlock large areas to be developed as prime real estate.

In its report submitted to the apex court, the ministry-led committee noted that "not every part of the Aravalli is a Hill, and not every Hill is part of the Aravalli" and emphasised "the risk of inclusion errors if slope alone is used for boundary demarcation."

While acknowledging the non-hilly areas of Aravalli, the submission puts the focus on avoiding "inclusion"—rather than exclusion—of areas under Aravalli.



A protest in Dhaka last week over the killing of student leader Sharif Osman Hadi. AP

MATHEMATICS

1729, number that bears Ramanujan name, reveals rigour behind genius

Yashee
New Delhi, December 22

DECEMBER 22 is observed as National Mathematics Day in India to honour Srinivasa Ramanujan, the man who seemingly knew infinity.

Ramanujan is known for the many formulae he scribbled on pieces of paper—proven as correct by other scientists—without showing anything of the process he used to arrive at them. In mathematics, a discipline of order, method, patterns and connections, what Ramanujan did was highly unorthodox. There is the popular legend that once in England, when asked about his methods, Ramanujan said the deity Namagiri appeared to him in his dreams and explained the processes to him.

On his 138th birth anniversary, we discuss a number that bears his name, the Hardy-Ramanujan number, to explain two

things about him: his innate genius for spotting rules and patterns, and the rigorous work that had trained his mind to work the way it did.

The Hardy-Ramanujan number

The Hardy-Ramanujan number is 1729, the smallest number that can be expressed as the sum of two cubes in two different ways: $1^3 + 12^3 = 1 + 1728 = 1729$; and $9^3 + 10^3 = 729 + 1000 = 1729$.

The anecdote goes thus: Ramanujan was hospitalised in Putney when his mentor, the English mathematician G H Hardy, came to see him in a taxicab. He remarked to the Indian that the vehicle had a "dull" number, 1729, and "hopefully it is not an unfavourable omen." Ramanujan replied, "No, Hardy, it is a very interesting number; it is the smallest number expressible as the sum of two cubes in two different ways."

When GH Hardy met Ramanujan

English mathematician G H Hardy remarked to

SMEthing Suspicious In These IPOs?

Have oversight before investor fatigue sets in

Just about half the number of IPOs by SMEs this year have made money for their investors. This underscores the need for tighter vigil by market participants for this category of paper. India is going through an IPO bull market where valuations derived by companies planning to list tend to be rich. SME IPOs represent heightened probability of the primary market price overshooting that of the secondary market. Even after listing, relative disinterest by institutional investors contributes to price volatility. Regulators have warned of speculative bubbles appearing in sections of the market as retail investors seek listing gains in SME IPOs. These warnings should be taken seriously, as IPO issues approach the tail of a market boom.

A section of the market is voicing concern that India's primary and secondary markets are decoupling. Correctives being considered are greater institutional participation in IPOs for more grounded pricing and restraint by companies over valuation so that there is more left on the table for investors. These measures, however, have a muted impact on SME IPOs. Small companies have less of a capitalisation headroom as they scale up. Institutional interest tends

to gravitate towards larger companies in stable businesses. It, thus, falls on the regulator to enhance vigil over the SME IPO segment to curb excess speculation.

SMEs offer a higher risk-reward trade-off than the broader market. This is amplified by retail interest in IPOs for this section of companies. Majority of retail investors sell their shares within a week of listing. This behaviour feeds the ambitions of issuers, especially those chaining hyper growth in their business. Companies that are late to list during an IPO boom are prone to seek fancier valuations. This affects the IPO pipeline if enough companies destroy investor wealth. In the SME segment, every second company that conducted an IPO is trading at a loss to its listing price. The record must improve before investor fatigue sets in.

All That Gold Card Appeal's Yet to Glitter

These are early days. But Trump's 'gold card' visa programme launched earlier this month has had a lukewarm response, so far. As an idea, it's swell: keep your tired, your poor and your huddled masses, give me those with capacity. The trouble is, even HNIs putting up non-refundable \$1 mn as 'Club America membership' fee (read: citizenship) — plus \$15,000 processing fee per family member — would like a bit more certainty. With Congress yet to approve the first-class ticketing system and federal court challenges expected, non-US HNIs wishing 'to be American' as one of their identities are understandably cagey.

The preferred route remains the EB-5 — Employment-Based, Fifth Preference Immigrant Investor — programme, which offers investors (and their families) a path to conditional permanent residency ('green card') for investing a minimum amount — \$8-10.5 lakh into a US commercial enterprise that creates or preserves at least 10 US jobs. The gold card is more directly transactional and, paradoxically, less certain not just for the applicant but also for the US. It's also not clear if the 'entry fee' will get applicants to the front of a considerably long queue.

EB visas across 5 categories are capped annually by law at around 1.4 lakh annually, with EB-5 visas numbering about 10,000, and individual countries capped at 7% of the total. Limited availability means countries like India and China have long waiting lines. The ability to shell out \$1 mn as 'gift' to Uncle Sam only earns one a place in the line. The 'gold card' is yet another demonstration of Trump's nifty brand-building prowess. Meanwhile, how hospitable the US will get for the world's rich — depending on which part of the world they are from — will also determine the gold card's glitter.

JUST IN JEST

Being neighbourly is a liability, so be the next-door Grinch

NY Resolution No. 6: Avoid Neighbours

New Year Resolution No. 6 in our world-famous HETLoR (2025 Honest ET List of Resolutions): don't love thy neighbour. In fact, avoid them like spam. Banish the 'Good morning!' lot pretending to be startup incubator while they 'morning walk'. Enough of those unsolicited stock advice that could have been casserole deliveries. Why? Because neighbourly greetings are the most sinister form of small talk. They are Trojan horses of faux cheer, smuggling in weather commentary and passive-aggressive remarks about your investment habits. One 'Happy New Year!' at the gate, and suddenly you're trapped in a 45-min symposium on AI's untapped potential to make chapati.

Being a Grinch year-round is not cruelty, it's efficiency. Save time and energy by not nodding at Mr Krishnaswamy while he narrates his plan to use Fava beans as fuel. Carry earpods — you never know when Mrs Varma will be walking past you — and then turning to chat. By extending the Grinch philosophy beyond December 25, you're not rejecting humanity but upgrading it. So, this end of the year, resolve to perfect the art of the curt nod, strategic hedge-trim that blocks sight lines, and the glorious invention of noise-cancelling curtains to make 2026 pestilence-free. Let others chase connection and networks. You can chase peace. And when the neighbours knock, you'll be happily unavailable.

2026 is poised to become a definitive turning point in India's odyssey toward space

GAGAN IS NOT THE LIMIT



Somak Raychaudhury

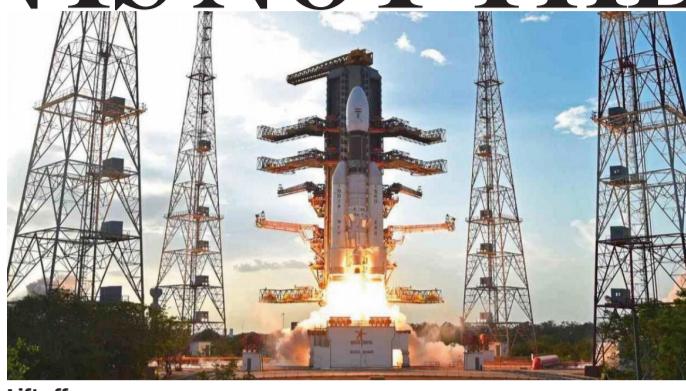
As Earth's 2025 orbit around the sun comes to a close, Isro can look back at a year of consistent progress. Throughout 2025, we saw the usual satellite launches, and steady progress in the cleanrooms of research labs spread across Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, Thiruvananthapuram... This year also saw consolidation of important commercial partnerships through New-Space India Ltd (NSIL). But this steady buzz is about to become a roar.

For decades, Indian spaceflight has been defined by frugal engineering and high-impact robotic missions, Chandrayaan and Mangalyaan being its crown jewels, and research missions like AstroSat and Aditya-L1. However, the dream of sending an Indian gaganayatri into orbit on an indigenous vehicle has always been the next major frontier.

All major launch vehicles, including LVM3, PSLV, GSLV Mk II and SSLV, are being prepared for a series of 7 missions in 2026. Under a commercial agreement through NSIL, India's heaviest launcher, LVM3, will place Bluebird 6 communication satellite of US-based AST SpaceMobile into orbit. Several of this year's missions are critical ones related to India's crewed cecraft mission. the casual obser-

To

Human spaceflight capability is a proxy for high-end tech mastery — over advanced materials science, complex avionics, medical tech and AI. When India demonstrates this, it alters global perception of Indian manufacturing and R&D



Lift off

ver an uncrewed launch might lack the drama of a cosmonaut waving from a shuttle's hatch. But before Isro can successfully launch a human into space, it must rigorously demonstrate a series of critical technological milestones to ensure crew safety.

This process begins with qualifying LVM3, which is now human-rated, to ensure it meets stringent safety margins, followed by a series of uncrewed test flights to validate the orbital module's performance in actual space conditions.

Crucially Isro must prove reliability of its Crew Escape System (CES) through various abort tests — such as pad abort and high-altitude abort scenarios — guaranteeing that gaganayatis can be safely ejected if the rocket malfunctions at any stage. Isro must perfect the Environmental Control and Life Support System (ECLSS) to maintain a habitable atmosphere, along with successfully recovering the crew module upon its splashdown.

Later this year, LVM3 will make its first uncrewed Gaganayana-related mission, carrying the humanoid robot Vyommitra, to validate critical mission systems and operational readiness. The robot will mimic human metabolic functions, and the assembly will add

ress questions like 'Is ECLSS maintaining the right pressure?' 'Is the oxygen mixture stable?' 'Is the temperature regulation holding against the extreme freeze-thaw cycles of orbit?'

Perhaps the most hold-your-breath aspect of the Isro roadmap starting in 2026 will be re-entry trials. For a human crew, the return journey is the most perilous phase, where the spacecraft hits the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds, with temperatures rapidly escalating around the

spacecraft.

Uncrewed missions will have

to validate thermal protection systems — heat shields that stand between crew and incineration. Furthermore, the complex ballet of parachute deployment needs to be flawless. Parachute anomalies can doom planetary landers.

For Gaganayana, the deceleration system must transition the module from thousands of km/hr to a gentle splashdown in the Bay of Bengal. Recovery operations involving Indian Navy which will be rehearsed and executed in the coming stages, are just as critical as the rocket science.

There is no room for 'learning on the fly' when humans are on board. In subsequent missions in the coming years, various possibilities will have to be rigorously simulated — abort scenarios, loss of pressure, and off-nominal re-entry trajectories.

Why does this matter? Why invest

billions in sending humans when robots are cheaper and safer? The answer lies in the geopolitical and technological stratification of the world. Currently, only three nations — Russia, the US and China — possess independent capability to launch humans into space. If Gaganayana succeeds, India enters this ultra-exclusive club. This is not merely about prestige, though soft power implications are immense. It is a demonstration of supreme technological industrial competence.

Human spaceflight capability is a proxy for high-end tech mastery. It signifies that a nation has mastered advanced materials science, complex avionics, medical technologies and artificial intelligence. When India demonstrates this capability, it alters the global perception of Indian manufacturing and R&D. We move from being the world's back office to being one of its premier labs.

Also, tech spin-offs from such a mission are historically profound. Water purification, fire-retardant materials and health monitoring systems developed for gaganayana will eventually find their way into civilian

Before Isro can successfully launch a human into space, it must rigorously demonstrate a series of critical technological milestones to ensure crew safety

markets, benefiting the common citizen.

The space economy is predicted to be a trillion-dollar sector in the coming decades. Having a seat at the table of human spaceflight ensures India is a pilot, not just a passenger. Apollo missions inspired a generation of Americans to embrace science and engineering. Gaganayana missions, starting with launches of 2026, promise to do the same for India.

The writer is vice-chancellor and professor of physics, Ashoka University



Rights and Wrongs

NARAYANI GANESH

How do we know that something is right or wrong? Difficult to say, since everything we see and do, think and act upon, takes place in a subjective, unreal, ever-changing world. Morals and ethics, the two aspects of rights and wrongs, are really two different concepts — while morals change with the passage of time, changing traditions and outlooks, ethics normally remain unchanged. 'Moral certainty is always a sign of cultural inferiority,' said H L Mencken. 'The more uncivilised the man, the surer he is that he knows precisely what is right and what is wrong. All human progress, even in morals, has been the work of men who have doubted the current moral values, not of men who have whooped them up and tried to enforce them. The truly civilised man is always sceptical and tolerant, in this field as in all others.'

Considering that the moral domain is not cast in stone, it is certainly not okay to stand or sit in judgement over whether something is morally right or wrong. Morals stem from behaviour based on personal beliefs, whereas ethics is something that the community and society agree upon as being right or wrong, and on the basis of which laws are formed and enforced. Which is why when government agencies take it upon themselves to become moral police, enforcing their ideas of behaviour, relationships or dress codes, it creates confusion and is distasteful, even appalling, to the civilised among us.

Chat Room

No Cloud in This Silver Lining

Apropos 'Silver's Still Hot Metal After the 2025 Double' by Kairav Lukka (Dec 22), silver hitting all-time high is welcome news amid the sagging sentiment on the bourses in the equities segment. There are fundamental reasons for silver shining with industrial use of the metal increasing each passing day. Its use in EV batteries and in AI-related technologies could spur demand to unbelievable levels. Gold, silver's sibling, will have a rub-off effect.

2025 was a subdued year for commodities and turned out to be healthy for consolidation. 2026 could trigger a bull phase for equities if companies report decent numbers in the coming quarters.

S N Kabra

Mumbai

Clear Not Add to, Air Pollution

This refers to the Edit, 'More Hot Air From Our Iron-Lunged MPs' (Dec 20). As air quality reached hazardous thresholds, legislative time was squandered on divisive and emotive themes that offer more heat than light. The opportunity cost of such neglect is borne

by citizens, not politicians. Air pollution is a public health crisis that demands sustained, evidence-based deliberation and legislative resolve. Instead, disruption and performative politics hollow out Parliament's governing role and weaken public trust. India deserves a Parliament that invests its time in governing challenges, not in amplifying divisions.

Insity Raj

Ujjain

To Be a Sport, Be Headlinear

The headline, 'Australia Bake English Cookies in Adelaide Oven' (Sports World Play, Dec 19), appropriately refers to the scorching temperature in which the third Ashes Test was played. Similarly, in the '70s, when the English pacer John Snow bundled out Australia in the cold English weather, one newspaper headlined, 'Snow leaves Australia cold'. Again, when England toured India some two decades ago, Andrew Flintoff became father on the day he won the man of the match award. One headline proclaimed, 'Dad becomes MoM'. Further, when Khar Gymkhana's badminton court was converted into a wooden one, one paper said, 'Wood news at Khar Gymkhana'. Finally, when Manu Bhaker clinched two medals in the Paris Olympics, a headline declared, 'Two good, Manu'. Deepak Odhekar Nashik

Letters to the editor may be addressed to edit@timesofindia.com

Meri FDI Hai Japani



Arijit Barman

As deals and diplomacy get intertwined in today's Trumpian universe, last week's developments shine a light on how strategic foreign investments will perhaps flow into India in 2026.

After a year-long negotiation over revised bids, Masdar pulled the plug on a billion-dollar deal to take ReNew Power private from Nasdaq, tripling up the stock 28% in a single day. It coincided with Narendra Modi's 3-nation trip to the region. Things turned when over the next few days, two of the three Japanese megabanks dominated headlines with Mizuho scooping homegrown investment bank Avendus and then MUFG writing a \$4.5 bn cheque to buy into India's 2nd-largest shadow lender Shriram Finance — the largest FDI in the sector to date.

Just as Gulf's monarchies and their

petrodollars get pulled towards Trump's grandiose plans to MAGA, corporations from Japan are getting pulled towards India. In the last 1 month, close to \$7 bn of investments were announced, across steel to financial services — more than cumulative FDI equity inflows over last 4 yrs. The double-digit figure by year end will also be the highest in the last 25 yrs.

Correspondingly, equity investments

held in India by Japanese investors have nearly doubled in last 2 yrs to \$28 bn, both in value terms as well as incremental capital flows via the FPI route — a function of valuations and renewed interest of fund managers, data from Ambit shows. Even more remarkable in the backdrop of a falling yen.

Tokyo has been our steadfast ally even

before Shinzo Abe had cemented the civilisational links with increased trade, tech and traditions proximity. Indian infra, including the bullet train project, has been bankrolled by multilateral agencies like JICA. Now, geopolitics is driving their private sector

and services. ADIA even backed NIIF, its quasi-SWF. But Trump's relentless bromance with Arab rulers is making them tilt towards him. As he did in 2017, POTUS decided to make Saudi Arabia his first pit stop of his state visit to West Asia during his 2nd presidency.

For him, it's also as much about further entrenching the business interests — multibillion Trump-branded properties, real estate developments, hotels and golf resorts, media and cryptoverse — as it is about a spur for American industry, pouring trillions of dollars in promised West Asia investments in the US. UAE SWF-backed Emirates Aluminum is setting up a \$6 bn smelter in Oklahoma.

For the first time, West Asian powers are also able to buy influence in Washington using money power. They have also become the answer to a list of intractable dilemmas ranging from conflicts across the region to handling early negotiations with Russia over Ukraine.

Smelling an opportunity, cash-rich kingdoms are fawning over Trump with gifts and promises to cut trillion-dollar deals in defence, energy, infra, chips and AI.

In October, MGX — a JV between UAE's national security adviser Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Mubadala — partnered Nvidia, Microsoft, BlackRock and Elon Musk's xAI to purchase Aligned Data Centers for \$40 bn, the largest global data centre deal to date.

It's wrong to assume Arab money will dry up for India, but it will get far more selective for banks like Emirates NBD or investment vehicles of Sheikh Tahnoon — Alpha Wave and IHC — and SWFs like ADIA, a lion's share of whose deals is in India. We may well be among the largest buyers of West Asian crude or a large aviation market for their national carriers, but Aramco's \$15 bn investment in greenfield oil refineries or buying into Reliance Industries is unlikely to happen in a hurry. The spectre of tariffs and turmoil is reshaping commerce.

For the Japanese, India is the prize they have been circling around for decades. Now is their moment to grab it. Many of their marquee names may have bled in the past, but they are willing to move ahead. We can ill-afford any slip ups.

Translated from German by Shaun Whiteside



Catch 'em if you can

The Wall

Marlen Haushofer

Today, the fifth of November, I shall begin my report. I shall set everything down as precisely as I can. But I don't even know if today really is the fifth of November. Over the course of the past winter I've lost track of a few days. I can't even say what day of the week it is. But I don't think that's very important.

All I have to rely on is a few meagre jottings; meagre, because I never expected to write this report, and I'm afraid that much that I remember will be different from my real experiences.

All reports probably suffer from this shortcoming. I'm not writing for the sheer joy of writing; so many things have happened to me that I must write if I am not to lose my reason. There's no one here to think

and care for me. I'm quite alone, and I must try to survive the long, dark winter months. I don't expect these notebooks will ever be found. At the moment I don't even know whether I hope they will be. Perhaps I will know, once I've finished.

I've taken on this task to keep me from staring into the gloom and being frightened. For I am frightened. Fear creeps up on me from all sides, and I don't want to wait until it gets to me and overpowers me. I shall write until darkness falls, and this new, unfamiliar work should make my mind tired, empty and drowsy. I'm not afraid of morning, only of the long, gloomy afternoons.

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A thought for today

Falsehood flies, and the truth
comes limping after it

JONATHAN SWIFT

EGGREGIOS

Food regulator has to do more to counter alarmist and dangerously false claims by food influencers

Food regulator FSSAI has called out the misinformation that eggs can be a cancer risk. It has clarified that detecting 'trace' residues isn't the same as proving health risk; there's 'no established causal link' between trace-level dietary exposure to antibiotics in question (nitrofurans) and cancer, and no health authority anywhere has linked normal egg consumption to increased cancer risk. When produced under food safety norms, eggs remain nutritious and safe to eat.

It started with a so-called 'influencer' on a social media platform naming a company's eggs as cancer-causing. It is just one more instance of the gray area where 'influencers' operate, without rules, regulation, restraint or scientific basis. The impact of such 'influencers' peddling food, finance and wellness/health gyaan is often ruinous. There is no accountability on their part. Anything goes. Recall how Delhi HC ordered a YouTuber to remove a food video, noting that social media influencers cannot irresponsibly comment on subjects outside their expertise. And bad money advice has hurt millions.

What is more alarming is how this dangerous fake news took a life of its own. The shady marketplace that is social media, unsurprisingly co-opted the claims to serve specific agendas. Like shops finding a new advertisement for their wares. One such misleading strand returned us to the so-called 'debate' on vegetarianism and meat-eating - in truth, a non-debate in most food circles. For, the problem is not veggies or dal (yum), egg or fish (also yum), but poor eating habits. A key challenge is over-reliance on fried snacks and processed foods. We have plenty non-eaters too, not for want of food - just excessively pernickety. Such attitudes impact health. Exclusionary food practices, self-denial, impacts health. At the other end, bingeing impacts health. Add to this the fundamental challenges of overuse of pesticides, unsafe additives and colours, poor water quality, and unhygienic production practices. Plus, the burden and fear of cancer is ever-growing.

Taken together, we are an audience ripe for food 'influencers' who're simply growing their online business. We spend a lot of time talking/thinking/planning food. Food influencers can, and do, influence people's dietary choices. It is easy to sow doubt. Fake news can do much more damage than any food fad. Which is why onus is on FSSAI to launch a wide counter-campaign to kill the misinformation and ensure public is not misled.

SIMply Problematic

Govt should rethink idea that SIM-binding will curb cyber fraud. Biggest impact will be consumer inconvenience

GOI's push for continuous SIM-binding for messaging apps like WhatsApp and Signal appears to be a classic case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Govt has been pitching the move as a way to counter cyberfraud and enhance security. But little attention has been paid to huge disruptions that'll follow SIM-binding. SIM-binding means messaging apps are always tagged onto particular SIMs - so, app accounts and their users can be tracked. But the order fails to appreciate how these apps have become an essential part of daily life.

India's communication-platform-as-a-service market is slated to grow to \$3.06bn by 2030. Consider this: India is a prepaid-dominated SIM market where low-income households frequently change SIMs to reduce costs and take advantage of the best telecom packages on offer. But SIM-binding kills this benefit in one stroke. Users will be immediately locked out of communication apps if they change SIM. And since messaging apps have essentially become the primary mode of communication in a relatively low-data-cost environment, reauthentication with new SIMs becomes a disincentive. Also, in many low-income households phones are shared. The order simply doesn't account for this.

On the other end of the spectrum, those who travel abroad frequently will not be able to use their Indian number-linked messaging accounts through Wi-Fi alone. Meanwhile, the order also mandates periodic logouts and reauthentication for desktop versions of these apps - govt's proposal mandates this happens every six hours. This is disruptive for workflows and automated systems that use these apps. Aside from all these inconveniences, the measure might not curb fraud either. SIM-binding is for Indian numbers. So, it doesn't account for fraudsters operating from abroad using foreign numbers. Nor does it account for remote access of devices located in India. SIM-binding merely creates a new burden for consumers without much benefit. Greater industry consultations must be held before it is rolled out.

Walk the walk

We never stop learning how to take things in our stride

Jug Suraiya

 We never stop learning how to walk the walk. The ability to stand upright on their two feet in order to walk gave our ancestors an evolutionary advantage. Almost all other species, barring birds and marsupials, are quadrupeds.

Walking on two legs instead of four freed our arms and hands to make things, weapons for the hunt and implements for the hearth. It enabled us to lift and carry away small children from approaching danger, ensuring the survival of our species.

The evolutionary history of walking did not stop in those prehistoric times, but continues to the present day, when this activity plays a crucial role in our lives.

Not so long ago getting from place to place on a daily basis entailed walking, which was as normal as eating or breathing.

With the advent of labour-saving technology such as automotive transport, physical exertion has been minimised, at least for urban dwellers.

We lead increasingly sedentary lives, creating the paradox of the fitness enthusiast who drives a car or rides a two-wheeler to a gym to pound the treadmill for an hour to burn off calories.

Medical science warns us that in order to remain healthy we must perform a special ritual called physical exercise, and the consensus is that the best form of exercise for people of all ages is walking as an aid to reduce excess weight, and lower cholesterol and blood sugar levels.

Apart from comfortable shoes, walking requires no special equipment. But how much walking we do? The urban myth that you should walk 10,000 steps a day owes its origin to a marketing ploy devised by a Japanese company which makes pedometers. With a yen, in more ways than one, to promote the concept of fitness, the firm conjured the 10,000-steps rule, which has been debunked.

Depending on one's age and general physical condition, most healthcare professionals advise 30 minutes of walking, at least five times a week, at a moderate pace.

That's the 'walk-up' call for all of us - no matter what we do for a living, that's our walk in life.

GLP-1 Does A Fat Lot Of Good

Our national love language is food, our cities discourage walking. So, most of us are portly. But best-selling weight-loss injections can help us only so much. Indians won't slim down unless they learn discipline

Chetan Bhagat



Ask anyone who has battled their weight all their life - yours truly included - and you'll discover the staggering amount of time, energy and mental bandwidth that mere weight management consumes. On paper, fitness is simple: "Eat less and move more." Easy, right?

Except, it isn't.

Because "eat less" really means eat less than you want to, all the time - and "move more" means move more than anyone normal would choose to. Add to this our environment, where tempting, hyper-delicious foods follow us around like loyal but toxic best friends - whether marketed by brands or lovingly forced upon us by Indian relatives.

Indians don't say "I love you." They say, "Beta, have one more samosa."

Our national love language is food - preferably the fat-carb-sugar explosion called mithai or the fat-carb-salt bomb known as namkeen. The most common expression of care in India is "Did you eat?" Nobody ever asks, "Did you eat less, like you're supposed to?"

And the "move more" part? Harder still. Trillion-dollar tech companies have trapped us in the quicksand of reels, videos and binge-worthy content. Exercise culture is patchy - a walk now, some yoga then, all inconsistent. Step outside and you face pollution, traffic and roads that treat pedestrians as optional. Even kids don't play outside anymore; why run in a park when an iPad can do the running for you?

Upshot: millions of overweight Indians who cannot eat less and move more. We're trapped with too much food, too little movement, and a culture that reinforces both.

And then something big happened in 2025. Something that, if global trends are any indication, is about to completely transform India over the next few years.

GLP-1 drugs - expensive and require weekly self-injections. Yet, within months of launch, they shot up sales charts. Why? Because GLP-1s help people lose weight - genuinely.

Scepticism is understandable. Over the decades, we've seen vibrating belts, "fat-melting" oils, electromagnetic waistbands (also useless), herbal supplements (double useless), and drastic solutions like bariatric surgery. But nothing in the last 50 years has shown results quite

like GLP-1s. Verdict from millions of users and multiple large studies is - they work.

GLP-1 stands for glucagon-like peptide-1, a hormone that regulates appetite and blood sugar. These drugs mimic the hormone, reduce cravings, lower blood sugar, and help with weight loss. They're so potent that tiny milligram doses can cross the blood-brain barrier and directly activate the brain's satiety centres.

Medicines like Ozempic, Wegovy, Mounjaro, and Zepbound fall in this category. Some variations target different hormones; some were approved for diabetes



like India headed the same way? My bet: absolutely. GLP-1s are cheaper here but still pricey - around ₹13,000 for four weekly injections. Not exactly pocket change. But several patents expire in 2026, and affordable Indian versions are already in development. Soon, lakhs - if not millions - of samosa- and gulab-jamun-loving Indians will give these injections a try. Expect a social revolution in the next three years.

But is this a magic bullet? Does "eat less, move more" now become "eat biryani daily, inject once a week"?

Not quite.

These drugs have side effects - nausea, constipation, indigestion, and general stomach drama. And they absolutely do not replace healthy eating or exercise. At best, they suppress hunger, making it easier to follow a sensible diet. Exercise remains essential - not just for calorie burn, but to prevent muscle loss. Without movement, you may lose weight - but at the cost of muscle, which is a terrible trade, especially as we age.

The smart approach is to use the lowest effective dose to quiet the "food noise" - the constant internal commentary that says "bhujia? biscuits? pao bhaji?" every 12 minutes.

But of course, many people will misuse the drugs - skip exercise, eat poorly and expect miracles. They'll end up with muscle loss and the dreaded "Ozempic face" - a hollow, shrivelled look that even Instagram filters can't fix.

There's another catch: stop the drug, hunger comes roaring back. If you haven't learned better food habits while on it, you will gain back all the weight - and possibly even more. That's not speculation; studies confirm it.

So yes, these drugs have great uses. But here's what they are not:

- They are not substitutes for discipline.
- They are not shortcuts to a six-pack.
- They will not let you recline on a sofa, binge-watch TV, and still lose weight while polishing off samosas and jalebis.

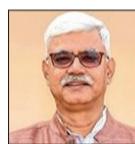
Nature demands effort. It rewards discipline - not injections - with long-term health. For now, no drug can give you a ripped body without work. Maybe AI will crack that someday, but for now, the old rule stands: move your body, eat sensibly, and build discipline.

Discipline may never be a trillion-dollar company, but when it comes to living a good life, it is - and will always be - priceless.

Did Macaulay Alienate Indians From Their Roots? No, No, No

He succeeded in his narrow goal of building a clerical class for colonisers. But education in Indian languages continued to thrive, as did criticism of Brits for betraying Enlightenment values

Bidyut Chakrabarty



English colonisers' introduction of English education in India, following the promulgation of Macaulay's 1835 Minutes, is once again in the eye of a storm. The Minutes have often been blamed for dissociating Indians from their cultural roots. PM Modi has also made this claim in a widely circulated public speech.

To the extent that his Minutes are considered responsible for creating circumstances in which "the natives" gradually became blind imitators of the British socio-cultural ethos, TB Macaulay is now regarded as a villain in history. But this is an oversimplification of India's colonial history, which was rooted in a programme of systematic exploitation, meant to consolidate British rule.

The 1899 Morley-Minto Reforms, for instance, were a response to the increasingly hostile nature of the nationalist campaign led by Congress's Lal-Bal-Pal triumvirate and Aurobindo Ghose.

Likewise, Macaulay Minutes were basically a design to prepare Indians to help the British rule India for the colonisers' priorities. These opened the door for the ruled to become part of the administration, and many Indians celebrated. One of the first Indian Civil Service officers was Satyendranath Tagore, elder brother of Rabindranath Tagore. In this sense, it is misleading to argue that Indians took Indians away from their roots.

Furthermore, the continuity of alternative education left enormous opportunities for Indians to be educated in the language of their choice. For example, Debendranath Tagore founded Tattwabodhini Patshala in 1840, to provide an indigenous alternative to English education. Under Akshay Kumar Dutta's (1820-1886) tutelage, Patshala emphasised a Bengali-language curriculum, promoting a rational and scientific outlook while remaining rooted in Indian culture. Here, English was taught as a language, with the belief that it would empower

learners to become acquainted with the values of Enlightenment, and champion humanism.

It's no exaggeration that many Indian intellectuals hailed the arrival of the British, because they were convinced that, by demolishing feudal rule, it heralded a new era in India. Rammohun Roy (1773-1833) was a pioneer. His determination to abolish the most inhuman Sati custom wouldn't have gone far had he not been supported by the rulers. Similarly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) would have failed to successfully address the agony of the young widows, without the legal



endorsement of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.

Yes, long before Macaulay Minutes were promulgated, Indian intellectuals were drawn to Enlightenment visions that had evolved in England since the seventeenth century. But the claim that Macaulay succeeded in dismantling India's civilisational base is quite incorrect.

Consider the Tagore family's history. Patriarchs Dwarkanath (1794-1846), Debendranath (1817-1905), and Rabindranath (1861-1941) were neither xenophobic, nor anglicised to the extent of being identified as pucca Englishmen. As a companion of Rammohun Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore, Rabindranath's grandfather, wrote many pieces in the weekly *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, which he funded, on the Ramayana, Mahabharat, and

Upanishads to show that India's intellectual resources were equally illuminating.

That Indian opinion makers showed admiration of the British, should also be qualified by how much they questioned the colonisers for deviating from Enlightenment visions. In the political arena, Dadabhai Naoroji's *Poverty And Un-British Rule In India* (1903) castigated the rulers for draining India's wealth, without care for the adverse impact on Indians. Lal-Bal-Pal and Aurobindo Ghose criticised colonial rule in their mouthpiece, *Bande Mataram*.

India's nationalist history thus witnessed a constant ideological battle between visions emanating from Western discourses and those from indigenous sources of wisdom. India benefitted from colonisation insofar as it created conditions for the flourishing of Enlightenment discourses. However, in his essay 'Crisis in Civilisation' (1941), Rabindranath Tagore candidly admitted that although he had welcomed British rule because it was an antidote to an archaic code of conduct, which safeguarded the exclusive interests of a few, he was soon disillusioned.

Because he discovered how easily those who accepted the highest truths of civilisation, disowned them with impunity whenever the questions of their self-interest were involved. British rule was condemned for its contemptuous indifference to Indians' well-being. Hence, the claim that Macaulay was responsible for making Indians forgetful of their civilisational worth does not seem tenable.

This was a battle fought at a structural level, where it has now been well-established that British rule was viewed differently by different Indians, in accordance with their different socio-economic and political priorities. And Macaulay's intervention wasn't nearly as impactful as is often assumed. Its purpose itself was limited: transforming a section of Indians into capable assistants to the *de facto* rulers, in governing India as a colony.

The writer is former Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

Calvin & Hobbes



Swami Tejomayananda

In life, it is almost impossible for anyone to remain entirely free from blemish. Criticisms and accusations touch everyone; no one escapes them. Ram and Sita were not spared; they were unfairly blamed and criticised. Yet in the entire Ramayan, there stands one character who remains untouched by fault, beyond all criticism: Hanuman. He embodies wisdom, devotion, and selfless service. This noble son of Vayu and Anjana is adorned with countless virtues.

It is easy to recognise the importance of the Sun, as it is unavailable at night. However, the wind is with us twenty-four hours a day. It exists within us as vital air (*prana*), and without it, we would not survive. Externally, the wind blows constantly, acting as a powerful purifier

It serves us quietly, without any pomp or show, which is why we often take its existence for granted.

Pavan Kumar Hanuman, inherited this rare ability to serve all from his celestial father. He crossed the ocean, entered for formidable Lanka, discovered Sita, burnt Lanka, and destroyed Ravan's demons - all with deep devotion and absolute humility. Ram was overwhelmed by Hanuman's service, filled with love and gratitude. He praised Hanuman openly. But on hearing his own glory described, Hanuman, fell at his feet, tears in his eyes, attributing every success to the Lord alone.

We are advised to emulate this spirit of serving our master with unwavering faith and devotion. But often, we fail to



THE SPEAKING TREE

ask: who is the true Master? Only the one who reigns as the Lord of the universe, and in serving whom our inherent divinity comes to shine forth. He alone can be a Master. Hanuman's life vividly reveals this truth.

Before meeting Ram, Hanuman served Sugriva, but his immense powers remained dormant. Sugriva could not awaken them; he himself lived in fear of his brother Vali and relied on Hanuman for protection. Such a person could never be the true master of anyone. It was Ram alone who, by His grace, brought Hanuman's latent greatness to full expression.

The moment Hanuman saw Ram, he recognised his true master immediately. From that instant, he became Ram's devoted servant and inspired Sugriva to do the same

As soon as Sugriva surrendered at the lotus feet of the Lord, blessings flowed, and fruits of devotion were his.

In Lanka, both Lankini and Vibhishan served Ravan out of a misplaced sense



Assam's Elephant deaths expose a systemic failure

As the Forest and Railway departments trade blame, the tragedy lays bare a deeper, long-standing failure: India's development model continues to carve through fragmented forests and animal habitats with inadequate safeguards, making such disasters not accidents, but outcomes of sustained policy and planning neglect

BK SINGH

In the wee hours of Saturday, eight elephants were knocked down by the Mizoram-Delhi Rajdhani Express in Sangjurai village, Hojai district of central Assam, killing seven of them on the spot and injuring one. The injured elephant also died the next day while undergoing treatment. Five of the killed elephants were calves. Visibility was very poor due to heavy fog when the train struck the elephant herd. The loco pilot did apply the emergency brake to avert the accident; testimony to this is the derailment of the locomotive and the first five bogies of the train. The train could only be started four hours later, when the derailed bogies were replaced.

The Forest and Railways departments blamed each other for this. Though Sangjurai village is not in the recognised elephant crossing corridor, movement of elephant herds in the paddy fields as well as through the cluster of houses in the village is quite common. The Forest Department has already recognised several corridors for the movement of elephants crossing the rail tracks in the state. I spoke to Assam's Chief Wildlife Warden, Dr Vinay Gupta, who says that the recognised corridors are many, where trains move with an upper speed limit of 20 km per hour and are monitored with an array of gadgets, but it may not be practical to recognise all rail tracks in the state as corridors. He further added that the track running through the paddy fields of Sangjurai village is elevated and the elephants on the track would not have sufficient time to move out, even after the locomotive whistle or sound was heard. He is hopeful of finding a solution to the problem in a forthcoming brainstorming session with Rail officials.

The Range Forest Officer, Kampur, has informed the press that the place of collision is three-fourths of a kilometre from the potential crossing spot at pillar number 125. Further, AI-enabled intrusion detection systems (IDS) are installed at several places. The nearest system to the accident site is 32 km away, located between Haukipur and Limdung towns linking central Assam to the Barak Valley and Mizoram. Locals at the acci-



FIFTEEN YEARS LATER, WHEN FORESTS REVIVE AND PRODUCE ENOUGH HUMUS ON THE FOREST FLOOR, VILLAGERS RETURN TO THE ORIGINAL AREA AND AGAIN CLEAR TREE GROWTH AND BURN IT

The writer is Retired Head of Kamataka Forest Force and presently teaches Economics in Kamataka Forest Academy

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dent site feel that a similar system at Sangjurai could have avoided the accident. They also said that elephants regularly move out of forests from November to February and come to the village for food (paddy and sugarcane), and the authorities have been pleaded with to recognise it as an elephant route.

Ninety-four elephants are said to have been killed in Assam since 2019-20 in train collisions. Elephants in the Jalpaiguri belt of West Bengal are even more vulnerable to train accidents. The last two train collision cases were recorded there. A report, "Suggested Measures to Mitigate Elephant and Other Wildlife Train Collisions on Vulnerable Railway Stretches in India", has identified 127 stretches spanning over 3,452 km. Seventy-seven railway stretches over 1,965 km in 14 states have been prioritised for mitigation measures. Clearly, there has been laxity on the part of the Railway and Forest departments, as despite such measures being in place, accidents continue

to happen.

Linear infrastructure such as roads, railways and canals fragment forests and wildlife reserves as well as corridors for their movement. Although widening of roads and converting single rail tracks into double lines are necessities of growth and development of the country, at the same time proper mitigation measures must be in place. Development projects such as mining, industries and expanding agriculture also lead to deforestation and degradation of natural forests, and in the process forests get fragmented. As forests shrink, wild animals have no option but to stray out of reserves.

If the size of forests or reserves is large enough to hold a viable population of wild animals and also provide enough food and water, animals can probably be contained within the reserves. Assam's forests have been sufficiently fragmented owing to development projects and expanding agriculture. The Bodo agitation also took its toll on forests, and there was massive

deforestation during that period. Northeastern states, in general, practise shifting cultivation. Forests are cleared and burned for growing agricultural crops, and after a few years, when productivity falls, villagers clear fresh areas and burn tree growth for cultivation again. Fifteen years later, when forests revive and produce enough humus on the forest floor, villagers return to the original area and again clear tree growth and burn it. These areas are perpetually cleared for cultivation. What remains as natural forest is on hilltops, which are spared as agriculture is not viable there. The practice of shifting cultivation is quite harmful to forests and wildlife conservation.

Forest-dwelling communities and tribals claim rights over forest land under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. The Act has been grossly misused in the North-east and several other states in central India and along the coast. This has provided a tool for local communities to occupy forests after clearing tree growth and burning. The Act has created a tendency among com-

munities to grab land. It has been the biggest driver of deforestation in post-Independence India. Officially, communities are to claim rights over forest land only if they were in occupation of the land as on December 13, 2005. More than 20 years have passed since the cut-off date; it is high time the Act is repealed.

Central Coalfields Limited, Ranchi, once came up with a proposal to lay a railway line through forests in Jharkhand. During scrutiny of the proposal in the Ministry of Environment and Forests, I found that the line had been deliberately aligned through forests to save costs, as the user agency would have had to pay heavily for acquisition of private land. I turned it down, but after my transfer, the proposal was accepted. Similarly, the Daitari-Banspani single railway line project through the forests of Keonjhar district of Odisha was turned down by me but approved later. This has led to an increase in wildlife conflict, and collisions of elephants with trains have gone up manyfold. Now the doubling of this rail line has been proposed.

The Hubballi-Ankola rail line through the best forests and wildlife-rich areas of Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka has been turned down by several officers during the last two decades, but the user agency, with the support of some politicians, continues reopening the file every time a new person takes charge. Despite being rejected many times in the past, the file of the Sharavathi pump storage project, requiring the sacrifice of 200 ha of pristine forest in the same district in the Western Ghats, is being reopened repeatedly. These projects will have disastrous consequences for the lives and livelihoods of people in Karnataka and will further aggravate human-wildlife conflict.

Land is a scarce commodity and is required for development projects. If any project is to be permitted, land has to be acquired or forests diverted. The need of the hour is to minimise diversion of forest land, and wherever it is necessary, proper mitigation measures must be built in. Highways and railway lines must have sufficient underpasses for the movement of wild animals. New rail and road projects in elephant areas must be made elevated.

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OPINION

The True Meaning of Empathy

INSIDE
VIEW
By Andy
Kessler

Walking down Sixth Avenue in New York recently, I was mesmerized by a Salvation Army dude with his red donation bucket dancing to Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You." I wondered if he took Venmo. It got me thinking—"tis the season—about good will toward men and the seasonal spirit of kindness, empathy and compassion.

How to do it? It takes more than a drop in a bucket. The Jewish faith has a moral obligation of *tzedakah*, loosely defined as charity but literally translated as righteousness. I'm the last person to interpret the Bible, but to me that means do the right thing. But what does that entail?

The word "empathy" gets thrown around like a rag doll. Empathy often means sharing other's feelings to understand their problems. Or maybe recognizing that everyone has a unique story and putting yourself in his shoes. Empathy is often confused with sympathy, which is more about feeling without sharing. Maybe that's why "with sympathy" is limited to deaths and personal losses, things no one wants to share literally.

These feelings have morphed into, as I've heard it, "showing empathy for categories of people who are margin-

alized and villainized and did nothing to bring it on themselves." This helps the empathizer make sense of things, but it sounds more like victimization and a savior complex than empathy. There's a fine line between compassion and pity.

I will assert that everyone, outside a few Cruella De Vils, has some empathy, no matter how you define it. Increasingly, our political divide is based on what to do about those feelings. Many people say they're empathetic, but are they?

Some people are performers. In June 2020, Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer led a group kneeling in the U.S. Capitol wearing African kente stoles. National Football League end zones say "Choose Love" and "It Takes All of Us." Empathy? More like images over action.

Then there are coddlers. They paternalistically throw money at problems: welfare, drug programs, ObamaCare. They create rules and regulations to protect "marginalized" groups: Title IX, affirmative action and federal contract set-asides. To pay for it, they rationalize redistributive of wealth so the world can be "fair" for everyone. This progressive playbook often fails. See low-income housing, preferential college admissions and rising insurance premiums. Is letting men on women's swim teams and in women's bathrooms empathy?

I can't get there. What coddlers are missing

with their brand of empathy is respect. Human dignity, the foundation of equality. Justice Clarence Thomas famously peeled a 15-cent price sticker off a cigar package and pressed it onto the frame holding his Yale Law degree. Such was his contempt for affirmative action.

Finally, we have the dignitaries. Create opportunities. Give fewer handouts, but instead

The word has many definitions, the best of which centers on respect and dignity.

clear a path to success. Educate. Train. Work hard. Get ahead. This free-market approach creates change and economic growth that not everyone buys into. But it's real progress. Yes, we need to help those who stumble by providing enough temporary assistance to restore human dignity so they can become productive. But commerce beats charity. (Don't make me quote Bono again!)

Encouraging growth is empathetic, as it enables everyone to get ahead. Even the weak-tea big-government "abundance" movement of the left admits this. But government ends up corrupting good intentions. Medicare fraud in Minnesota is only the latest example. Fraud from the Covid-era Economic Injury Disaster Loans and Paycheck

Protection Program may be in the hundreds of billions. Giving stuff away creates a cycle of dependency, no matter how good the person giving things away feels.

New York Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani is a coddler: "We will prove that there is no problem too large for government to solve, and no concern too small for it to care about." Yikes. Is that empathy or a threat? Sadly, we know how the latter ends. Lately there has been talk of a \$140,000 poverty line for a family of four. See what I mean?

Economist Milton Friedman put it best: "One of the great mistakes is to judge policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results." Intentions like "social justice" inevitably lead to organizing and activism and raised taxes—empathy is expensive!—and redistribution of wealth, without solving the underlying problems.

For me, empathy and that elusive righteousness is about restoring lost dignity. And that often means setting up rules and then getting out of the way and letting freedom and free markets do their magic. There is little political credit for that whole "freedom" thing. Just results.

The American way is: Do what you want, but respect the dignity of others. An essential part of respect is to not be pitied. Freedom is dignity. That's true empathy.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

The EU Fights Carbon and Loses

By Carlo Stagnaro

The European Union may establish a subsidy to offset a tariff meant to offset a tax. The European Commission, the bloc's executive branch, recently announced a €600 million temporary fund to help domestic businesses cope with a new carbon border tax that will take effect in January. The fund is part of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, a tariff system conceived to protect European producers from foreign competitors that aren't required to pay for the carbon emissions they generate.

CBAM will create as many problems as it addresses. During the transitional phase, 2023-25, importers of some carbon-intensive goods (cement, iron and steel, aluminum, fertilizers, electricity and hydrogen) were required to report the embedded emissions of their imports. Next year, they will pay a fee linked to the price of carbon allowances in the EU Emissions Trading System. The distribution of free allowances—set up to protect energy-intensive, trade-exposed industries from foreign competition—will be phased out.

According to the European Commission, the law is "a tool to put a fair price on carbon emitted during the production of carbon-intensive goods that are entering the EU, and to encourage cleaner industrial production in non-EU countries." Who could object to leveling the playing field, improving environmental quality,

and protecting the competitiveness of European producers? But the implementation is riddled with complexity.

Take its reporting requirements. The direct and indirect emissions of imported goods are difficult to estimate even in countries with strong, transparent reporting frameworks—never mind in places like China, where verification is nearly impossible. Yet importers are responsible for the accuracy of their submissions.

The bloc considers establishing a subsidy to offset a tariff meant to offset a tax.

Such systems are also easy to game. When California introduced its cap-and-trade system and a carbon border fee on imported electricity, generators in neighboring states rerouted low-carbon electricity to California while sending carbon-intensive electricity elsewhere. Such "reshuffling" involved substantial paperwork and had no environmental benefit. Now imagine the scale of such opportunism when the trade involves the EU and China or India.

Even if gaming could be eliminated, the law would be seriously flawed. Applying only to certain carbon-intensive sectors, it raises prices to reflect the cost of embedded carbon and so creates a perverse incentive to outsource production of downstream

goods. If the cost of EU-made cars or wind turbines rises because the law increases the price of steel, it may become cheaper to import finished cars or turbines. That wouldn't prevent "carbon leakage"—the relocation of industrial activity to avoid regulation—but exacerbate it. The commission admitted the problem and extended the mechanism to such finished products as washing machines, industrial radiators and garden tools. But importers will need to assess the direct and indirect carbon content of every component.

There's more. Even if the law successfully levels the playing field within Europe, many European firms rely heavily on exports. In the first three quarters of 2025, the EU recorded a trade surplus in goods of €104.3 billion, with extra-EU exports of €1,986.7 billion. These exporters will face higher domestic input costs for products under the law, and the announced fund, which is likely incompatible with trade rules under the World Trade Organization, is too small to do much good.

The €600 million fund is supposed to offset a cost estimated to be around €1.4 billion. As a result, European producers may lose market share abroad to competitors in more carbon-intensive jurisdictions. Global emissions will rise, harming both Europe's economy and the planet.

Economist James Bushnell noted when the debate over the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism began: "There is at least one instrument that

avoids all of these problems. Strangely enough, that instrument is output-based allocation"—i.e., free allowances to carbon-intensive, trade-exposed industries—"the very tool being phased out by the EU in favor of CBAM."

Europe's carbon regime is also fueling international friction, as seen at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in late November. Instead of leading negotiations, the EU found itself criticized for intertwining climate and trade policy in ways that undermine trade, damage Europe's economy and may increase global emissions.

The EU climate commissioner, Wopke Hoekstra, admitted that the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism was "too broad" and "too clunky." Making it even broader and cunkier won't help.

Carbon pricing is the most efficient tool to abate emissions; its pain may be alleviated by pragmatic fixes, such as recycling revenues to reduce other taxes or distributing free allowances to industries exposed to foreign competition. Economic historian Carlo Maria Cipolla defined stupidity as causing losses to others while gaining nothing. It's time for Europe's climate policies to become smarter.

Mr. Stagnaro is the research and studies director at the Bruno Leoni Institute, an Italian think tank.

Mary Anastasia O'Grady is away.

Would You Let Claude Do Your Taxes?

By Carter C. Price

Artificial-intelligence evangelists and alarmists share one conviction. Both believe, despite scant evidence so far, that AI is on the verge of replacing human knowledge workers. Today's large language models—ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Grok—can write code and polish prose. But would you trust them to do your taxes?

In principle, tax filing should be the ideal use case for an AI system. It is a highly routinized but complex process. It requires attention to detail, an understanding of ever-changing regulations and the ability to interpret ambiguous instructions.

But it's also a task that has little to no room for error. The Internal Revenue Service won't accept "The robot did it" as an excuse for misfilings, which can carry life-altering penalties for the taxpayer.

Given that specialized AI

systems can produce gold-medal answers to International Math Olympiad questions, calculating taxes should be no big deal. But AI systems also fail to count how often the letter r appears in "strawberry." This variation in capabilities is sometimes referred to as the "jagged frontier."

Preparing a return is the kind of task AI ought to be good for.

Before they replace human workers, AI systems need to be able to do the required tasks—and consumers and employers need to trust that AI will do them properly. There have been hundreds of examples of lawyers relying on AI systems that "hallucinated" case law or misrepresented exhibits and filings. The consequences of this happening on your tax return could be severe.

Predictions are tricky, but as a mathematician working on economic and technology policy, I guess that Americans won't use large language models for their taxes in the year ahead. I know I don't trust them to complete my own return without error.

In the future, that will likely change. Models are already pretty good at extracting information from structured text, and AI systems are becoming more reliable with each update. By 2027 I anticipate using a large language model to help draft my filings, perhaps as a first pass before reviewing and submitting them myself. By 2028 I predict enough people will trust general-purpose AI to handle their individual taxes to have a material effect on companies like H&R Block and Intuit.

My timelines might be too conservative if there is a push to make reliable consumer AI products. Alternatively, regulatory or liability hurdles could

slow progress, as governments grapple with privacy and other implications of AI-driven automation in sensitive areas like tax compliance.

Still, the ubiquity, complexity and accountability tax filing requires make it a good litmus test of the AI zealots and doomsayers' beliefs. My research leads me to worry about the effect that AI may have on the labor market: Policymakers should be preparing for major economic disruptions.

TurboTax will be the canary in the coal mine. Until people can trust AI to do their taxes, they shouldn't trust it to do their jobs. That gives us a little time to prepare—but not much.

Mr. Price, a mathematician, co-directs the RAND Budget Model Initiative and a professor at the RAND School of Public Policy, where he teaches courses on machine learning and AI.

BOOKSHELF | By Dominic Green

The Revolution Stabs Its Own

Murder in the Rue Marat

By Thomas Crow

Princeton, 176 pages, \$30

A man sits in a bath and bleeds to death. He holds a piece of paper in one hand and a quill in the other. It could be a "Roman death": the noble suicide choosing death before dishonor. Yet the wound is in his chest, not his wrist. His hands still grip the tools of his trade, so the knife on the floor must belong to someone else. We are looking at murder. But we already know that. The man in the tub is the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, a journalist and physician who had incited a series of judicial massacres. Marat was murdered in July 1793 by Charlotte Corday, who was aligned with the more moderate Girondin faction. Her name is on the paper Marat holds in his left hand.

This murder scene is the 1793 painting "The Death of Marat," a life-size tribute by Jacques-Louis David. Marat's friend and ally, David is the exception that proves the rule that political art is bad art.

The arc of the French Revolution is revealed in three David paintings: the brutal republican ideals of 1789's "The Lictors Bring to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons," the revolution stabbing its own in "The Death of Marat" and, in "Napoleon Crossing the Alps" (1805), the rise of an imperial dictator.

In this triptych, Marat's martyrdom is a muted centerpiece between grand hope and grander disaster.

Thomas Crow's "Murder in the Rue Marat" is a granular account of the making of a masterpiece and a personal elaboration on its afterlife. Mr. Crow, a professor of modern art at New York University, has previously written about the relationship between art and politics in 18th-century France and America's 1960s counterculture. The political centerpiece of 1968 was, at least if you're French, the *événements* of May, in which bourgeois students took to the streets of Paris to re-enact the revolutionary theater of 1789. "Murder in the Rue Marat" engages the whole period, from the making of a radical French myth to the radical self-mythologizing of a French elite.

Jean-Paul Marat and Jacques-Louis David rose through the Revolution as a double act, with what Mr. Crow calls "generalized identities." Marat, who edited the daily sheet *L'Ami du peuple*, played the role of a "friend of the people." He was so fervent that he got ahead of the Revolution in its early, constitutional phase and had to hide in the sewers. As the Revolution intensified, he emerged as "the fiercest advocate for the wholesale arrest and execution of wrongdoers." David, who had already secured a reputation and patrons, retained his winnings while remaking himself as the "pageant-master of the Revolution." Both lived in the Cordeliers neighborhood, where the Revolution was said to have begun. Both were Montagnards, members of the Revolution's most ardent faction; Corday, from the rival Girondins, gained entry to Marat's bathtub by claiming to have information on Girondin fugitives. David had a tumor on his cheek that "distorted his face and slurred his speech." Marat had an agonizing skin condition, which is why he worked in his bath.

The blood from Marat's carotid artery, Mr. Crow writes, "splashed over the assassin and every surface in the vicinity" and ran into the next room. This is not what David depicts. The top half of his canvas is dark. In the lower half, Marat reclines in a coffin-like bath, topped with a board and a green cloth. Next to it stands the wooden crate on which Marat wrote. The board conceals most of the bloodstained water; David shows us only a

Jean-Paul Marat met his end in his bathtub. The assailant was sent to the guillotine but the murder would live on in an indelible painting.

tiny drip of blood, running along the small puncture mark beneath Marat's right clavicle, and a thin carmine zigzag running to a foreshortened puddle on the floor. His Marat has the "seraphic countenance" and clear skin, Mr. Crow tells us, of a "secular martyr." (Corday, guillotined four days later, was maligned as "hard, insolent, common, and covered in hives.")

Mr. Crow's analytical breakdown is illustrated with "image manipulations" by Dominika Ivanická. One shows how the pattern of the blood reinforces the horizontals and verticals of the bath and the crate. The most elucidating superimposes a Pietà by Anne-Louis Girodet, David's little-known pupil, over David's "Marat." The near-perfect overlay of the religious image with a political image is a visual synecdoche for the Revolution's replacement of Christianity with the cults of Nature and Reason.

The mythology of 1789 reached as far as 1960s California, where Mr. Crow discovered Marat through Peter Brook's 1967 movie adaptation of "Marat/Sade," Peter Weiss's 1963 antitotalitarian play. The author first encountered David's painting in adapted form in 1968, on Robert Wilson's psychedelic concert poster for Moby Grape (a nominal pun on David's sanguinary image). A lyric from "Marat/Sade," Mr. Crow notes, even supplied the line "we're all normal and we want our freedom," in the rock group Love's 1967 song "The Red Telephone," a stoned plea for sanity amid the Vietnam War. The irony, which Mr. Crow misses, is that Marat, with his lists of enemies and scapegoats and his lust for punishment, was the ancestor of the modern totalitarians.

Roger Scruton, the English philosophy student, observed the Paris riots of 1968 and realized that he was a conservative. Mr. Crow was also studying in Paris in 1968. After seeing student insurgents "waving red and black flags," raising barricades and setting fires, he returned to California wanting to be a radical. He fell under the influence of T.J. Clark, a British Marxist art historian, and remains susceptible to French theorists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Roland Barthes. Of this lineup of serial offenders, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had prior convictions, mostly for communism, and only Barthes had a sense of humor.

Mr. Green is a Journal contributor and a fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

By All Means Raise Mitt's Taxes

One curiosity of democracy is the rich citizens who tell politicians to raise their taxes. It's the patriotic thing to do, they say. The latest example is Mitt Romney, the GOP's 2012 presidential nominee, who volunteers to put his wallet on the chopping block in return for reforming entitlements.

"And on the tax front, it's time for rich people like me to pay more," Mr. Romney writes in the *New York Times*, where he is joining the Hallelujah Chorus.

The first point to make is that if Mr. Romney wants to pay more taxes, by all means go ahead. Write a check to the Treasury. It's a writ of at-taider to target an individual with legislation, Democrats, but maybe Mitt won't mind.

The rich who favor higher taxes pitch this as an act of civic virtue. But paying higher taxes on income or capital gains is no great sacrifice for them because they're already rich. Mr. Romney made his fortune at Bain Capital, and good for him. He can afford to pay more now, but would the 28-year-old Mitt still on the make have thought so? Raising taxes makes it harder for others to get rich.

Mr. Romney is especially eager to raise the annual income cap on Social Security payroll taxes. That cap is \$184,500 in 2026 and rises each year with inflation. Democrats want to raise the cap much higher or eliminate it. Mr. Romney thinks this should be the trade for entitlement reforms.

Not likely. Democrats eliminated the income cap for Medicare payroll taxes of 1.45% (2.9% including employer) in 1993, but have you noticed a Democratic desire to reform Medicare? They ran against Mr. Romney in 2012 by saying his modest reform amounted to throwing grandma off a cliff.

The Medicare tax increase has merely become another marginal-rate tax hike on work. The Social Security payroll tax is 6.2% each for employee and employer, so lifting the income cap on that tax on the working middle

class would be even more onerous.

The truth of the relative tax burden is best shown by the share of income taxes paid by income level. The nonpartisan Tax Foundation does the tax math each year, with the most recent IRS data from 2022.

The top 1% paid an average tax rate of 26.1% in 2022.

Their top marginal income-tax rate is far higher, and in New York and California can exceed 50%. The top 10% paid an average tax rate of 21.1%, while the bottom 50% paid 3.74% on average.

As a share of total adjusted gross income reported in 2022, the top 1% earned 22.4%, but they paid 40.4% of total income taxes. They paid in taxes nearly double their share of income. The top 10% earned 49.4% of total AGI but paid 72% of total income taxes.

And the bottom 50%? They reported 11.5% of AGI but paid only 3% of all income taxes. These tax shares of income demonstrate that the U.S. tax system is already steeply progressive. The numbers would be less progressive if you include payroll taxes, but not by all that much. Even that 3% overstates how much the bottom 50% pay because "refundable" credits paid to those with no tax liability are treated as spending and aren't reflected in the IRS numbers.

Billionaires like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates are able to shelter their wealth behind tax loopholes like creating foundations. Higher income-tax rates matter less to them than they do the salaried couple who finally feel they made enough for retirement after 30 years of the daily grind.

The U.S. has a federal debt problem, and entitlement reform is essential. It will happen because sooner or later lenders will demand it. Until then, we'll consider tax increases when we see a Democratic presidential nominee propose a serious plan to reform Social Security and Medicare. Do not bet your retirement money on it happening.

Democrats Vote Against Abundance

Remember when many Democrats started talking up what they called an "abundance" agenda after their 2024 defeat? The plan, or at least the slogan, was to stop making it so difficult to build anything in America. Well, so much for that. Last week all but 11 House Democrats voted against permitting reform, which is the most pro-abundance idea on offer in Congress.

The House on Thursday passed the Standardizing Permitting and Expediting Economic Development (Speed) Act, 221-196. Every Republican except Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania voted for the bill. But the Hakeem Jeffries' Democrats voted 195-11 against the bill that is co-sponsored by Democrat Jared Golden of Maine. The 11 Democrats other than Mr. Golden who voted aye include four from Texas and represent swing districts where Republicans have at least a chance at winning.

The Speed Act attempts to simplify the morass of federal permitting by limiting environmental reviews to the impact from a proposed project but not from speculative downstream effects. The Act also imposes sensible limits on the lawsuits that are routinely deployed to delay projects for years. Under the bill, lawsuits must be filed within 150 days and can only be filed "by a party that has suffered or imminently will suffer direct harm from the final agency action."

The Democrats who voted no bowed to the

They oppose permitting reform, 195-11, bowing again to the green left.

green lobby that refuses to accept any changes to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the 1970 law that has become the main impediment to building roads, bridges, tunnels, pipelines, transmission lines, you name it. Some 26 environmental interest groups opposed the bill, while nearly all business groups supported it.

Opponents claim the Speed Act guts NEPA, but that's false. It restores NEPA's original intent, which was to make sure environmental impact was considered before approval, not that it would become a weapon for stopping American progress on energy and crucial infrastructure.

The bill now moves to the Senate, where it will be an abundance test for the likes of Georgia Sen. Jon Ossoff, who is up for re-election this year. The bill will need 60 votes to pass, and progressives will try to water down the NEPA changes or kill it.

Democrats have blocked permitting reform for years, but 2026 is the year Republicans should make it a political priority. That includes President Trump, who has been missing in action so far in this debate. Democrats talk a good game about growth and abundance, but when voting arrives they always bow to their anti-growth left. If they kill reform again, voters will know they're the same old Biden-Pelosi-Elizabeth Warren Democrats.

Elise Stefanik Gets the Trump Treatment

Being an opponent of President Trump is fraught, but being his friend can also be perilous. Witness New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, a rising GOP star who thought she had Mr. Trump's support to run for Governor until she didn't.

Ms. Stefanik announced her run for Albany shortly after the November election. But on Friday she left the race, despite having raised \$12 million, and says she also won't run for re-election in her upstate district. It's hard to blame her after her rough treatment by the President.

Ms. Stefanik has been one of Mr. Trump's most loyal and outspoken defenders, and he nominated her to be U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in his second term. But he later pulled the nomination to save her vote if needed for the One Big Beautiful Bill Act. That cost Ms. Stefanik her spot in the House leadership, which she had given up to take the U.N. post. She was given a nominal leadership title instead.

The President encouraged her to run for Governor, and she said she would if she could run without a primary. Ms. Stefanik hoped to link Democratic Gov. Kathy Hochul to New York socialist Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, but Mr. Trump undercut that strategy with his love fest with Mr. Mamdani in the Oval Office. "Commie Mamdani" was suddenly a great guy.

The final punch came when 70-year-old Bruce Blakeman, the Nassau County Executive on Long Island, announced his run for the GOP nomination for Governor this month. Instead of endorsing Ms. Stefanik, as she expected, Mr. Trump said he liked both of them.

That meant a bloody and expensive Republican primary that would help Gov. Hochul. Ms.

With the President, political loyalty goes only one way.

time or your generous resources to spend the first half of next year in an unnecessary and protracted Republican primary, especially in a challenging state like New York."

She's right. Next year's midterms are trending toward Democrats, and a GOP candidate needs a united party, plenty of money, and a candidate with focus and energy to win. Ms. Hochul is vulnerable, and Mr. Blakeman won re-election in November. But he is unknown in the rest of the state, especially upstate where the GOP organization has collapsed. The easier Ms. Hochul has it, the more she will feel free to cave to the Mamdani socialists on taxes, rent control, and union domination of schools.

Ms. Stefanik is 41 years old, so she could revive her career down the road. The New York Sun floats the idea of running for the Senate in 2028 against either Chuck Schumer or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, though no Republican has won a New York Senate race since Al D'Amato in 1992. She could also run for Governor in 2030, a better year for Republicans if Democrats take the White House in 2028.

For now Ms. Stefanik's fate is a reminder of how quickly Mr. Trump can discard allies when they no longer suit his purposes. It's one reason his political coalition may not have the staying power he imagines.

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

OPINION

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The U.S. Can't Get Xi Hooked on Nvidia Chips

Aaron Ginn's case for exporting H200 chips to China rests on the dangerous myth that the U.S. can preserve technological leadership by making an adversary "dependent" on Nvidia's tech (Letters, Dec. 17). Instead of hooking Chinese companies, the exports will relinquish our lead in frontier AI models while actively supporting China's military and economic advancement.

Claims that Chinese firms will become dependent on Nvidia chips and their CUDA architecture ignore what is happening across the tech industry. Every major U.S. hyperscaler—Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Meta—is reducing its reliance on Nvidia. The latest iterations of the two leading frontier models, Claude and Gemini, were reportedly trained largely on Amazon's Trainium and Google's TPU chips, respectively, not Nvidia GPUs. If U.S. companies can switch architectures, why would Chinese firms be any different?

Rather than grow dependent, China will take Nvidia chips while they are available, use them to train models to compete with American frontier variants and continue to invest heavily in domestic alternatives like Huawei's Ascend chips. When those are good enough, the firms will drop Nvidia—and quickly.

The notion that restrictions "accelerate Beijing's move toward alternatives" misses a critical reality: Technological

self-sufficiency is a Xi Jinping mandate. He isn't going to allow China to rely on an American tech stack. The Communist Party is already investing in an alternative supply chain and will limit Nvidia imports if needed to ensure sufficient domestic demand for Huawei. The question isn't whether China pursues self-sufficiency; it's whether we hand it advanced capabilities during its years-long catch-up period.

China holds structural advantages in AI that we can't match: cheaper power, a massive pool of engineers, virtually unlimited subsidies. Until now, the only constraint limiting those has been our access to the most advanced compute. Ceding that constraint will accelerate Beijing's ability to compete with U.S. firms and field military capabilities that could one day kill U.S. soldiers and sailors.

During the height of the Cold War, it was unthinkable for the U.S. to sell supercomputers to the Soviet Union, the equivalent of the GPUs today. We've never won technological competitions by arming our competitors—we've prevailed by preserving a clear and enduring advantage.

DMITRI ALPEROVITCH

Washington

Mr. Alperovitch, co-founder and former chief technology officer of CrowdStrike, is author of "World on the Brink."

The History of Hubristic U.S. Ethanol Policy

Mario Loyola and Derrick Morgan are generally right about the Renewable Fuel Standard, or RFS, but they omit key facets of the mandate's history ("Can Trump's EPA Break the Ethanol Habit?" op-ed, Dec. 5).

The RFS was established under the 2005 Energy Policy Act, which called for the annual blending of 7.5 billion gallons of ethanol into the gasoline supply by 2012. The real expansion, however, came in 2007 with the Energy Independence and Security Act, a response to soaring gasoline prices.

EISA upped the ante, raising the desired ethanol amount to 36 billion gallons by 2022. Fifteen billion would be derived from food crops like corn, but much of the rest was to come from the development of cellulosic ethanol: fuel from wood chips, switch grass and the

like. President Bush assured us the technology would be ready by around 2012. With billions of gallons of cellulosic ethanol around, the auto industry would produce cars that could take a blend of 85% ethanol, leading to greater U.S. energy self-sufficiency.

EISA passed with bipartisan support, but the thinking behind it was the same hubris that Congress had shown in supporting other energy panaceas like synfuels: the notion that if government demanded technological change, it would happen. Cellulosic ethanol has never proved economically viable, but the RFS remains. It is too much a farm bill for politicians to repeal it, though surely they should.

EM. PROF. PETER Z. GROSSMAN

Butler University

Indianapolis

Why Should Europe Let Putin Have His Loot?

In what kind of projects would Washington and Moscow invest? Would we help Russia rebuild the territory it illegally occupies, or invest in expanding its energy sector so it could rebuild its war machine and use it again on a later date? There is no legal provision to justify such proposals at the expense of supporting Ukrainians and jeopardizing European security.

GREG WILSON

Ester, Fla.

Mr. Wilson was a deputy assistant at the Treasury Department, 1986-89.

The NFL's Modern Sisyphus

In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus describes a man doomed to push a boulder uphill forever and asks us to imagine him "happy." But when I think of Sisyphus, I think of Philip Rivers: a quarterback who showed up every week, played through injuries and never reached the mountaintop. When Sisyphus's rock tumbles back after all that struggle, I can't imagine him as happy. I wouldn't be, and I'm sure Mr. Rivers wasn't either ("Grandpa QB Nearly Deaths Father Time," Sports, Dec. 16).

This month, after the storybook comeback of a 44-year-old grandfather was undone by a late-game field goal, we saw Mr. Rivers once more in tears. His voice held steady long enough to tell the high-school players he coaches that doubt is real and frightening but that you can't run from it.

Purpose doesn't make pain hurt less. Camus missed the mark with "happy." What he really meant was what we saw from Mr. Rivers: heartbreak with a smile that never quite disappears.

NICK SPEAR

Phoenix

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Money down the drain" is such a nasty term. We prefer to say '75% below cost basis.'

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.ltrs@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

JOSEPH NAFTZINGER

St. Augustine, Fla.

Mr. Trump is a peddler of "one simple trick" that economists "hate." Tariffs will fuel a manufacturing boom, raise wages, strengthen families, attract foreign investment, eliminate U.S. trade deficits, flood our government's coffers, secure our defense and even stop the flow of fentanyl. Easy-peasy—except in reality, they are as promising as fast and easy weight-loss and hair restoration.

DONALD J. BOUDREAU

Farifax, Va.

OPINION

Jews Face Horrors With Humor

By David Mamet

Q . What's the difference between a Jew and a canoe?

A. A canoe tips.

This passes, just under the wire, as humor because of the rhyme. "A Jew doesn't tip" on its own legs isn't funny. It's also untrue. You may take it from a longtime member of the entry-level positions: Jews are good tippers.

The Jews of my Chicago were a few generations—often none at all—from the horrors of Europe. The challenges of hand-to-mouth

Jokes can deny humanity or revel in what sets us apart. The truth, however, is invariably sadder.

were not at all theoretical. Professionally, the biggest tippers in my cab were waitresses. Among them, as with the Jews, generosity was not charity but, if I may, righteousness. (The Hebrew *tzedakah*, mistranslated as charity, actually means righteousness.)

The Jew and the canoe, like other racial jokes of my youth, is an identification ritual passing as humor. It unites the teller and those he is assured will laugh in complicity in its viciousness. The "joke," in addition to having nothing to do with humor, has nothing to do with Jews.

French humor is set in the bedroom, German humor in the bathroom, and actual Jewish humor in

the mind, both that of our oppressors—clueless—and our own—inverted, overanalytic and terminally self-referential. A terrorist gets on a plane and demands to know: "Who's a Jew?" A little old man in the back says, "That's an interesting question."

* * *

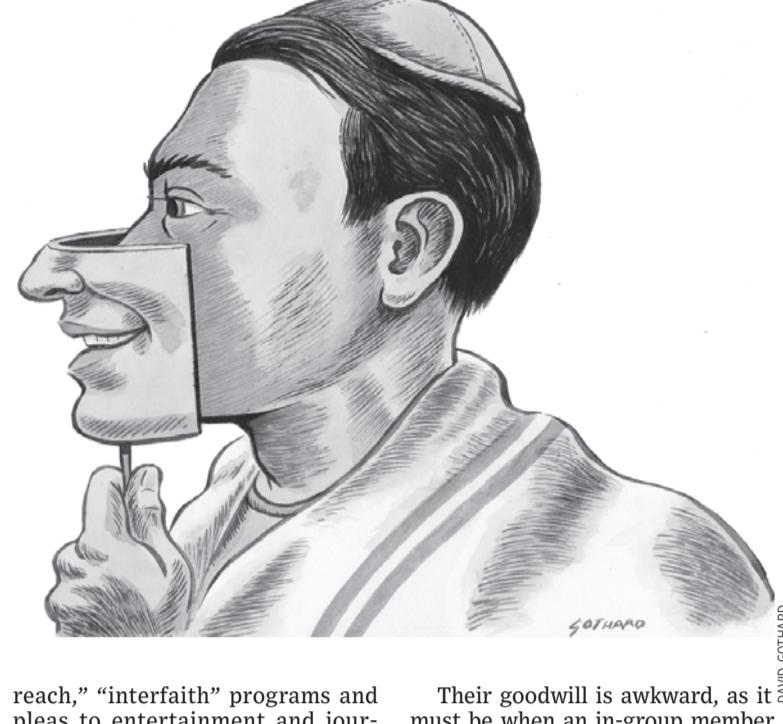
Much Jewish humor is set in the face of horror. An old Israeli joke: "Why did Hitler kill himself? He got his gas bill." And a favorite: "Jews of Auschwitz, good news and bad news. Tonight you will be traveling on the Trans-Orient Express, the most luxurious of trains. Now the bad news: You will be going as soap."

Two years before my birth, Germans were murdering Jewish babies, an exercise latterly taken up by Palestinians. It is challenging for a majoritarian (that is, not directly concerned) populace to digest today's antisemitic horrors without, to some extent, unconsciously or not, indicting the victims. For if Jew-murder and Jew-hatred aren't inspired by some actual acts of Jews ("a Jew doesn't tip"), the onlookers are faced with the absolute horror of our human condition.

For Jews, the stultifying fact to be faced is that antisemitism has nothing to do with Jews.

Reform and assimilated Jews have changed names, traditional clothes and religious practices (among other things), celebrating intermittent acceptance of our charade as "progress." That is, we were "getting there" (the old African-American equivalent being "whiter and whiter in every generation").

The essence of our assimilationist mindset is seen in "out-



our oppressor's need to be placated. Jew-hatred exploded after the Oct. 7 massacre in response to Israeli "forgetfulness" of our historic status as beggars—existing only on the gracious sufferance of others. (Note that even the supposedly humane term "tolerance" means the ability to abide the noxious.)

Current antisemitic savagery echoes the South's fear of and responses to slave revolts. The enslaved asserted the truth the oppressors feared above all: that they were actual human beings. The worried insistence on the contrary was found not only in law but, even more revealingly, in humor, where the punchline of any "joke" could be a dehumanization of blacks, demanding the complicity of laughter. One can't take back a laugh.

Antisemitism has nothing to do with Jews. It is equivalent to child sacrifice: the offering to pagan gods of the lives of the unprotected. It emerges, historically, when a sufficient mass of the populace has become terrified into unreason and ceded control into the hands of the evil but assured. Pagan societies fearing the wrath of unknowable gods fed them innocent lives. The fearful of our age, unsettled by unassimilable change, seek security in mass thought and relief in violence. That's all.

How can we know that one thing is truer than another? If it is sadder. I conclude not with a joke but with a proverb at the essence of most Jewish jokes: What is as whole as a Jew with a broken heart?

Mr. Mamet is a playwright, film director and screenwriter.

Why the Affordability Crisis Is Most Severe in California



LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysa Finley

Here's a trivia question for your holiday road trip: In which five U.S. metropolitan areas did the consumer-price index rise by less than 2% over the preceding 12 months?

Ding, ding, ding.

The answer: Detroit (0.7%), Dallas (1.1%), Houston (1.1%), Phoenix (1.4%) and Atlanta (1.7%).

Now guess the four metro areas where prices on average have increased by more than 3%. Don't cheat by asking ChatGPT, which answers incorrectly anyway. The answer: Philadelphia (3.3%), Los Angeles (3.6%), San Diego (4%) and Riverside, Calif. (4.5%).

Milton Friedman observed that inflation is always and everywhere a monetary phenomenon. But affordability—the prices of particular things—can be very much a local phenomenon.

Consider housing. Among the reasons for higher CPI readings in California's metro areas are fast-rising housing costs. Riverside, an exurb of Los Angeles, has drawn droves of middle-class families who can't afford to live on the coast. Yet the housing supply in Riverside—and for that matter, everywhere else in the state—hasn't kept up with demand.

Blame the state's litigation-friendly environmental laws and strict zoning, which raise construction costs and suppress development. Shelter prices have risen by 4.4% in Riverside and 5.6% in San Diego over the preceding 12 months, versus 0.1% in Dallas and 1.1% in Houston. In Phoenix, shelter prices have declined by 0.1%.

It's true that housing prices in many Sun Belt cities surged early in the pandemic as people migrated from states that had imposed strict lockdowns like California. But more-permissive permitting and zoning enabled housing developers to bring on additional supply quickly, which has helped curb prices.

Only 118,000 building permits for new homes were issued for the Los Angeles metro region (population 12.8 million) between 2021 and 2024, versus 163,000 in Atlanta (6.3 million), 187,000 in Phoenix (5.1 million), 276,000 in Houston (7.5 million) and 281,000 in Dallas (8.1 million).

Vice President JD Vance blames illegal immigrants for making housing unaffordable. It's a specious ex-

planation that doesn't add up. It's not as if Arizona and Texas were unaffected by the flood of foreign migrants during the Biden presidency.

One reason housing prices have remained stubbornly high in Florida is a dearth of construction workers, which has been exacerbated by a state law requiring com-

The state's policies make it inevitable that prices will rise, especially for housing and energy.

panies with 25 or more employees to use E-Verify to check a new hire's work authorization. Nearly 40% of Florida's construction labor force is foreign-born, with a large share undocumented.

Contractors can't hire many foreign-born roofers and drywall finishers, which is delaying projects and keeping prices high. Memo to the vice president: Contractors can't build, baby, build if their workers are being deported.

On the other hand, Democrats in California don't want to build—or drill. The state's mélange of climate

polices have driven up energy prices in San Diego (8.7% year over year), Riverside (7.9%) and Los Angeles (7%), even as they have been falling in places like Atlanta (by 2.3%), Phoenix (0.8%), Detroit (3%) and Houston (3.4%) that haven't sought to banish fossil fuels.

Folks in the Philadelphia metro area have also seen a jump in energy prices (5.1%) as the shutdown of coal and nuclear plants in the region has driven up electric rates. Economics 101 teaches that when demand grows faster than supply, prices increase.

Another local phenomenon is legal abuse, which affects insurance premiums and other business costs that ultimately get passed onto consumers. The American Tort Reform Foundation this year scored Los Angeles as its top "judicial hellhole." The Perryman Group estimates its local "tort tax" at \$3,658 a person.

Plaintiff attorneys exploit California's tort-friendly laws to extract settlements. Proposition 65 requires businesses to place warnings on products—including many toys, clothing items and electronics—if they contain trace amounts of chemicals that the state has deemed potentially carcinogenic. Such laws are toxic for business.

Proposition 65 legal settlements

totaled more than \$43.7 million this past year in response to 1,204 notices of violation, according to ATRE. Property and casualty insurers also pick up some of the costs of excessive litigation, which get reflected in higher premiums. If businesses have to pay more for insurance, they may raise their prices.

Mandatory insurance costs make up about 45% of the average Uber fare in Los Angeles County, versus 10% or less in most places in the country. Taking an Uber across L.A. can cost more than a flight to Miami.

Higher state-mandated minimum wages can also increase the price of a burger. The cost of eating out has climbed by 14.4% in San Diego and 12.4% in Riverside since September 2023, when Democrats increased the state minimum wage for fast-food employees to \$20 an hour. Restaurant prices nationwide have increased only 8.3%. Who cares if California's working class can't afford a Big Mac? Gov. Gavin Newsom's attitude: Let them eat filet mignon.

California offers a textbook example of how to make life unaffordable. The lesson for the president: When government makes it harder and more expensive for businesses to do what they want to do, consumers pay the price.

Tariffs Are a Discipline, Not a Press Release

By Peter Navarro

The tariff debate remains distorted by two opposing misconceptions: that tariffs would instantly resurrect American industry, that they would immediately crash the economy and ignite runaway inflation.

The experience of 2025 has disproved both. The economy didn't collapse, but neither did a manufacturing renaissance appear on demand. These outcomes should surprise no one who understands how industrial capacity is built.

Tariffs aren't a press release. They're an instrument that reshapes bargaining leverage, investment math, and supply-chain location decisions. Their success can be measured only using the right metrics and the right timeline. Capital needs time to respond. But when supported by stable policymaking, tar-

iffs can powerfully and positively address trade deficits.

Start with a constraint critics routinely ignore: You can't reshore what you no longer have the capacity to produce. After decades of offshoring tooling and the intermediate inputs, supplier networks and skilled trades that go along with it, no policy—tariffs included—can reverse all that damage in a few quarters. Reindustrialization is sequential: upstream materials and components first, then subassemblies, then final assembly at scale.

That sequence is governed by permitting, labor availability, engineering complexity and capital formation, not by quarterly deadlines.

The most common critique of tariffs inadvertently proves the point. U.S. manufacturers still rely heavily on imported inputs. Exactly. That dependence is a vulnerability. "Made in America" too often means final

assembly built atop foreign-made parts. A serious and secure industrial base requires domestic capacity not only for finished goods, but for all the materials, tooling and process know-how that determine cost, resilience and scalability.

A sound tariff strategy doesn't deny this reality. Instead it sets priorities: identifying strategic chokepoints, sequencing capacity build-out, applying targeted relief where downstream producers would otherwise be squeezed, and holding firm where security exposure is unacceptable.

Another familiar objection is framed as an accounting exercise: The effective tariff burden can be made lower than the headline rate if firms substitute products, resource suppliers or alter configurations. But this isn't evidence that tariffs are hollow. It is evidence that incentives matter.

Substitution is one channel through which tariffs work. When firms diversify away from single-country dependence, supply chains shorten and overall risk decreases.

A tariff regime that signals firm objectives and credible enforcement forces investment decisions, while one that treats tariffs as static misunderstands how leverage operates. Effective tariff policy is adaptive, tightening when dependence persists and easing only when capacity and alternatives are credibly rebuilt.

Inflation is where the tariff debate most often departs from reality, because it begins from a false premise: that tariffs automatically raise prices for American consumers.

In practice, tariffs don't generate inflation so much as apply pressure

in international markets. In most, foreign producers are export-dependent. They operate with excess capacity and compete aggressively for access to the U.S. consumer. Their growth models rely on volume, not pricing power. When tariffs are imposed, these producers frequently reduce pretariff prices and absorb margin losses to preserve market share rather than pass costs through.

The aggregate data bears this out. Despite repeated warnings, tariffs haven't produced a sustained inflationary spiral. Inflation

Measured correctly and supported by good policy, they are an adaptive tool for reindustrialization.

in 2025 has been elevated, but its drivers lie overwhelmingly in shelter, services, energy and fiscal conditions—not tariffs. Central bankers increasingly distinguish between one-time price adjustments and persistent inflation.

The related slogan—"Who pays the tariff?"—is equally misleading. Importers remit duties at the border, but who actually pays is determined by bargaining power, not paperwork.

In real markets, the burden falls on whoever can't afford to lose access to the U.S. consumer. For export-driven systems built around subsidized capacity, suppressed domestic consumption and aggressive pricing abroad, that means foreign producers. Faced with tariffs, they

discount, reprice, accept lower returns or absorb the cost outright to keep factories running.

Finally, the trade deficit. An occasional deficit can reflect temporary capital inflows or cyclical demand and need not be harmful. A chronic trade deficit is different. When deficits persist year after year, they reflect a structural imbalance in which foreign producers—often supported by state-directed capacity and aggressive pricing—systematically displace domestic production.

The result isn't abstract: Supply chains migrate offshore, price discipline suffers, and investment follows output abroad. For the U.S., decades of sustained deficits have coincided with industrial decline and rising dependence on foreign-controlled inputs. By any economic or national-security standard, that outcome isn't benign.

The relevant metric isn't the deficit alone. It is the composition of trade, the location of added value, and the ability to surge production when conditions demand it.

For decades, the U.S. treated market access as a gift rather than leverage—and paid for it with shuttered factories and dependence on foreign producers.

Tariffs aren't a magic wand. They are a discipline—an instrument that forces the true cost of dependency into corporate planning and counters predatory trade behavior. Measured on the right timeline, tariffs are a tool for rebuilding capacity, not a headline to be graded on a news cycle.

Mr. Navarro is White House senior counselor for trade and manufacturing.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1889 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

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EDITORIALS

Another steep homeowners insurance rate hike from Allstate. How should Springfield react?

Oh, for the days when insurance rate hikes simply matched inflation.

A few months after State Farm shocked Illinoisans and angered Gov. JB Pritzker with a 27% average rate increase for homeowners insurance, Allstate now will raise average homeowners rates for most policyholders by 9%, according to filings last week with the Illinois Department of Insurance. That increase will take effect in February.

On its face, Allstate's hike is just a third of State Farm's shocking increase, at least percentage-wise, but keep in mind that Allstate raised its homeowners premiums by more than 14% on average this past February. Combine those two increases, and Allstate is nearing State Farm territory.

The two combined hikes at Allstate Vehicle & Property Insurance, the unit insuring the majority of Illinois homeowners customers, will total about \$42 more a month on average once the new rates kick in, according to filings. For many customers, those amounts are paid as part of their monthly mortgages. Those are substantial increases for homeowners; many are contending too with higher property taxes, especially in Chicago.

Allstate's two hikes also are more on a dollar basis than the State Farm increase

because State Farm's rates were lower on average than Allstate's before these most recent rounds of price hikes. State Farm's action is costing policyholders about \$29 more per month on average.

State lawmakers responded in October to State Farm's action by pushing a Pritzker-backed bill that would have given the Illinois Department of Revenue the authority to disapprove homeowners rate hikes if they were deemed "excessive, inadequate or unfairly discriminatory." The measure easily passed the Senate and fell just short in the House — a sign of State Farm's considerable clout in Springfield.

But the issue surely isn't going away, with more such increases well exceeding inflation, as demonstrated by Allstate.

The industry is regulated state by state, and Illinois has one of the nation's most lenient regulatory approaches to insurance. Insurers don't have to win regulatory approval in Illinois to change their pricing, either before or after the fact. Virtually every other state gives its regulators at least some say over rates.

The industry argues that Illinois consumers benefit from the large number of insurers that compete here, in no small part due to the lack of price regulation. For many decades, the industry's argument has been convincing — Illinois' insurance

rates indeed have been quite competitive compared with other states.

But State Farm and Allstate's actions are calling that conventional wisdom into question. And the two giants are the most important players in Illinois. Both are based here, employing thousands of Illinoisans each, and State Farm and Allstate between them insure nearly half the homes in the state.

Ann Gillespie, Pritzker's insurance director, a few months ago raised questions about whether insurers — State Farm in particular — were taking advantage of Illinois' lack of rate regulation to make up for losses being incurred in other states with stricter approaches. State Farm adamantly denies doing so, but Gillespie complained that State Farm hadn't adequately responded to department demands for information supporting its assertions. And the state has sued State Farm to compel more disclosure.

In Allstate's case, its nationwide homeowners insurance business has swung to profitability after several years of price increases. A unit that paid out nearly \$1.20 in claims and incurred costs for every dollar of collected premium in the first nine months of 2023 shelled out just 95 cents for every dollar collected during the same period this year, according to in-

tor materials.

Those disclosures don't separate out performance by state.

"Illinois rates are being driven by the state's severe weather events and higher repair costs," an Allstate spokesman tells us.

"While calls for rate regulation may appear politically appealing, it is critically important to appreciate that recent increasing insurance rates in Illinois are a reflection of the risk, rather than the cause," the industry-supported Insurance Information Institute in Washington, D.C., tells us. "Premium increases reflect real, escalating costs, from natural disasters to inflationary pressures to legal system abuse."

As we've said before, we believe the state's light regulatory touch on insurance largely has served Illinoisans well over these many years. But the industry's biggest and most visible players aren't doing themselves any favors right now in Springfield.

We still wouldn't go as far as Pritzker in responding to homeowners' affordability issues, but we do think insurers should agree to make their results in Illinois far more transparent, both to regulators and the public. And those provisions should be written into law.

Medicaid fraud is a problem. But so is a lack of understanding about the program

Medicaid is a federal program jointly funded with the states, providing health and long-term care insurance to more than 80 million low-income Americans.

And if you didn't know all of that, you're not alone.

The government has spent a fortune over the years de-emphasizing the term "Medicaid," instead promoting other names that carry less of a stigma. The idea has been to encourage eligible Americans to sign up for benefits they otherwise might reject out of confusion, pride or political philosophy.

Marketing efforts have succeeded in disguising Medicaid, assisting states across the country in rebranding at least part of their public health-insurance programs. HealthChoice Illinois, for instance, is funded by Medicaid. Same goes for BadgerCare in Wisconsin, SoonerCare in Oklahoma, Apple Health in Washington state and so on.

Making things even more confusing, most states use private insurers such as Aetna or UnitedHealth to help administer their Medicaid programs. Millions of people who get health care paid for by Medicaid don't see "Medicaid" displayed prominently on their insurance cards or billing documents.

As a result, many Americans just don't realize they're on Medicaid — and that hasn't mattered much until now. But the confusion becomes a serious problem when staying insured depends on navigating new rules, paperwork and deadlines.

Folks can hardly be blamed for assuming they have private health insurance, or, conversely, believing they're uninsured. In some cases, they disparage a program they depend on for themselves, their children, grandparents, neighbors and loved ones.

A recent public radio story spotlighted a patient advocate in Kentucky who was yelled at during a health fair when she explained that a man's parents were indeed on Medicaid. "He started screaming about no one in his family was ever using Medicaid: That's for poor people. That's not for us." In fact, 1 in 3 Kentucky residents depend on Medicaid.

Under the One Big Beautiful Bill Act that President Donald Trump signed into law in July, Medicaid is set for a long-awaited tightening. The concern is not that eligibility standards are being revisited, but that the law relies heavily on new work and reporting requirements that could reduce participation through administrative complexity rather than clear policy

choices.

For starters, the bill bars the use of rules approved during the Joe Biden era that would have streamlined the program by removing barriers, simplifying documentation and automatically enrolling people who already qualify for related government benefits. The Biden initiative also improved payment systems and helped ensure access to care.

Those rules are out. Instead, GOP lawmakers have added new work and reporting requirements and increased the pace of eligibility determinations. Supporters claim the additional administrative burden is worth it to reduce fraud and abuse.

We are all for better firewalls against that fraud and abuse. On Thursday, a federal prosecutor suggested that the total amount of recent Medicaid fraud in Minnesota could top \$9 billion. That's a staggering amount, reportedly perpetrated across 14 different Medicaid services. Guilty pleas in Minnesota already have been forthcoming. That's enough to tell us that Medicaid needs reform at both the federal and state levels. Especially in Minnesota.

We also don't believe that spending should go unchecked.

But if lawmakers believe Medicaid is too large, they should narrow eligibility openly, not rely on bureaucratic obstacles that push eligible people out by accident.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates the new law will cut Medicaid spending by more than \$900 billion over the next decade, while increasing the ranks of uninsured by at least 10 million, and potentially many more. States receiving reduced federal funding will likely cut services.

Some of the biggest changes will go into effect after the midterm elections in November. The deadline for states to impose new work requirements and boost the frequency of Medicaid redetermination kicks in as of Jan. 1, 2027.

So, as it stands, the end of next year will be a busy time for separating low-income Americans from their health insurance. And that's a problem, separate to our minds from the fraud issue.

Medicaid has expanded dramatically since the pandemic, and we firmly believe that abuse must be stamped out and costs kept under control. Spending cuts should be made in an aboveboard way, however, not by tripping up Americans with bureaucratic landmines.

ON THIS DAY 15 YEARS AGO :

LOSING CLOUT

Come 2013, there will be one less congressman from Illinois.

Maybe that doesn't rate more than a shrug. You've got other concerns. Maybe you think one less Illinois politician in Washington — a drop from 19 to 18 in the House delegation — is no tragedy.

But if you live in Illinois and you work in Illinois and you raise your kids in Illinois, this does concern you.

Over the course of the last decade, Illinois' population inched from 12,419,293 to 12,830,632. That 3.3-percent growth rate ranked among the lowest nationwide, and was well below the national population increase of 9.7 percent. Meanwhile, Texas, Florida, Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Utah and Washington all gained representatives.

The loss of a congressional seat is a barometer of many things. But most of all it is a barometer of people making decisions — about themselves, their children and the kind of future that Illinois promises.

Would you come to a state that makes national headlines not only for the size of its estimated \$15 billion deficit this fiscal year, but also for its political leaders' inability to dig in and reform how they spend? ...

For too many people who have the choice to move, to relocate, to seek opportunities, or not to come here in the first place, the answer has become: of course not. That is how the state's clout ebbs away.

Most voters probably don't remember that the state had 25 congressmen when President John F. Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961. After the 2012 election, it will have one fewer than it had in ... 1873.

This latest decline isn't about the loss of one job in Washington, no matter how much power and prestige it holds. It's about the loss of tens of thousands of jobs across this state over the past decade. Astonishing statistic: Illinois needs to create 600,000 jobs just to catch up to where it stood a decade ago.

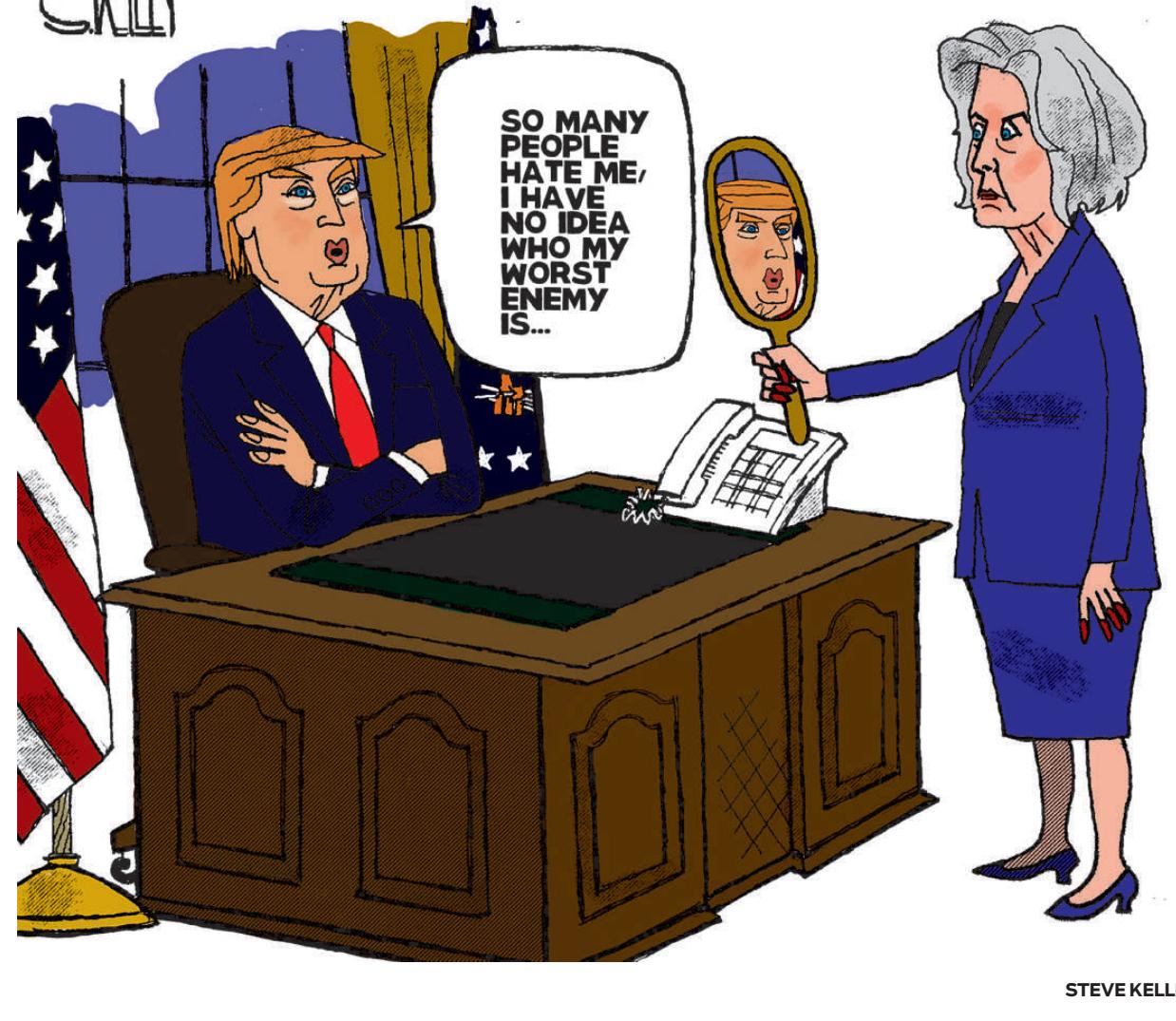
The equation is simple: Jobs = people = political clout in D.C. ... Illinois can grow, and grow faster, if it attracts and retains productive people. Every state is in competition with every other state for that growth.

And, over the last decade, Illinois has been a loser. Not of population, but of ... clout.

People make choices. They're choosing to go elsewhere. Now ... what will we do about it?

Tribune editorial board, Dec. 22, 2010

EDITORIAL CARTOON



STEVE KELLEY

OPINION



President Harry S. Truman, left, and the entire American delegation look on as Sen. Tom Connally signs the United Nations Charter in San Francisco on June 26, 1945. AP

Civic organizations in Chicago hold a crucial key to the UN's future

By John Hewko

The United States officially began its withdrawal from the World Health Organization earlier this year through a presidential executive order. Under the mandatory one-year notice period, the U.S. exit from the WHO and the cessation of funding would take effect around Jan. 22.

At the same time, many governments are retreating from the globalism that defined the post-Cold War era and are reducing financial support for United Nations agencies, which now face deep funding shortfalls.

As the United Nations confronts an existential crisis, community organizations in Chicago, groups that played an important role in the U.N.'s founding and have long enjoyed close partnerships with the institution, must once again step up to help the world body navigate its current challenges.

The term "United Nations" first appeared in the 1942 "Declaration by United Nations," a document signed by 26 Allied nations during World War II as an attempt to prevent future global conflicts. Two years later, delegations from the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China met in Washington, D.C., to develop a proposal for the structure of this global peace-making body.

In the period leading up to the 1945 U.N. Charter Conference, many Americans embraced "America First" isolationism and were skeptical of global governance. In response, large international civic organizations such as Chicago-based Rotary International and Lions Clubs International were

tasked by the U.S. government with a critical mission: using their global reach to broaden public support for an intergovernmental organization dedicated to fostering cooperation, maintaining peace and addressing global challenges. Through conferences and membership publications, civic organizations promoted this visionary concept of a world body that promised to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war."

Their efforts paid off. When delegates from 50 nations gathered in San Francisco in 1945 to negotiate and finalize what became the U.N. Charter, the U.S. State Department invited 42 nongovernmental organizations — including Rotary and Lions — to serve as consultants and technical advisers during the negotiations.

These NGOs were not mere observers. They brought persuasive advocacy and specialized expertise that helped shape the treaty. Their future role was ultimately enshrined in Article 71 of the U.N. Charter, which authorizes the Economic and Social Council to establish formal channels for consultation with NGOs. This provision ensured that civil society would have an institutional voice within the U.N. system.

Although the U.N. initially functioned primarily as a forum for sovereign states, the global landscape has changed dramatically over the past eight decades. Civic organizations have expanded rapidly at the local and national levels — particularly in developing countries — and today, they represent a powerful "third force" in international affairs.

In recent years, I have attended numerous major U.N. conferences. Nearly all of them, whether focused on women, food security or climate change, have been accompanied by robust NGO forums designed to broaden participation and help shape global agendas. As former U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once observed, "NGOs are an essential part of the legitimacy without which no international activity can be meaningful."

Civic organizations amplify citizen concerns, monitor compliance with international agreements and help implement them. They bridge the gap between global policy and everyday life through public campaigns, community programs and initiatives such as Model U.N.

Perhaps most importantly, they bring scale. Rotary and Lions operate in more than 200 countries and geographic areas, mobilizing millions of volunteers. Rotary became a founding partner of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative in 1988, alongside the WHO, UNICEF and others. As a result of this collaboration, global polio cases have fallen by 99.9%. Lions, meanwhile, works closely with the WHO to combat river blindness and trachoma.

Many civic organizations also align their work with the U.N.'s sustainable development goals, advancing progress on inequality, climate change, hunger, public health and education. They promote peace by addressing root causes of conflict, such as poverty, lack of opportunity and injustice, through joint development projects with U.N. agencies and

people-to-people exchanges, including youth programs and international scholarships. Their efforts also include mediating dialogue as neutral parties and delivering humanitarian aid.

At this critical moment for the U.N. and its agencies, civic organizations must continue to do what they do best: Educate the public, mobilize grassroots networks to support the U.N.'s work, use storytelling to shape public opinion, and advocate with governments and legislatures to sustain financial commitments.

We will also continue partnering with the U.N. by leveraging our on-the-ground networks to provide access, sharing specialized expertise in areas such as health, food and shelter, and using our agility and community trust to deliver aid during disasters and conflicts. Just as importantly, NGOs can help raise funds to fill the gaps left by governments. Between 2024 and 2025, Rotary was among the largest contributors to the WHO.

In a world marked by conflict and political polarization, the United Nations remains a beacon of hope for millions. The WHO embodies that hope through science and global cooperation against health threats. Our long-standing partnership with the U.N. demonstrates how much stronger the world can be when citizens and governments work together.

John Hewko is a lawyer and public policy scholar and serves as CEO of Rotary International, which is headquartered in Evanston.

My school improved attendance by showing up for families

By Barton Dassinger

At César E. Chávez Elementary School in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, our school's attendance rate climbed to 96% last year. That's in comparison with nearly 1 in 4 students nationwide who are chronically absent — and when students aren't in class, they're more apt to fall behind.

Every day at 8:15 a.m., my team and I gather around a custom-built dashboard that shows every student absent from Chávez. Before our students even finish eating breakfast in the classroom, we've already called families, checked on students and even knocked on doors. Sometimes we walk students to school. Or, help parents troubleshoot transportation or child care challenges. This is not a special initiative. It's our daily routine.

What may surprise people is that we did not set out specifically to reduce chronic absenteeism. We focused on building strong attendance habits, strengthening relationships and creating a school where students feel supported and safe. At Chávez — where nearly all students qualify for free or reduced-price meals, and the vast majority are Latino

— this work has taken on added urgency. Increased immigration enforcement activity in Chicago has created real fear among families in our community. When students are afraid to leave their homes, when parents worry about walking their children to school, attendance becomes more than an operational challenge. It becomes a matter of trust.

That's why focusing on the number alone is not enough. Chronic absenteeism is a lagging indicator. It tells us which students are absent 10% or more of the time but not why they stayed home or what schools can do. If Chicago wants to make meaningful progress on reducing absenteeism, we must focus on the deeper conditions that keep students connected to school.

I've spent nearly 25 years at Chávez — first as a teacher, then a coach and now principal — in a school the district once rated Level 2, at the edge of probation. We are now among the top-performing schools in Illinois.

Our school was one of the few high-poverty schools statewide designated "exemplary" last school year.

Here are several lessons I believe could guide efforts across Chicago:

1. Treat attendance as a daily practice, not a quarterly strategy. At Chávez, attendance is the No. 1 priority in our school improvement plan. Teachers record attendance in two places: the district system and an internal Google dashboard built by a developer on staff. By 8:15 a.m., our attendance team — including assistant principals, security guards, clerks and our restorative justice coordinator — reviews it together. If a student is absent, we call immediately. If we can't reach a family, we visit. In the first weeks of school, those visits are daily. Later, they happen one or two times a week. Attendance improves through real-time action and accountability — not end-of-month reports.

2. Build a comprehensive student support system. We have a six-person behavioral health team: two counselors, a full-time social worker, an assistant principal, a restorative justice coordinator and a student support coordinator. Importantly, our counselors aren't pulled into non-counseling duties; they spend their time supporting students and families. In a community where deportation fears are affecting daily routines, this support is vital. Students

need to know school is a safe place with adults who will help them navigate stress or crisis. We create a foundation of trust.

3. Prioritize teacher stability. A recent report showed that teacher absenteeism across Chicago Public Schools is alarmingly high, with over 40% of teachers chronically absent.

Teacher absences affect predictability and routines. At Chávez, teacher stability is one of our greatest strengths. In our math department, turnover has been nearly zero for 15 years aside from one retirement. Several teachers are Chávez graduates. We also hire new teachers through a paid residency model, where they shadow veteran teachers before leading their own classrooms.

When students see the same adults year after year, they feel grounded. Attendance follows stability.

4. Extend learning beyond the bell. As a federal 21st Century Community Learning Center and a recent CPS Sustainable Community School, we offer 36 after-school programs and a free summer program serving hundreds of students. These programs expand students' network of trusted adults and strengthen their attachment

to school.

5. Allow principals the flexibility to design solutions. It comes down to flexibility. As an Independent School Principal, I have the autonomy to structure staffing, scheduling, curriculum and supports in ways that meet our community's needs.

Addressing absenteeism requires being nimble. Attendance is not merely an administrative issue; it is a cultural one.

Chicago is right to be concerned about chronic absenteeism. But the solutions won't come from focusing on a metric. They will come from investing in the systems and relationships that help students feel seen, supported and connected to school.

At Chávez, we've learned that you don't improve attendance by demanding compliance from families. You improve it by showing up consistently and with care. If we want students to be present every day, then the adults in the system must be present first.

Barton Dassinger is principal of César E Chávez, a pre-K through eighth grade open-enrollment neighborhood school in the Back of the Yards neighborhood. He is an alum of Teach for America.

OPINION

Who gets invited to the table? Holiday gatherings offer a lesson in leadership

By Dawn S. Brown

Last year, a doctor of physical therapy program at an institution of higher education faced an all-too-familiar challenge: how to celebrate the holidays in a way that felt meaningful for everyone. Instead of defaulting to the traditional catered lunch and gift exchange, the director invited faculty, staff and graduate students to co-create the event.

The group chose a potluck featuring dishes from their own cultural traditions; scheduled the gathering at a time that accommodated teaching loads, administrative duties and studying; and added a gratitude board where everyone could publicly recognize each other's contributions.

The result? People lingered longer, conversations crossed silos and new collaborations emerged. What started as a holiday celebration became a catalyst for belonging — a reminder that when people feel seen and valued, they show up differently.

This story illustrates a powerful truth: Holiday gatherings offer a metaphor for leadership. Who gets invited to the table?

Who feels welcome when they arrive? Inclusive leadership ensures that everyone — not just the loudest or most familiar voices — has a seat and a say. However, this does not happen by accident. It requires intentionality: culturally sensitive celebrations, equitable policies, and systems where diversity thrives and belonging is real.

Today, that work is harder than ever. Across higher education and beyond, we see backlash against diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. Critics dismiss them as unnecessary or divisive, and some institutions have scaled back programs entirely. Yet, here is the reality: When DEI is treated as a checkbox or a seasonal gesture, skepticism is justified. Token efforts — such as adding one cultural dish to a holiday menu or issuing a generic statement — do not create belonging. They create optics.

Real DEI looks different. It means building structures that make inclusion sustainable, not situational. That starts with avoiding major meetings or deadlines during religious observances and providing flexibility for personal responsibilities. It incorporates the creation of inclusive

traditions by inviting input from faculty, staff and students on how to celebrate holidays and milestones in ways that honor diverse cultures. It also requires year-round recognition, acknowledging contributions regularly rather than only during the holidays. Finally, leadership accountability is essential: Inclusion goals must be tied to departmental missions and priorities, so they are not optional but integral to how success is measured.

These practices are not just nice-to-haves. They drive measurable outcomes: higher engagement, stronger retention and greater innovation. When people feel they belong, they contribute more fully — and institutions thrive.

Belonging is not created by grand gestures alone; it is sustained through everyday choices. Leaders can model inclusion by amplifying all voices — especially those historically marginalized — in meetings, by mentoring across similarities and differences and by ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent and fair. Seemingly small actions — such as rotating who sets agendas or acknowledging diverse perspectives — signal that

equity is woven into the fabric of organizational life. Moreover, inclusion should extend beyond holiday celebrations to hiring practices, workload distribution and professional development opportunities. When these principles guide policy and practice, holiday gatherings become more than symbolic.

The holidays remind us of values such as gratitude and empathy. For leaders, these are not seasonal sentiments; they are strategic imperatives. In a climate where anti-DEI sentiment undermines progress, leaning into inclusion is not just the right thing to do — it is the smart thing to do.

So, as you gather around tables this season, ask yourself: Who is missing? Who feels welcome? And what will you do to make belonging real all year long?

This is the ultimate leadership test: not how well we decorate the table but how consistently we make space for all to thrive.

Dawn S. Brown is the assistant chair of curricular affairs and an assistant professor at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, in the Department of Physical Therapy and Human Movement Sciences.



The National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, in August 2016. Russell Vought, the White House budget director, called the laboratory a source of "climate alarmism" that will be taken apart. **CAINE DELACY/THE NEW YORK TIMES**

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

National security threat

Is there anything more threatening to our national security than the constant threat of climate change and severe weather events that have disrupted and destroyed communities, businesses and personal property throughout our country and the world this past year?

Lisa Friedman, Brad Plumer and Jack Healy, reporters for The New York Times, wrote an article published Dec. 18 in the Tribune print edition titled, "White House plans to take apart weather research center in Colo." This article should send up red flags all over this nation. The National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado is "one of the world's leading Earth science research institutions," the article says.

This is a short must-read for any American concerned with severe weather events that have threatened our country and the world community.

Our country's modus operandi has always been to seek out the best and brightest to take positions of leadership and authority in any and every field of our national security.

The current administration stands against scientific research and investigations that actually help protect us and our homes and businesses. Just because they disagree with practical scientific research in our educational institutions and especially in institutions as important as this one, they want to tear them down; taking away our guardrails and exposing us to unknown dangers.

How short-sighted, stupid and dangerous.

This administration's agenda to destroy progress and our well-being by dismantling institutions such as the NCAR in Colorado is a true and real threat to our national security.

— Joe Artabasy, Glencoe

Republicans' abdication

The Donald Trump administration says it is closing the National Center for Atmospheric Research because of its "climate alarmism." Do these officials really believe issues go away if you stop studying them?

Even more perplexing to me is the role of Republicans in Congress. I think most of them recognize this as a bad idea, but they

seem unwilling or unable to exercise the role the Constitution indisputably gives them: to provide checks and balances to prevent a president from running amok. Basic reality orientation seems like it would be one of the less controversial areas for expressing that duty.

— Mike Koetting, Chicago

Helping our neighbors

Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids have recently occurred in Evanston, Elgin, St. Charles, Geneva, Aurora and Chicago, as well as other communities. Violations of constitutional rights are increasing since the Supreme Court ruled that agents can stop and arrest individuals based on the color of their skin, the language they are speaking or their location. These detentions are devastating families, neighborhoods and businesses. People are afraid to leave their homes, to take their children to school, to go grocery shopping or even to attend church. And everyday, these actions also put police at risk.

It is hard for many Americans to believe that this can happen in our country — and our neighborhoods. We should all be outraged. It is un-American.

Fortunately, here and throughout the country, thousands of people are helping these families. Groceries, clothing and toiletries are being collected for organizations that are helping people who cannot leave their homes. Individuals, organizations and religious congregations are driving kids to school, providing legal services and money for legal defense, collecting food and more. Your help is needed.

What is happening is wrong. You can help: It is important to join the volunteers who are working to serve our neighbors. Speak out: Let local, state and national government representatives know that you want these illegal activities to stop now. Ask them to publicly support efforts to ban ICE from using municipal-owned properties for immigration enforcement activities. Tell political candidates that you will not support anyone who accepts donations from companies and organizations that are providing services to ICE.

There is much to be done. Together, we can help to protect innocent community members — and to end these raids.

— Kathy Winterhalter, St. Charles

Is the ACA affordable?

I have read several articles about the Affordable Care Act subsidies that are being debated. If this insurance is so expensive without the government paying for it, what made this affordable in the first place?

— Loren Monsess, Waterman

We can't fail our kids

Two students at Brown University lived through school shootings as children. They were forced to relive that terror again at Brown.

As a father, I am heartbroken for the trauma these young adults and their parents are experiencing. As someone who was shot by a school shooter and survived, I deeply empathize with those whose lives have been forever altered. As a former FBI special agent and crisis negotiator, I have seen the aftermath: families waiting in trauma units and asking questions that will never have answers.

I know we can and must do better.

Too often after shootings such as the one at Brown, we offer "thoughts and prayers." But thoughts without action are not a strategy. We have failed to translate grief into policies that save lives. We need to close loopholes that allow weapons of war into civilian hands, invest in community-based violence intervention and treat gun violence as a public health crisis.

We have seen promising steps at the state level: improved background checks, red flag laws and funding for prevention programs. Yet, national action remains stalled by political calculation and the lack of courage to prioritize people over special interests.

Our children should be safe in classrooms, not trained for active shooters. And parents should be able to send their children to school without the constant fear of "what if." To honor those we have lost at Brown and every community scarred by gun violence, we must not accept this as normal.

With a Congress that lacks the courage to act, we will fail another generation of children if active shooter drills, fear and tragic loss continue to define our values.

— Phil Andrew, U.S. House candidate, Wilmette

Brazen Islamophobia

U.S. Sens. Randy Fine and Tommy Tuberville, in calling for the mass expulsion of Muslims from the United States, demonstrate their ignorance of the Constitution, which they've sworn to uphold and defend. The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion. The fact that it is the first line of the First Amendment shows how important it was to the Framers of the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Deporting all Muslims due to the depraved actions of one individual would be illegal, immoral, racist and anti-American. What's next on the Republican agenda? Deport all of the Latinos, which Trump is getting a head start on, and only allow immigration of Scandinavian or Slavic supermodels?

— Larry Mayerhofer, Geneva

The Person of the Year

Nerts to Time magazine and its glorification of artificial intelligence architects. The Person of the Year for 2025 is Ahmed al Ahmed, who saved lives at Bondi Beach.

— Mac Brachman, Chicago

Inspiration for action

Following up on Sami Uddin's letter to the editor ("Hero at Bondi Beach," Dec. 18), Ahmed al Ahmed's bravery will go on to inspire others to react to sudden abominations.

As the saying goes: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

— Terry Takash, Western Springs

Note to readers: We'd like to know your hopes for the new year. Please send us a letter, of no more than 400 words, to letters@chicagotribune.com by Sunday, Dec. 28. Include your full name and city/town.

For online exclusive letters go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Send letters by email to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your name, address and phone number.