

OUR VIEW

THEIR VIEW



Heed India's apex court on reeling back freebies

The Supreme Court has done well to caution Indian political parties against declarations of indiscriminate freebies at the cost of fiscal prudence. Bad economics is eventually bad politics

At one level, the Supreme Court's (SC) chastisement last week of political parties and elected governments announcing freebies and direct cash transfers to woo voters ahead of elections might smack of judicial over-reach. Under India's Constitution, all three arms of the state—the legislature, executive and judiciary—are required and expected to maintain a delicate balance without stepping on each other's turf. However, a closer look at the object lesson delivered by the apex court to our political class on the long-term cost of such fiscal irresponsibility offers no reason to level that charge. The SC was only voicing what many observers have said before. That the seemingly endless freebies announced by governments at both the Union and state levels with no heed paid to who can or cannot pay amounts to "appeasement." And if this trend continues, it will "only hamper the country's development."

The three-judge bench presided over by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant was hearing a writ petition filed by Tamil Nadu Power Distribution Corp Ltd that challenges Rule 23 of the Electricity Amendment Rules of 2024. This rule provides that power tariffs must be cost-reflective and there should be no gap between the approved annual revenue requirement and the estimated annual revenue from the approved tariff, except in situations of natural calamity. Issuing notice to the Centre, the CJI drew attention to free power distribution by state governments. Though his remarks were made in the context of Tamil Nadu, the CJI clarified that he was speaking about the freebie culture that seems to have overtaken India, especially on the eve of elections. "What kind of

culture are we developing?" asked CJI Surya Kant. "Without drawing any distinction between those who can afford and those who cannot afford, if you start giving, will it not amount to a kind of an appeasing policy?" It is a query that all political parties must answer; and citizens must hold them answerable to. After all, as the CJI put it, "Is it in the public interest that... the state is absorbing all these?" The CJI is only the latest to voice concern. The 16th Finance Commission report talks of a "vibrant 'freebies' debate" triggered by "the recent proliferation of subsidies alongside tight fiscal constraints" adding an "additional element of urgency to concerns of fiscal sustainability."

To the extent direct benefit transfers (DBTs) ensure state largesse goes straight to intended beneficiaries, they are a vast improvement over an earlier leaky system that saw just a trickle of the outlay reach the needy. A vast security web in the form of a basic income, or some essential services offered freely to all, could also be well-deliberated policy calls. But the same cannot be said of freebie showers that accompany poll campaign trails. We can only guess how exactly they impact electoral choices, but they clearly come at the cost of fiscal prudence. The 2024 poll results in Maharashtra and Jharkhand are surmised to have been influenced by freebie schemes, as last year's Bihar polls, whose freebie bill was estimated to exceed ₹30,000 crore. With elections scheduled in four states this year—Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal—we might see political parties of all hues go down the same path. No wonder the CJI concluded, "Sometimes we are really disturbed." It is now over to our political parties to become more fiscally responsible. And not disturb the country's justices unduly.

Why ONDC has not got very far and how it can still change that

This open e-com network needs a clearer focus and better customer orientation to meet its objectives



LOYD MATHIAS
is an investor and an independent director. He's on X as @LloydMathias

India's digital public infrastructure story has been remarkable. The Unified Payments Interface (UPI) made digital payments a habit. CoWin demonstrated population-scale tech execution during a crisis. Aadhaar, DigiLocker and Fastag showed how digital rails can drive inclusion and efficiency.

Naturally, this success would inspire ambition beyond payments and identity. The Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) was born from this confidence to do for e-commerce what UPI did for payments: break platform silos and create an open, interoperable network where buyers and sellers could transact freely. Big private platforms would not be the only options.

Nearly four years on, ONDC has not lived up to its promise. It remains niche, confusing to many users and largely invisible to the typical e-shopper.

India's online commerce market remains dominated by a few large integrated platforms. They control product discovery, listings, payments, logistics and data. They are efficient and convenient, but they are also closed systems.

ONDC's proposition was to separate the network from the platform. It aimed to create a shared digital network where any buyer app could connect with any seller app. In theory, a small kirana store could be discovered just as easily as a large brand. In practice, that shift has proven harder than anticipated.

So, where did ONDC go wrong? First, the consumer experience is weak. UPI is simple: scan, pay, and you're done. ONDC, by contrast, feels fragmented. Search results vary. Returns, refunds and customer support are inconsistent. This can frustrate users. E-commerce today is not just about prices, but about trust, reliably speedy deliveries and easy returns.

Second, sellers don't see clear value yet. Small sellers were supposed to be ONDC's biggest beneficiaries. But onboarding can be complex. Managing catalogues, pricing, fulfillment and logistics across multiple participants demands digital capability many small businesses lack. Sellers also find that demand on ONDC is still low. Estimates suggest ONDC accounted for less than 0.1% of India's roughly \$100-billion online retail market in 2025. Without customers, there is little incentive to invest time and effort.

Third, logistics and fulfillment remain weak links. UPI was built on existing bank infrastructure, but ONDC relies heavily on external logistics, delivery partners, warehousing and last-mile service. Private platforms invested in these. ONDC does not yet offer the same reliability or speed, which directly affects customer satisfaction.

Fourth, network effects favour incumbents. Marketplaces thrive on scale. More buyers attract more sellers and vice-versa. Large platforms already have this advantage. ONDC entered a mature market, not a greenfield one. Without strong incentives or differentiated value, getting switchovers was always going to be difficult.

Finally, its narrative is unclear. UPI had a clear message: free instant payments. ONDC's value proposition is harder to explain. "Open network," "interoperability" and being a "protocol" rather than a platform constitute jargon, while consumers are focused on price, convenience and certainty.

However, ONDC can still be revived. One, focus sharply on a few categories instead of trying to do everything to everyone. It should double down on areas where openness offers a clear advantage—hyperlocal commerce, ride hailing, groceries, medicines or select financial products.

Two, standardize the experience. Set minimum standards for search, returns, refunds and customer support across all buyer apps. Most e-com consumers have come to expect this as table stakes. Using ONDC must feel as smooth as any leading platform.

Three, support small sellers firmly. ONDC needs hands-on seller enablement, including easy on-boarding tools and catalogue support. It must become the go-to for smaller sellers who struggle to get discovered on big platforms, not an experimental add-on.

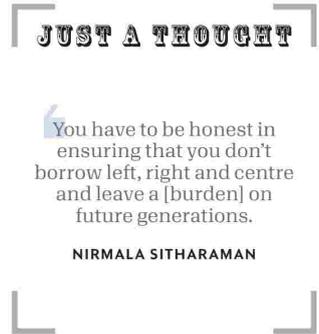
Four, use incentives strategically. Early UPI adoption was driven by incentives and strong bank participation. ONDC needs similar nudges—for buyers, sellers and logistics partners—to kick-start network effects.

Five, communicate in simple language. ONDC's story must shift from protocol design to tangible benefits, be it better prices, more choice or local discovery.

The success of ONDC matters. This is because the future of India's digital economy should not be owned by a few closed platforms alone. Open networks are harder to build, but they are essential for long-term competition, innovation and inclusion.

India has shown the world that it can build digital systems at scale. ONDC is a harder challenge than UPI, but not an impossible one. With a clearer focus, better execution and a consumer-first mindset, ONDC can still become what it was meant to be: a truly open marketplace for India's next billion digital users.

The idea behind this open network was right. Now it's for its execution to catch up.



MY VIEW | MUSING MACRO

What does India's cash-in-circulation spike portend?

AJIT RANADE



is senior fellow with Pune International Centre

India is currently running two payment systems in parallel. On one side is its gleaming showcase, UPI, with 21.7 billion transactions in January 2026 worth ₹28.33 trillion in value. On the other side is the system of physical cash. Currency in circulation (CIC) hit ₹40 trillion, rising 1% year-on-year. At first glance, it looks like a contradiction: How can India be "digitizing" and "recashing" at the same time? It isn't, though, because while the digital payments revolution is real, India's cash-loving political economy is also part of the stark reality. The apparent paradox of the usage of both rising is a warning that we are settling into a hybrid equilibrium: digital for convenience, cash for avoidance or for those excluded from UPI's digital infrastructure. UPI is for the honest and cash usage is for the anxious and those who want to hide. And when the cash stock expands faster than nominal GDP, it usually means something deeper is happening than "people like cash."

First, a bit of caution. Remember that UPI

is a flow, while CIC is a stock. Hence even in a fast digitizing economy, the cash stock can rise as the economy grows. But why is it rising so fast now? There are many explanations, some of them uncomfortable.

There are many factors pushing CIC up. For instance, as interest rates go down, the opportunity cost of holding cash goes down, so more cash lies outside banks. Also, if inflation is expected to rise, the transaction demand for cash goes up. There are four other troubling factors that may be contributing to higher cash usage.

The first is a fear of UPI as a trap for small traders. Its digital trail exposes them to be caught in the taxman's net. Research from State Bank of India confirmed this causality: ATM cash withdrawals rose after income tax notices to small traders in Karnataka based on their UPI transaction volume. The remedy is to remove this fear that UPI is a ploy to entrap sellers in the informal sector.

A second driver could be the explosive growth of unconditional cash transfers, estimated at around 2% of GDP across 15 states. These schemes are large enough to impact household liquidity behaviour and state budgets. Some of this transferred money will stay digital. But some will inevitably leak into currency because of local cash markets,

because recipients budget in cash, connectivity is unreliable and cash payments are behind a big part of consumption in rural and informal India. The more states expand transfers without building complementary supply-side capacity—skills, jobs, local services—the more we should expect cash demand to rise. When the welfare state expands in a low-formality economy, cash is often the medium through which that expansion is monetized.

The third driver is the rising use of money power in elections. The Election Commission routinely seizes cash during the campaigning phase of state and national polls. What is seized is just a tiny fraction of the actual cash being distributed, as estimated by observers and the press. The accumulation of cash for illegitimate disbursement can now precede elections by several months. There is little conclusive, legally tenable evidence of vote buying, leave aside the enforcement. But this is an open secret and is not likely to decline in the foreseeable future. This has a

concomitant demand for cash generation by the black-money economy.

A fourth driver is the rise of ₹500 notes. UPI replaces small-ticket cash usage very well and solves a problem of small-change. But if households and businesses treat cash as a privacy-preserving store of value, then demand to rise.

UPI does not automatically shrink the cash stock. This is the part of the story that most techno-optimists miss: digital rails replace transaction cash faster than they replace hoarding cash. As if to illustrate the current cash spike, a video went viral of a wedding where the couple was showered with crores of cash. It shows that cash is not just a payment method. It is a social custom, for celebration at best and ostentatiation at worst. Nobody questions the origin of this stash. In India, weddings, real estate, local contracts and informal labour markets are not just "cash-heavy," but cash-shaped.

The success of UPI should not blind us to a fact corroborated by RBI data. UPI has taken market share away from NEFT, cards

and wallets, not just cash. The overall share of the value of "paperless" transactions has not risen as sharply as headline UPI numbers suggest. India is not sprinting to cashlessness. Cash remains entrenched.

This January's cash spike is much above normal. It means many things. First, digitalization without trust will eventually plateau. Second, UPI faces a potential compliance backlash. Surprise tax notices and ambiguous thresholds push micro-entrepreneurs back into informality. Third, increased cash-transfer welfareism will show up as a higher stock. Fourth, opacity around election use is an unending headache.

Our CIC now is about 2.2 times what it was pre-demonetization in 2016. Nominal GDP is that much larger too. As a share of nominal GDP, CIC has kept pace, although this year's spike is abnormal. We should forget the fantasy of a "cashless" India. Even developed economies with deep banking systems have large cash stocks. The goal should be more realistic: a less-cash, clearer-cash India.

India's payment-story is often narrated as a triumphal march from cash to QR code. The truth is subtler. UPI is remaking the flow of transactions, but the stock of cash is shaped by informality, trust, enforcement, welfare design and electoral politics.



GUEST VIEW

MINT CURATOR

Europe's China anxiety: Why we must track how it might respond

Policy ideas are being discussed that would have been unthinkable till recently and India must stay attuned to developments



SHISHIR PRIYADARSHI is president, Chintan Research Foundation and former director, World Trade Organization.

A recent report by the Haut-Commissariat à la Stratégie et au Plan that urged the EU to consider either steep tariffs on Chinese imports or a deliberate weakening of the euro against the renminbi has triggered reactions well beyond Paris and Brussels. What began as a domestic French strategic recommendation has evolved into a wider debate about Europe's economic direction and its role in an increasingly fragmented global trading system.

The proposal, suggesting tariffs of up to 30% or a 20-30% euro depreciation, reflects mounting anxiety over Europe's widening trade imbalance with China and its erosion of industrial competitiveness. But the strong international responses underline how consequential such steps would be.

Within Europe, reactions have been mixed. Export-oriented economies such as Germany and the Netherlands have signalled caution amid worries about retaliation and supply chain disruptions. European Central Bank (ECB) officials, while not commenting directly on the proposal, have reiterated that exchange-rate targeting is not part of their mandate, thereby reinforcing institutional limits on currency engineering. Meanwhile, southern European voices more exposed to industrial pressures have shown greater openness to robust defensive measures.

Beijing's response has been firm too, warning against protectionism and signalling that sweeping tariffs would invite counter-measures. Given China's demonstrated willingness to target politically sensitive sectors—from agriculture to luxury goods—the risk of escalation is real.

The attraction of tariffs lies in their clarity. They are visible, direct and politically communicable. A significant tariff wall could provide breathing space to European industries under pressure from what many policy makers describe as subsidised Chinese overcapacity. It could also serve as leverage in negotiations on market access, industrial subsidies and regulatory reciprocity. For sectors such as electric vehicles, batteries and green technologies—where Europe sees strategic stakes—temporary protection may be framed as necessary to preserve critical industrial capabilities. However, the costs are substantial.

Tariffs are taxes and are rarely absorbed entirely by exporters. European consumers and firms reliant on Chinese intermediate goods would bear part of the burden. In an environment where inflation is politically sensitive, raising import costs could complicate macroeconomic management. Retaliation is a serious concern. China has signalled that it would respond proportionately. A tariff spiral would disproportionately hurt export-driven European economies and deepen global trade fragmentation. Perhaps most consequen-



tially, sweeping tariffs would challenge Europe's commitment to the multilateral trading system at a time when it has sought to position itself as a defender of rules-based trade.

The alternative, engineering a weaker euro—is less overtly protectionist but potentially just as disruptive. Currency depreciation works as a broad-based competitiveness tool. A 20-30% depreciation would make Chinese imports more expensive while boosting the competitiveness of European exports, supporting manufacturing-linked employment and narrowing the trade deficit.

Unlike tariffs, currency adjustment would have an impact across sectors, avoiding the complexity of product-by-product trade remedies. But the trade-offs are equally stark. A weaker euro would increase the cost of all imports, particularly energy and raw materials. For a region structurally dependent on imported energy, this poses inflationary risks. Imported inflation would erode real incomes and test political tolerance.

Institutionally, deliberate depreciation would also raise profound questions. The eurozone's monetary policy is set by the ECB with a price-stability mandate. Any perception of exchange-rate manipulation could undermine central bank credibility, unsettle financial markets and invite retaliatory responses from other major economies.

The intensity of global reactions underscores a deeper truth: this is not merely about tariffs or exchange rates. It is about structural competitiveness in an era of Chinese scale and state-backed industrial dynamism. China's export strength reflects not only pricing advantages but ecosystem efficiencies—integrated supply chains, rapid scaling, coordinated industrial policy and sustained state support for strategic sectors.

Europe's deeper challenges lie in productivity gaps, fragmented capital markets, regulatory com-

plexity and high energy costs. Defensive macro tools may offer temporary relief, but they cannot substitute structural reform. A credible strategy would involve targeted, World Trade Organization-consistent trade defence instruments combined with accelerated innovation, investment in green and digital infrastructure, and deeper capital markets integration.

For India, this holds three lessons. *First*, it reflects a shift in trade thinking. Even the EU—historically a champion of open markets—is contemplating tools once associated with economic nationalism. Globalization is not what it was. *Second*, if Europe restricts Chinese imports, trade diversion could intensify competitive pressures in third markets, including India. Chinese exports may seek alternative destinations. *Third*, exchange-rate adjustments in the eurozone, should they happen, would influence global capital flows and currency alignments. A much weaker euro could alter the rupee's effective competitiveness against European and Chinese exporters.

The French advisory proposal should be seen less as imminent policy and more a signal of frustration. It reflects Europe's struggle to reconcile industrial preservation with its commitment to open markets and monetary orthodoxy. The prudent path likely lies between the extremes: calibrated trade remedies within multilateral norms, reinforced domestic competitiveness and continued engagement with China, even if difficult.

Whether Europe opts for tariffs, currency adjustment or structural reform, its choice will reverberate across supply chains, capital markets and diplomatic alignments. For India and other emerging economies, the message is clear—prepare for a world where trade, currency and geopolitical are increasingly intertwined. One where strategic foresight is no longer optional.

Trump tariffs: Congress must do the job it was created to do

The legislative wing's negligence violates the spirit of democracy



MARY ELLEN KLAS is a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion.



The US Constitution envisions a highly empowered Congress.

The US Supreme Court's decision to strike down President Donald Trump's sweeping global tariffs is a wake-up call for Congress. If the legislative branch had been doing its job last year and hadn't ceded its taxing power when the White House embarked on this unprecedented protectionist journey, perhaps we wouldn't be in the mess we're now in.

But with its 6-3 ruling on 20 February, America's top court not only reaffirmed the separation of powers but invited Congress to reassert itself as the branch with the power of the purse. Congress should get its act together and tell the president if he wants to keep his tariffs, he'll need to work with them to do it.

It could take a lot of persuasion. Within hours of the ruling, Trump delivered a rambling press conference where he dismissed both lawmakers and the court. He noted that some tariffs he had already declared under different laws had not been struck down by the courts and announced plans to expand others using Section 122 of the US Trade Act of 1974. That provision allows the president to declare import surcharges of up to 15%, but only for 150 days, not indefinitely.

Of course, if Trump wanted the tariffs to last for more than a few months, he could work with Congress on a longer-term solution. But that would require him to agree that laws are things to be followed and Congress is a branch of government to be respected. Neither will happen. When a reporter asked Trump why he doesn't try to get congressional approval, he replied: "I don't have to." Then, he stubbornly insisted: "I have the right to do tariffs. I've always had the right to do tariffs." Congress has demonstrated that most of its members aren't tariff fans, but Republican party leaders don't seem ready to find the votes to do much about it.

Throughout the majority opinion, judges seemed to be reminding Congress that while the president cannot unilaterally impose unlimited emergency tariffs, he's not out of options as long as he works with lawmakers. Justice Neil Gorsuch, a conservative whom Trump appointed to the bench in 2017, seemed to be speaking directly to the president and the MAGA wing of the Republican party in his concurring opinion. "For those who think it important for the Nation to impose more tariffs, I understand that today's decision will be disappointing," Gorsuch wrote. "All I can offer them is that the most major decisions affecting the rights and responsibilities of the American people (including the

duty to pay taxes and tariffs) are funnelled through the legislative process for a reason." Gorsuch acknowledged that "Legislating can be hard and take time." He acknowledged that "It can be tempting to bypass Congress when some pressing problem arises." Underscoring his reputation as a constitutional originalist, Gorsuch also said something the framers would have liked. He noted that "the deliberative nature of the legislative process was the whole point of its design. Through that process, the Nation can tap the combined wisdom of the people's elected representatives, not just that of one faction or man." He then wisely pointed to the fact that when legislation must "earn broad support," it is more likely to endure, allowing ordinary people to plan their lives in ways they cannot when the rules shift from day to day.

Unfortunately, few in the party's leadership echoed it. There are two reasons for this. First, Trump and Congress leaders know that 60% of Americans disapprove of the president's tariff policies. And second, Trump has run the table on Congress for so long that Republicans are terrified to push back. For the past 13 months, Congress has abdicated its role as a check on the executive. Lawmakers remained silent as the president cut billions of dollars in congressionally mandated funds, renamed the congressionally established Kennedy Center after himself and dismantled agencies he doesn't like. Congress not only allowed Trump to illegally use emergency declarations to impose global tariffs but has done nothing as he's spent money on things that were never authorized—like transferring \$10 billion from the US government to his personally controlled 'Board of Peace.' And Congress has been AWOL on oversight, allowing the president to dismiss congressional appointees from independent commissions, accept questionable gifts from foreign countries, engage in conflict-ridden business deals and gut the federal watchdog system.

The US Constitution's framers didn't intend for Congress to be a coequal branch of the executive. They wanted it to be the first branch because it's closest to the people and can better reflect the public's values and interests. It's time for the US Congress to tell Trump: We've got this. **@BLOOMBERG**

MY VIEW | A VISIBLE HAND

Gold: Investors must weigh each price driver carefully

NARAYAN RAMACHANDRAN



is chairman, InKlude Labs. Read Narayan's Mint columns at www.livemint.com/visiblehand

The intraday price of gold hit an all-time high of \$5,595 per troy ounce in late January, having nearly doubled within the span of a little over a year. On the same day, in rupee terms, gold of 24 Karat purity recorded a price of 1183,000 per 10 grams, having risen 134% over the same period thanks to the combined effect of its price gain and the rupee's depreciation. Silver, the metal's younger sibling, sparkled almost as much during the same period.

The sharp rise of gold and its moderate correction since has every investor asking what is going on. What next for this metal? Should one have had gold as a chunky part of one's investment portfolio? Have we missed the bus? These questions are from investors everywhere, but particularly in India where we think we have an edge of familiarity since we grew up with gold in our households.

New York University professor Aswath Damodaran has a nice framework to think about what investments should go into an asset-allocation portfolio. In an excellent

Substack blog on the topic of gold, he says that investments may be classified into four categories. One, assets like equities and bonds that generate cash flows. Two, commodities like copper that are useful in industrial production. Three, currencies that are a medium of exchange or a store of value. Four, collectibles like art or wine, which as the name implies, is for emotional or aesthetic value. Gold is an interesting combination with features of a commodity, currency and collectible. However, its longstanding appeal for investors, households and central banks has been as a collectible. Gold does not have a yield or cash flow associated with it. There is also a small cost of warehousing physical gold. Gold has retained its lustre as a collectible over centuries because it is durable, its supply is finite and it has provided a safe haven during geopolitical shifts.

Analysts cite a few drivers for the price of gold. Most of these drivers do not hold up under close scrutiny. For instance, an oft-quoted idea is that gold is driven by inflation. The correlation of gold prices (in dollars) with US inflation has been quite moderate in the last 40 years. Look closer and you will see that gold does respond to large and unexpected bouts of inflation, but it is not correlated at other times with inflation

movement. Similarly, gold is not much driven by indices of volatility or crises like credit spreads. During the past year's rally, gold prices were driven by two factors. One, continued buying by central banks to the tune of 2,000 tonnes over the last two years; and two, as a hedge against geopolitical uncertainty emerging from US President Donald Trump's economic policies and wars in multiple locations.

Is gold overvalued? For an investment that is either a currency or a collectible, any notion of absolute value is moot. The best one can do is make some relative valuation observations. On historical trends, it does appear that the price of gold relative to that of silver is high, with a price ratio of 65 times versus an average of about 57. Gold, relative to dollar inflation, is at about 18 times against a median value of three times. The correlation between gold and Bitcoin (sometimes called 'digital gold') over the past 10 years has been zero. Most major investment banks say they expect gold

to resume its rise in 2026, sustain it in 2027 and head towards \$6,000 an ounce. Most relative value indicators, however, do not back these predictions.

It is still possible that gold defies relative value considerations and continues to rise. One reason for that could be that central banks continue to buy it. At about 20% of reserves, gold surpassed the euro recently to become the second-largest reserve asset for all central banks combined. The central banks of Italy, China, Russia, Japan and India hold 1,000 tonnes of gold among them.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) dramatically slowed down its gold purchases in 2025, buying only 4 tonnes versus 73 tonnes in the prior year. Its total of about 880 tonnes of reserve gold makes up about 17% of its total reserves. Over the last few years, RBI has brought home 274 tonnes of gold. The apparent aim of this is to secure these assets onshore as a hedge against geopolitical uncertainty. India's central bank could continue to gradually increase its gold

reserves and bring more of it home.

Should India, China, South Korea and Brazil decide to increase their central bank gold allocation to 30% of reserves, that would imply a significant increase in gold demand. The US manages its bullion stocks in a peculiar way. Its reserves of 8,000 tonnes (worth well over \$1 trillion) are managed by the Treasury department. The Federal Reserve, its central bank, was issued 'gold certificates' when these were transferred at \$424 an ounce. The US Federal Reserve could conceivably 'mark to market' these gold certificates and return the excess to the US Treasury through a special dividend. If this were to happen in whole or part, there could be a massive spike in the price of gold (driven by front-running) and a strong inflationary impact within the US.

Gold is a collectible that has some diversification value for investor portfolios. However, adding it to one's portfolio at a time when its relative valuation is out of alignment with historical trends seems imprudent. For long-term growth in the value of assets, it is advisable to stick to those that generate or deliver cash flows.

P.S.: The desire of gold is not for gold, it is for the means of freedom and benefit. said Ralph Waldo Emerson

[OUR TAKE]

Red sunset on the horizon

The surrender of top Maoists underlines the near-collapse of the insurgents. But the road ahead must be one of development and democratic promise

It now appears certain that the Union government will meet its deadline of March 31, 2026 to eradicate Maoist violence from India. The surrender of party general secretary Thippiri Tirupati alias Devji, 60, and central committee-cum-politburo member Malla Raji Reddy alias Sangram, 76, along with 16 other members of the party over the weekend was only the latest in a string of successes for the security forces. The operation against Left Wing Extremism, announced a little over two years ago, has switched gears in recent months — as fierce gunfights deep inside rebel strongholds have given way to a series of high-profile surrenders spanning Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh. No doubt, the relentless security inroads into territory once held by rebels, coupled with rising government pressure and waning public support in the villages, has forced the Maoists to come to terms with their impending end. Roughly two decades after their prime minister Manmohan Singh described Maoism as the country's greatest internal challenge, this is a significant achievement.

It is now believed that the highest decision-making body of the insurgents, the politburo, has only one active member and the central committee has less than 10 members. Maoist branches have also released statements in recent weeks, underlining decaying morale among the rebels and admitting that losses had cut deep into their operational strength even as public opinion of the fighters had tanked. With the security onslaught showing no signs of slowing down, it appears only a matter of time before the Maoist resistance collapses even in the final pockets in the Dandakaranya and hinterlands.

What comes next? Establishing a credible and transparent civilian administration, with the active participation of the local communities, must remain high on the agenda of the government. As soon as areas are secured, the authorities must begin the move from a securitised to a democratic approach. Any complaints of human rights abuses must be addressed on priority and governance initiatives evenly distributed. The State needs to double down on participative development and democratic representation of the people. An absent government on the ground and botched security operations had laid the ground for Maoist ideologies to take root — which has taken tens of thousands of victims and decades to uproot. The road ahead should be negotiated carefully, with deliberation and empathy.

Restoring trust key to better Dhaka-Delhi ties

With the recent change of guard in Dhaka, there is fresh impetus for normalisation of the relationship with New Delhi. Bangladesh's missions in India are resuming tourist visa services, which the Muhammad Yunus-led interim administration had suspended over "security concerns". A resumption of services by the Indian side — suspended in response to the Yunus administration's move — is also on the cards. Under the newly-elected Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government headed by Tarique Rahman, a string of overtures has signalled an intent to return to a more cordial relationship, after a long period of largely one-sided rancour. The two countries must reciprocate good-faith gestures and build on them to recover lost ground.

The relationship must be insulated from the noise of domestic politics in both countries for long-term stability and regional progress. The government in Bangladesh will have to balance competing interests in the neighbourhood and the larger South Asian region while not facilitating anything that jeopardises ties with India. The new dispensation has sent out the right initial signals, moving away from the hostility towards India that marked both the BNP's earlier leadership and the previous, interim, government. For its part, India must distance itself from the factors that shaped Dhaka's perception of New Delhi as preferring one party across the border, even as it urges inclusive democracy in Bangladesh.

People-to-people connect will be a key pillar for normalising ties in the long run. There have been some positive signs here, with the Agartala-Dhaka-Kolkata bus service set to resume after a trial run. Rescuing cricket from the consequences of the unnecessary controversy thrust upon it by the Yunus regime can be another platform to nurture this. Restoring friendly relations will need both sides to strengthen trust with a range of actions, small and big.

Managing crises in the absence of dialogue

Calibrated steady mechanisms — rather than diplomatic breakthroughs — offer the most realistic path forward for managing India-Pakistan relations

India-Pakistan relations have entered a phase defined by a volatile mix of active confrontation alternating with constrained hostility. Formal dialogue remains politically untenable in India, public discourse is sharply sceptical of engagement, and Pakistan's internal political trajectory has moved further toward praetorian dominance. The result is not peace but a suspended hostility in which crises remain possible even when escalation may not be imminent.

The emergence of general Asim Munir as Pakistan's central power figure has reinforced this dynamic. Pakistan's military establishment has historically shaped the country's foreign policy, but the current consolidation of military authority — combined with persistent ambiguity over militant proxies — has narrowed the political space for meaningful diplomatic engagement. The absence of major terrorist incidents in Kashmir between 2019 (Pulwama) and 2025 (Pahalgam) had encouraged cautious optimism in some quarters. That optimism has now evaporated. In India, the political space for dialogue, and politically the costs of overt engagement remain extremely high.

This constraint-driven environment must shape policy thinking, as sustained political questions is no longer how to revive dialogue but how to prevent crises from escalating in the absence of dia-

logue. Stability in South Asia cannot rely solely on deterrence, nor can it assume periodic diplomatic thaws. It requires mechanisms capable of functioning even amid sustained strategic mistrust.

Recent crises underscore why. India-Pakistan confrontations rarely erupt fully formed. They tend to build incrementally through misread signals, tactical incidents, terrorism, media amplification, and domestic political pressures that compress decision-making timelines. Nuclear deterrence may cap escalation, but it does not prevent the processes that generate it. Indeed, hardened public rhetoric on both sides increasingly shortens the margin for error.

China's expanding regional footprint adds another layer of complexity. Beijing's territorial stakes in the broader Kashmir region and its deepening strategic partnership with Pakistan ensure that India-Pakistan tensions are rarely insulated from wider geopolitical competition. The omnipresent architecture of Chinese territorial claims in Ladakh and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir — expressed through infrastructure development, Line of Actual Control transgressions, and strategic presence — has quietly altered the regional balance. This triangular dynamic reinforces the need for disciplined crisis management even when political normalisation remains distant.

Within Kashmir itself, the political landscape remains fluid. Security indicators have improved in some respects since the constitutional changes of 2019, yet questions of political representation, economic recovery, and legitimate demands for self-determination. These internal dynamics intersect with India-Pakistan relations where policymakers foreground

them diplomatically or not.

Human rights narratives surrounding Kashmir also reflect asymmetries that complicate external perceptions. Much advocacy focuses on Indian State actions because India is the sovereign authority defined by visible institutions, legal processes, and media scrutiny. Non-State actors or developments across the Line of Control are harder to document and less susceptible to reputational pressure. Fear, access constraints, and international advocacy incentives reinforce this pattern. The consequence is not that abuses are unreal, but that the map of advocacy does not always align with the full map of coercion. Selective narratives ultimately weaken credibility and reduce the space for constructive accountability.

Against this complex backdrop, calibrated steady mechanisms — rather than diplomatic breakthroughs — offer the most realistic path forward. These mechanisms are not about reconciliation or normalisation. They are instruments of risk management designed to keep rivalry bounded.

Water remains a particularly sensitive domain. The Indus Waters Treaty, negotiated in a very different geopolitical era, was once seen as a rare stabilising framework in an otherwise adversarial relationship. Yet the circumstances underpinning it have changed substantially — demographic pressures, energy requirements, climate variability, and persistent interpretive disputes have altered the operational context. For Pakistan, the Indus system remains a so-called "civilisational" lifeline, underpinning agricultural viability and social stability. For India, however, growing strategic trust, compounded by genuinely rooted concerns over cross-border terrorism, has increasingly shaped perceptions of



Water remains a particularly sensitive domain. The Indus Waters Treaty was negotiated in a very different geopolitical era.

the treaty's constraints. The cumulative impact of such concerns resulted in the Indian side announcing that the treaty will effectively be held in abeyance. This does not diminish the humanitarian centrality of the river system, but it does suggest that what India sees as an unequal agreement framed in 1960 cannot remain static indefinitely.

Equally important are communication guardrails, informal or backchannel communication has historically played a quiet role in managing India-Pakistan crises. Under present political conditions, such channels are unlikely to lead to formal dialogue. Their value lies instead in providing discreet and candid mechanisms for clarification, signalling, and de-escalation when public diplomacy is politically constrained or operationally too slow. In a relationship where civilian and military decision-making in Pakistan do not always align transparently, such communication can help prevent misinterpretation from hardening into confrontation. Properly understood, backchannels are not instruments of rapprochement but safeguards against inadvertent escalation.

Technical cooperation insulated from political signalling can also contribute modestly to stability. Flood forecasting, environmental monitoring, humanitarian coordination, and carefully structured academic or civil society dialogues can help preserve analytical continuity even during diplomatic freezes. Such interaction is not a substitute for political dialogue, but it can

maintain channels of understanding that become valuable during crises.

None of this implies imminent normalisation. The political mood in India does not support it. Pakistan's internal power configuration complicates it, and regional geopolitics increasingly constrain it. But rejecting all stabilising mechanisms would not strengthen deterrence. It would increase the risk of miscalculation.

The broader lesson is straightforward. Rivalries between nuclear-armed neighbours cannot be managed solely through deterrence or periodic diplomatic optimism. They require persistent, often quiet guardrails that prevent crises from spiralling. These mechanisms rarely attract public attention precisely because they function best outside political theatre.

India-Pakistan relations may remain adversarial for the foreseeable future. The goal, therefore, is not premature reconciliation but disciplined rivalry — a framework in which competition continues without recurrent crises that destabilise the region and distract both countries from their larger developmental priorities.

Reading the tea leaves suggests that stability is unlikely to arrive through grand diplomatic gestures. More often, it will emerge through calibrated, incremental measures that reduce risk even when trust remains elusive.

Nirupama Rao is a former foreign secretary. The views expressed are personal.

[SIMPLY ECONOMICS]

Pramit Bhattacharya

The great Indian local governance challenge

India's founding fathers famously disagreed on many policy issues. But most of them agreed on the need to build a strong centralised State. Fearful of fissiparous tendencies in a diverse country, they voted for a Constitution that empowered the Union government at the expense of the states, and virtually ignored local governments. India's embrace of economic planning after Independence further centralised policymaking in the country.

Local governments received statutory backing only after the liberalisation of the economy in the early 1990s. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments were aimed at empowering village and city governments to deliver public goods such as sanitation and waste management. The constitutional provisions for participatory democracy in these amendments aimed to give citizens a direct say in governance.

The reality of local governance has belied that constitutional promise. The third tier of government still remains the weakest tier. Most state governments have been reluctant to devolve powers to local governments, especially in urban areas. Across Indian cities, unelected officials appointed by state governments enjoy greater powers than elected mayors. Local ward committees are largely defunct.

Institutions responsible for local body elections and local fund flows — State Election Commissions (SECs) and the Union Finance Commissions (SFCs) — have been denied the resources and authority they need to function effectively. So local body elections keep getting delayed without rhyme or reason. SFC recommendations are routinely ignored. A recent report on SFCs published by the urban watchdog, Janaagraha, shows that several states tend to set up SFCs long after the previous award period ends. Unlike in the case of the Union Finance Commission, most SFCs are appointed for a very short tenure (typically less than 12 months), lack dedicated technical staff, and remain ill-equipped to judge the evolving needs of city and village governments.

While it has become a convention at the Centre to accept most of the Union Finance Commission recommendations, states seem to have devised their own conventions of ignoring SFC recommendations. Even when action taken reports are presented in state assemblies, they often leave out key details — such as the department(s) that would be responsible for implementing a particular recommendation, or the timeline for it.

State governments often complain about the Centre's intrusion in state-level policy issues. But when it comes to devolving power to the next level of government, most states in the country fare worse than the Centre.

The lack of effective and accountable local governments hurts citizens, throttles the economy, and weakens the political system. By denying authority to city and village govern-



ments, it deprives citizens of a voice in local governance, and undermines the provision of civic amenities.

As in other parts of the world, cities have been the key engines of growth in India. But the lack of effective city governance elevates the costs of doing business, and shades fresh investments. Large Indian businesses sometimes arrange for quasi-public goods for their employees, but such workarounds have their limits.

A weak local governance system also hurts the country's political culture. Since the stakes in local body elections are relatively low, very few serious aspirants for state and national leadership roles contest these elections. This hollows out the organisational base of political parties, making them excessively dependent on moneybags and crimalords.

In several other democracies — from Indonesia to Turkey — successful mayors have gone on to be elected heads of State. In India, the last time a municipal executive assumed a national leadership role was during the British Raj, when Subhash Chandra Bose, a former chief executive of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation, became the Congress president in 1938.

There is growing recognition among policy elites today that our cities are crumbling, and they need better infrastructure and financing. The allocation for urban agglomerations in the recent Budget has strengthened the case for urban local bodies by the 6th Finance Commission (for the 2026-31 period) stem from this realisation.

However, building liveable and thriving cities is not just a financing challenge. It is an institutional challenge. It requires us to tackle hard questions about local governance. Can unelected municipal commissioners really drive governance reforms in a messy democracy such as ours? Or should directly elected mayors be in the driver's seat? Is the three-tier structure for rural local bodies required? Should peri-urban villages share a common governance setup with urban areas? Do we need constitutional amendments to strengthen local body institutions such as SECs and SFCs?

Nearly ten years ago, the Thiruvananthapuram Member of Parliament, Shashi Tharoor, introduced a private member bill that provided for directly elected mayors in large Indian cities. It also included several thoughtful provisions to empower municipal councillors and citizens' ward committees. As with other private member bills, Tharoor's did not make much headway. But the issues it raised remain important.

Local governance, and local government-related institutions such as SECs and SFCs, deserve more attention than they receive.

Pramit Bhattacharya is a Bengaluru-based journalist. The views expressed are personal.

[KAJA KALLAS] VICE PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN COMMISSION

We want to be part of the peace process in Gaza and also contribute with what we have

Ahead of EU diplomats' meeting with the director of the Board of Peace

Weaving richer success for India's apparel sector

India's domestic textile and apparel market is estimated to be \$10 billion and growing at 9-10%. India is the second largest producer of cotton globally (5 million metric tons) and has the second largest spinning capacity in the world (60 million-plus spindles). Yet, fully seized the opportunity. Despite employing over 45 million people and producing an estimated 22 billion garments annually, exports have remained broadly stagnant at around \$37 billion for nearly a decade, even as competing sourcing hubs have steadily gained share. Why do we not hear about the Ludhiana or Tiruppur clusters in the same breath as we do about similar clusters in other categories where India is making some very decisive moves?

Textile supply chain realignments and reconfiguration offer a unique opportunity for the industry which we believe is at a crossroads.

India largely focuses on upstream play for nearly a decade, even as competing sourcing hubs have steadily gained share. Why do we not hear about the Ludhiana or Tiruppur clusters in the same breath as we do about similar clusters in other categories where India is making some very decisive moves?

India largely focuses on upstream play for nearly a decade, even as competing sourcing hubs have steadily gained share. Why do we not hear about the Ludhiana or Tiruppur clusters in the same breath as we do about similar clusters in other categories where India is making some very decisive moves?

India largely focuses on upstream play for nearly a decade, even as competing sourcing hubs have steadily gained share. Why do we not hear about the Ludhiana or Tiruppur clusters in the same breath as we do about similar clusters in other categories where India is making some very decisive moves?

There is an opportunity to enhance productivity and efficiency by 20-30% by transforming operations and using fit-for-purpose digital planning solutions. This needs to be backed by a ruthless pursuit of efficiency across the value chain. Reducing lead times and bringing predictability materially shapes buyer behaviour. Companies need to adapt technology to meaningfully compress lead times and variability, rather than remain confined to pilots.

Third, revisit the focus portfolio and leapfrog. The nature of value creation in textiles is shifting. Growth is being driven by man-made fibres, technical textiles, design-led services, and sustainability-linked differentiation. Globally, man-made fibres account for close to 70% of raw material consumption, while India's production remains skewed toward cotton at nearly 60%. Where Indian firms have moved into higher-value niches, the competitors are already visible, with downstream and specialised segments delivering materially higher margins than upstream manufacturing.

The next phase of India's textile journey will, therefore, be defined less by headline capacity additions and more by execution choices. Can large, compliant capacity be scaled reliably across states, when fewer than a dozen textile companies today generate revenues above \$5,000 crore?

The opportunity before India is real, but it is not in perpetuity. Global buyers are allocating sourcing volumes now, and competing ecosystems are moving with speed and coherence. Domestic demand will continue to anchor industry growth, but exports offer sharper margins.

For India to emerge as a true alternative manufacturing hub rather than a supplementary one, the industry must rapidly make bold choices and transform. The next few years will not reward potential but will put a premium on those who execute consistently, integrate deeply, and deliver predictably in a world that increasingly values reliability over rhetoric.

Rahul Jain is India head, BCG, and Namit Puri is Asia-Pacific leader, Consumer Practice, BCG. The views expressed are personal.

The Editorial Page

The Indian EXPRESS
— FOUNDED BY —
RAMNATH GOENKA
— IN 1932 —
BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Naxalism nears end, work of democracy goes on

THE SUCCESS against Left-Wing Extremism (LWE) can be measured across three registers. The first is state capacity and policies that take the fight to the armed cadres of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). The second is the concerted efforts to facilitate the surrenders and rehabilitation of those who were till recently "waging war" against the Indian state. On the ideological front, splits within the Maoist leadership, as well as recognition of the futility of "armed struggle", have weakened the Maoists. The reported surrender of the highest-ranking Maoist, Thippiri Tirupathi alias "Devujji", along with 20 other cadres in Telangana, marks the near end of the LWE, ahead of the central government's March 31 deadline.

Nearly 2,000 Maoist cadres have surrendered since 2024. This has been backed by local intelligence and the spread of forward posts in the remote and forested "red corridor" across Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The neutralisation of Nambala Keshava Rao, alias Basavaraju, the then general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Maoist), in May 2025, pushed the Maoists further onto the back foot. The killing of Madvi Hidma, head of Battalion 1, in November last year, and Mediyam Vella, commander of Company No 2, in December, dealt body blows to the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army. The Maoists, though, are not merely an armed band — they are also the bearers of a political ideology. On this front, the surrender of Mallouja Venugopal Rao (alias Sonia), one of the chief ideologues of the Naxal movement, was a major gain.

With Devujji's surrender, the Maoists are now estimated to have an armed cadre of just around 180 and a leadership that is all but decimated. This moment, however, calls not for triumphalism but sombre reflection. At its height, the red corridor ran through some of India's most backward districts, where the state was often absent or, at times, coercive. Now, policy and politics need to protect and ensure both development and representation. The strength of India's democracy lies in its capaciousness, its ability to turn critics and rebels into stakeholders. Issues like forest rights and just and transparent land acquisition must be addressed. The most marginalised must be a part of the larger India story. That, as much as the actions of the security forces, will help ensure that Naxalism does not return in any form.

Victimhood vs justice: V-C should know better

THE RECENT remarks of vice-chancellor Santishree D Pandit on caste and on the UGC Regulations against discrimination, now stayed by the Supreme Court, are disappointing. Pandit, the former head of a prominent institute which does disservice to Pandit's position as a leader of an institution of higher education, especially one as storied as the Jawahar Nehrui University, Pandit spoke of the Regulations as "unnecessary", and done without "due diligence". She has a right to criticise the Regulations, of course. But the problem is that her critique seems to come from a denial of the backward-caste experience of an embedded historical and continuing injustice, and a completely ahistorical equivalence of that experience with that of other groups. Her remarks on a "premier institution", encouraged by "wokeness" — "this was done for Blacks, same thing was brought for Dalits here" — her indignation at an "equity group" becoming "inequitable" by giving "powers" to "one regulation" and denying "justice" to others, reek of a regressive political position. There is a valid critique of affirmative action and some provisions in the UGC Regulations needlessly lend themselves to abuse, but Pandit's vocabulary, unfortunately, echoes upper-caste misappropriation of the language of marginalisation.

Listen to V-C Pandit — the comments on caste are part of a 52-minute interview to *The Sunday Guardian* — and it is clear that her misreading of affirmative action is set in a world view teeming with "us and them" binaries. JNU, according to her, was a "garrisoned university" and an "adda" of Left politics, and it was her task to turn around its reputation of being "anti-national", a hotbed of Naxalism and "intellectual authoritarianism". That these epithets draw upon politically contrived spectres and that JNU has a proud and rich record far larger than the sum of these spectres is unfortunately not acknowledged by its own V-C. On caste and backwardness, JNU was pioneer in creating a system of deprivation points to make its admission process more inclusive, diverse and equitable. These points, added to candidates' scores, recognise backwardness because of region, caste, gender, among others. They were discontinued for research degree admissions in 2017 but remain in place for undergraduate and postgraduate admissions.

V-C Pandit is right, "everyone is fighting a battle". But surely she knows that some battles are more important than others, and that the university campus must be a space that is nurturing and enabling for those whose right to equality and dignity has been violated in an unequal society. V-C Pandit must reflect on her remarks, and the government that appointed her, and to which she professes loud allegiance, must explain whether or not she speaks for it.

Sun sets on East India Company, again

EMPIRES ARE carving up the world and its natural resources, revanchism and territorial warfare are on the rise, the superiority of Western civilisation is being asserted, and the East India Company is shutting shop. It's 2026. The East India Company was founded in London in 1600 by a group of investors, Sanjiu Mehta, after he had bought the rights to the name. He opened a shop in Mayfair, the heart of affluent London, and traded in luxury food and drink items — including, inevitably, tea. Now, *The Sunday Times of London* has reported that the company has been placed into liquidation.

After starting his company, Mehta was quoted as saying that he had reclaimed a symbol of colonial oppression for Indians and that "today's East India Company is about compassion". It may not have been the message that Boban Singh Zafar dreamt of — that the "sword of Hindustan" would "flash before the throne of London" — but irony, or at least money, can be its own reward.

The money, it appears, has run out. But is the real East India Company truly dead? Its name and the mercantilism it represents are often invoked as a reference point to understand the oligopolistic capital that, hand in hand with the state, increasingly dominates the world today. Its strange second life in London may be over, but the East India Company's ghost may have moved to haunt Silicon Valley.

New federal compact must be based on principle of non-domination



DESHKAAL
BY YOGENDRA YADAV

WE ARE passing through a *dashshinyavan* phase in the history of our republic. Be it ecological, revival, or education of weaving, alternative education, efficacious health policies, smart IT clusters, or innovative business — many of the fascinating ideas, models and experiments relevant to our collective future are emerging from the southern states. As are cutting-edge debates on politics.

Tamil Nadu must be thanked for restarting a badly needed conversation on Indian federalism. Following the precedent of the Rajamannar Committee (1969-71) which made a case for state autonomy in an era when no one spoke about it, the Tamil Nadu government last year appointed a High-Level Committee on Union-State Relations. Chaired by Justice (ret'd) Kurian Joseph, the three-member committee (with retired IAS officer K Ashok Vardhan Shetty and professor M Nagathan) has just submitted a report that deserves to be read and debated by anyone interested in the future of Indian federalism. It does not merely reiterate or update earlier suggestions, but takes the discussion forward with a set of concrete proposals on improving the constitutional design of federalism.

To put it simply, the report is a plea for a

fresh federal compact or a "structural reset" of Indian federalism. As is widely acknowledged, the original design of the centre-state relationship in our Constitution leaned heavily towards centralisation due to the anxieties of the founding moment of our republic. The moment passed but centralisation became an inherited reflex rather than a consciously renewed constitutional choice. The rise of regional parties and coalition governments in the 1990s checked this regression. Sadly, the new political consensus was not encoded in the Constitution. The last decade has seen a complete reversal, a "consistent and troubling pattern of federal imbalance across constitutional design, institutional practice, and sectoral governance." Worse, federal erosion now threatens to become an ideology packaged in the template of One-Nation-One-Something.

In this context, the report makes a case that a federation "that trusts its states, respects subsidiarity, empowers local governments, and accommodates heterogeneity does not weaken sovereignty; it deepens democracy. Unity in such a system is sustained not by command but by consent, not by enforced uniformity but by negotiated accommodation, and not by the concentration of power but by its principled distribution." This understanding of the "Union of states" should be the starting point of any future conversation on the Centre-state relationship.

The report offers concrete proposals for a reset in multiple arenas, starting with a much-needed constitutional reset. Doing away with the draconian power of the Centre to redraw state boundaries and the Centre's primacy in amending much of the Constitution without

consulting the states. This is unacceptable, as are the proposals to restore subjects like education back to the domain of states and check the Centre's encroachment on states subjects like health and agriculture. The proposals for a political reset include a participatory model to check the arbitrariness and partisanship of the governor, elimination of loopholes in the existing anti-defection provisions and transferring the responsibility of assembly elections to the State Election Commission. While these are correctives to a real and pressing problem of institutional distortions, the exact design of the alternative needs more deliberation, lest the medicine be worse than the disease. Proposals for a reset of political representation rightly reject the idea of "One Nation, One Election" and suggest continuing the freeze on delimitation till fertility rates stabilise. This could be reframed as a permanent freeze on the ground of balance of power. There is a valuable and detailed examination of the fiscal reset with multiple options for reworking the GST regime. Finally, there are proposals for a cultural reset to clear the misconception that national unity requires linguistic uniformity, a point that needs reinforcing in our times. Sadly, the valid imperative to resist the hegemony of Hindi leads the committee to take issue with the language itself and advocate the uniform imposition of English.

A perspective that places Indian languages on an equal footing would have been more in keeping with the spirit of this report. Minor quibbles apart, this report opens up a conversation on the need to draw a new federal compact. Such a conversation must go beyond a constitutional and policy-

pragmatic logic to a civilisational mode of reasoning. Context-sensitive ethical reasoning, rather than fixed and universalisable moral imperatives, is the very core of Indian philosophical traditions. This acknowledgement is the basis of the widely accepted practice of *deshachar*, or respect for local customs, practices and rules, that we find in Indian history. The mighty Maurya, Gupta, Mughal and British empires learnt that the only way to rule this subcontinent was to respect its diversity. Unlike the Chinese state, the Indian state has a "compositional" character. Its unity is constituted in and through its regional units. Unlike the US, India is not a federation formed by "coming together" of sovereign states; it is a "holding together" federation. India's unity that of a "melting pot" like the US, but more of a "salad bowl" where each piece retains its distinct identity. Centralisation of the kind pursued in the past decade runs against the grain of our civilisation.

The conversation on a new federal compact could begin with a frank discussion on a balance of power across the Hindi and the non-Hindi states. The former could agree to a guarantee of non-imposition of the Hindi language and a freeze on their political representation as it stood in 1971. The southern (and western) states could agree to continue an equitable distribution of federal revenues in a way that transfers more resources to the poorer states in the Hindi heartland and eastern India. The principle of political, cultural and economic non-domination is the foundation of an enduring and just republic.

Yadav, author most recently of *Ganarajya ka Svadharm* (Setu Prakashan, 2026), is member, *Swaraaj India*, and national convenor, *Bharat Ado*. *Abhinav*. Views are personal

Let high courts steer tech reforms in justice system



SUPRIYA SANKARAN

A FEW weeks ago, the Madras High Court permitted an AI-assisted system into live court proceedings. Kerala's 24x7 ON Court, just a year old, has already shown how localised solutions can significantly compress resolution time. But for these efforts to scale, the Rs 1,200 crore e-courts budget announced earlier this year must become accessible to the high courts willing to act.

For nearly two decades, the e-courts mission has been India's flagship effort to modernise court administration. Over Rs 4,104 crore has been spent since 2011 and earnest efforts have followed. Yet, courts remain slow, unpredictable, and disempowering. A critical reason for this is the way the budget is allocated and governed.

If the goal is faster, more predictable, and seamless courts, high courts may need greater autonomy to determine their own needs and innovate. This autonomy to set their priorities, control the spending, and drive local innovation may be the missing piece. There are three reasons:

First, the Constitution and administrative logic support it. Under Article 227, high courts have administrative superintendence over district courts. They are autonomous constitutional courts. Devolving flexible resources respects that constitutional autonomy and aligns decision rights with operational responsibility.

Second, it's practical. Local problems need local solutions. States have different contexts, capacities, and priorities. Their workloads and caseloads are different. Decentralised allocation of funds lets high courts prioritise what actually improves access in their context.

Third, digitalisation catalyses capacity and innovation. When high courts can pilot, measure, and iterate, they learn faster. A single high court experimenting with an e-filing workflow or digital court can produce an evidence base that others can adapt and scale.

Decentralisation is constitutionally grounded, contextually necessary, and a more resilient path to solutions that scale. Closer to litigants and lawyers, high courts can meaningfully improve user experience

and access to justice. Tailored pilots will also reduce wasted investment in poorly matched national rollouts. Devolving funding to high courts need not mean abandoning standards, accountability, or e-courts. The Centre or the Supreme Court can create mechanisms that ensure both.

One option is to release a defined share of the e-courts budget directly to high courts as conditional block grants for transformation. Conditions can be simple: Utilisation of funds, alignment with national technical standards, and transparent publication of outcomes. This could enable rapid disbursement, local ownership, and lower transaction costs. Alternatively, disbursements can be tied to simple, auditable outcomes such as infrastructure or capacity built or reduction in disposal time. Crucially, these metrics should be proposed and agreed upon by the high courts themselves, so funding is linked to demonstrable results rather than just inputs.

A third option is creating competitive grants for innovation. High courts bid with concise proposals (scope, timeline, budget). A small central panel, comprising technical and judicial representatives, evaluates the bid on demand signal, scalability, and return on investment. Such an approach would encourage experimentation while using evidence to scale successful models.

The role of central bodies should be limited to creating digital public infrastructure standards for technology, data, and privacy, certifying compliant vendors and creating dashboards for each high court programme funded through the mission. Such measures will build public trust and accelerate the diffusion of good practices.

The budget of Rs 1,200 crore is in place. The Supreme Court, in coordination with the Department of Justice, has a historic opportunity to pilot a decentralised architecture this year. A blended model (conditional block grants and competitive innovation funding) offers the best of both worlds. Local relevance, experiential learning, and national standards.

Decentralise the money, centralise the standards, and we might have a good chance to watch digitisation transform our lives.

The writer is co-founder of PUCAR and Agami

Big win for internal security, but no time to rest



PRAKASH SINGH

THE MAOIST insurrection in the country appears to be at a terminal stage. There was a time when it was considered the biggest internal security threat to India. During 2009-10, its fire had engulfed 223 districts spread across 20 states. Today, hardly 11 districts are affected, and only three "most affected". Security forces have been hammering and tongs to decimate Maoists by March 2026, the target date set by the Home Minister. The reported surrender of Thippiri Tirupathi, alias Devujji, is a blow to the armed insurgency. Mallu Raju Reddy, politburo member of CPI(M), also surrendered along with 50 cadres before the Telangana police. In the last year, at least 15 central committee members have been killed and another six have surrendered. The Maoists are thus facing a leadership vacuum.

In the last three months, the Maoists have suffered setbacks in quick succession. It started with the annihilation of Madvi Hidma, commander of the central military commission, in an encounter with the Greyhounds of Andhra Pradesh on November 18, 2025. A day later, former Maoist leader Mallouja Venugopal Rao released a video urging the Maoists to surrender their weapons and join the mainstream. He said: "Armed struggle is no longer possible. We must work according to the Constitution." On December 25, 2025, Ganesh Ujke, "commander" and central committee member, was killed along with three other Maoists in the Kandhamal district of Odisha. Ganesh was in-charge of the Odisha unit of the party. In Jharkhand, on January 22, 15 Maoists, including Patiram Manjhi, a central committee member who served as secretary of the Bihar-Jharkhand Special Area Committee, were killed in an engagement with the security forces.

There were massive surrenders, too. According to partial data collected by the South Asia Terrorist Portal, there were 1,425 surrenders in Chhattisgarh, 486 in Telangana, 103 in Maharashtra, 381 in Andhra Pradesh, 22 in Odisha, 21 in Jharkhand, 13 in Madhya Pradesh, 6 in Karnataka, and five in Bihar in 2025. The Maoist movement is in shambles. The People's Liberation Guerrilla Army has been disintegrated. The near defeat of the insurrection is to be attributed to firm political resolve, well-organised security measures, intelligence-based operations, centre-state coordination, improved governance, and socio-economic interventions.

The government deserves credit — this has been the biggest victory for internal security from after the defeat of terrorism in Punjab. However, there should be no room for complacency. The host of Khalistanis still haunt us. We have to ensure that mistakes of the past are not repeated. The government will have to be sensitive to the concerns of tribal communities. Corporates are trying to enter the areas cleared by the security forces. Development may be an imperative but as the Supreme Court recently said, it cannot be an absolute goal and the right to a healthy environment should not be sacrificed for economic benefits.

The writer, a retired police chief, is author of *The Naxalite Movement in India*

40 YEARS AGO February 24, 1986



Punjab, after the bandh

THE PRIME Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, is intending to take concrete steps after February 26, the day of the Bharat Bandh, for implementation of the Punjab Accord, regarding the transfer of Chandigarh to Punjab and some Hindi-speaking villages to Haryana.

Plan to eliminate missiles

THE PRESIDENT, Ronald Reagan, in a letter to the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, is calling for the elimination of medium-range missiles deployed in Europe as a "constructive first step" towards a worldwide curb of the nuclear arms race, a US official said. A presidential statement to the nation is also

planned, said the official, who insisted on the advice of most of his senior arms control specialists, who see an agreement on US and Soviet medium-range missiles as the most likely way to break the deadlock at the negotiating table in Geneva.

Zia evades question on India

THE PAKISTAN President, General Zia-ul-Haq, has said that it is too early to say anything on a possible agreement with India on a comprehensive friendship treaty or a non-aggression pact, "if there is some outcome, it will emerge before us." General Zia told newsmen on arrival in Sibi (Balochistan). Replying to a question, he said that the new

democratic order in the country was working satisfactorily. He said he would not join any political party, including the official Pakistan Muslim League, launched by the Prime Minister, Mohammed Khan Junejo.

In capital, a murder a day

ONE PERSON is murdered in the capital every day on average and there is one case of attempted murder. At least half a dozen persons receive severe injuries in violence and brawls every day, according to the police figures. Many more are injured or otherwise beaten up in brawls that do not figure in police records. Many of these attacks, police say, happen when people cross the thin line between anger and aggression.

From Panini to AI stack: Delhi is forging new structures, rewriting frameworks



HARDEEP S PURI

WHEN PANINI reduced the chaos of spoken language into a compact, computable grammar, he proved something that still holds: Intelligence is most powerful when it is expressed as structure. Nalanda took that instinct to institutions, building methods to debate, preserve, and transmit knowledge across borders. India's decision to host the India AI Impact Summit 2026 draws from the same civilisational impulse, because the next leap in technology is about systems that can learn, reason, and act at scale, and the world cannot afford a future in which only a few capitals decide how those systems are built.

This was the first global AI summit hosted by a Global South nation, and no previous edition drew participation at this scale: Over 20 heads of state, 60 ministers, more than 500 AI leaders from over 100 countries, 300 exhibitors across 10 thematic pavilions. Under PM Narendra Modi's leadership, India is putting forward its own organising idea: Sovereignty over data, inclusion by design, accountability by default. And it is inviting global capital to build here on those terms.

That idea finds its sharpest expression in the PM's MANAV vision: Ethical guardrails, accountable governance, sovereignty over data so that the raw material of intelligence is not extracted the way commodities once were, broad access so that benefits reach a farmer in Madhya Pradesh as surely as an engineer in Bengaluru, and legal validity so that every deployed system is subjected to democratic scrutiny. His formulation about giving AI an open sky while keeping command in human hands draws a line many advanced economies have been reluctant to draw.

Those principles now carry multilateral weight through the Delhi Declaration, adopted at the summit and already being called the first major AI governance blueprint from the Global South; taking a development-oriented view, anchored in a techno-legal approach that favours flexible guardrails over rigid compliance. It organises

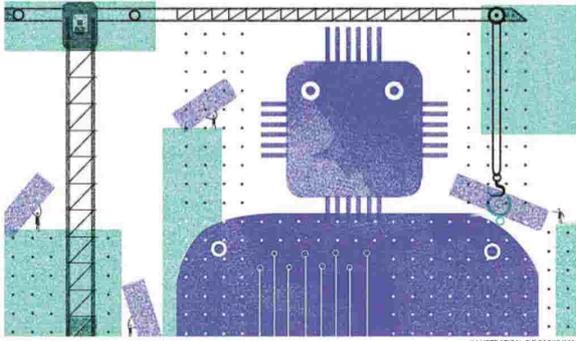


ILLUSTRATION: CH SANKHAR

global collaboration around three pillars: People, planet, and progress. Population-scale solutions like BharatGen, which supports 22 Indian languages, address the reality that most of the world does not operate in English. A proposed global compute bank, modelled on India's subsidised GPU access at Rs 65 per hour, lowers entry barriers everywhere. The insistence on data sovereignty challenges AI extractivism: The pattern in which developing nations' data is harvested to train models they must then pay to use.

What gives that framework credibility is the decade of execution that precedes it. This government arrived at AI through the most ambitious digital public infrastructure programme any democracy has undertaken. UPI processed over 228 billion transactions in 2025, worth roughly \$3.4 trillion. The IAM trinity has delivered over \$3.48 lakh crore in welfare savings since 2015. No other country has built identity, payments, and entitlement delivery at this scale within a single policy arc, and that is the foundation on which India's AI moment stands.

If the logic of digital public infrastructure was to connect every citizen to the state, the logic of AI infrastructure is to connect every citizen to capability, and here the numbers reveal a striking gap: India generates nearly 20 per cent

of the world's data but hosts roughly 3 per cent of global data centre capacity. That gap is being closed with the same intent that built UPI. Fast, at scale, and with sovereign design.

Consider what was announced. Microsoft: \$80 billion by 2030 for the Global South, with \$17.5 billion already committed to India. Google: The America-India Connect initiative, anchored by \$15 billion over five years. Amazon Web Services: \$8.3 billion in Maharashtra. Adani Group: \$10 billion toward renewable energy-powered AI data centres by 2035. Yotta Data Services: Over \$2 billion for one of Asia's largest AI computing hubs using Nvidia's Blackwell Ultra chips. Larsen & Toubro: A proposed venture with Nvidia to build India's largest gigawatt-scale AI factory. The India AI Mission's national compute cluster has crossed 38,000 GPUs and is scaling to 58,000, available to startups at roughly one-third of global cost. The government's target of \$200 billion in AI infrastructure investment over the next two years is not aspiration; the commitments already announced bring it within reach.

Ensuring that this investment becomes a long-term structural advantage is the purpose of the Union Budget 2026-27, which extends a tax holiday until 2047 for foreign companies using Indian data centres for global cloud ser-

vices and commits \$1.1 billion to a venture capital fund for AI and advanced manufacturing startups. The National Critical Mineral Mission secures the lithium, cobalt, and rare earths that AI and semiconductor manufacturing depend on.

None of this matters, however, unless it reaches people. On the first day of the Summit, more than 2.5 lakh students took a pledge to use AI for responsible innovation. Thirty Data and AI labs are operational in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, the first wave of a planned 570-lab network, while AIKosh offers over 7,500 datasets and 275 models as shared public infrastructure. When this government took office, India had 16 ITIs; today, there are 23. OpenAI's CEO disclosed that India is ChatGPT's second largest market. The consumption is here, and the production capability is catching up: Three sovereign AI models were unveiled at the summit, including Sarvam AI's LLM and BharatGen's Param 2.

Equally telling is how partnerships are now structured, because they are no longer about licensing foreign technology but about co-building sovereign capacity. The Tata Group's strategic partnership with OpenAI, beginning with 100 MW of AI-ready data centre capacity under the Stargate initiative and scaling to one gigawatt, signals that Indian industry is moving to the supply side of global intelligence. India's signing of the Pax Silica Declaration places it in the US-led coalition securing supply chains for AI, semiconductors, and critical minerals. The India-US AI Opportunity Partnership commits both nations to pro-innovation approaches on critical technologies, while the India-France Year of Innovation in 2026 adds another axis organised around joint skilling and measurable outcomes.

Under PM Modi's leadership, the first Global South nation to host the global AI summit series laid out the terms on which it intends to compete: A declaration that rewrites the rules of AI governance, digital infrastructure processing nearly half the world's real-time payments, investment commitments in the hundreds of billions, sovereign models built from scratch, and entry into the supply chain security architecture of the AI age. Panini's lesson was never complicated: Structure is intelligence. India is building that structure now.

The author is Union Minister for Petroleum & Natural Gas

Congress protest didn't hurt India's image. It sparked a conversation



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

LET ME begin with a confession. When some Youth Congress workers entered the AI summit venue and staged their protest, my first reaction was that they should have chosen a different site. Also believed that while there is anguish among many Indians over the US deal, such a dramatic intervention risked appearing misdirected. Yet, reflection has a way of unsettling first impressions. Now, I am persuaded that the familiar anxiety about India's "international image" being damaged is overstated. More importantly, the choice of the protest site must be understood as a calculated act of political communication, to amplify a dissenting idea by inserting it into a space of maximum visibility.

Movements and protests emerge within what scholars describe as a field of power structured by opportunities, constraints, and symbolic hierarchies. Protest, therefore, is about making claims in ways that compel recognition. When dissenters choose a site like an international summit, they are intervening in a spectacle of consensus. Elite gatherings are designed to project inevitability; a protest at such a venue disrupts this script.

The history of contentious politics demonstrates that the effectiveness of protest often depends on its capacity to transform ordinary spaces into arenas of contestation. By entering the summit venue, the protesters were not only opposing a specific policy; they were contesting the very idea that such decisions should unfold insulated from public scrutiny.

Another dimension is the performative nature of protest. The shirtless protest can be read as a metaphorical device, an attempt to signify dispossession or the stripping away of protective narratives surrounding the deal. Political communication often relies on such stark imagery. In a media-saturated age, movements must compete for attention.

Critics argue that such acts embarrass the nation. This argument rests on a fragile understanding of democracy. A nation's reputation is not built on the absence of dissent but on the robustness of its institutions and the openness of its public sphere. Many countries regarded as stable democracies today carry histories marked by disruptive movements. To equate protest with national humiliation is to privilege order over justice, optics over substance, and opacity over transparency.

It is also important to recognise that movements calculate their actions in relation to the economy of attention. Today, in the age of information, the visibility of an issue often determines whether it enters public debate. A protest at a high-profile event forces journalists, policymakers, and citizens to confront the issue.

One must also reflect on the deeper disjuncture that dissent generates in societies marked by growing centralisation of authority. The invocation of national image becomes a rhetorical device to delegitimise protest without engaging with its substance. Yet a confident polity should not fear moments of discord; on the contrary, such moments signal that citizens remain invested in the collective future.

Seen through this lens, the protest was part of a long tradition of contentious politics. It tried to insert an alternative voice into a conversation dominated by state agencies and contractors. Whether one agrees with the protesters' position is a separate matter. The more important question is whether we are willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of dissent as a democratic practice.

If democracy is reduced to periodic elections and ritual affirmations of unity, it risks becoming hollow. Its vitality lies in the continuous negotiation between authority and opposition, between order and disruption. Protests serve as reminders that sovereignty resides with the people. They disrupt the illusion that governments can proceed indefinitely without accountability. Therefore, the issue is not whether the protest tarnished India's image, but whether it compelled us to engage with the anxieties that produced it. The measure of a democracy is not the absence of protest at international summits, but the presence of a citizenry willing to speak even when the setting is inconvenient. Silence may preserve appearances, but dissent preserves freedom.

The writer is Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal

The writer is a political anthropologist, teaches Anthropology at the Government General Degree College, Keshriy

The writer is an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University and affiliated with CRIER and the Carnegie Endowment

The writer is Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha), Rashtriya Janata Dal

Post US SC ruling, openness must be India's strategy



SHOUMITRO CHATTERJEE

THE US Supreme Court has ruled that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) does not authorise the President to impose tariffs. This decision eliminates the reciprocal tariffs imposed so far, but it would be a mistake to read it as a reversal of US trade policy.

Within hours of the judgment, Donald Trump announced a uniform 10 per cent global tariff and then raised it to 15 per cent under Section 122. Paradoxically, the three primary targets of tariff action to date—Brazil, China, and India—have seen the largest reductions in their tariffs, while some that had struck deals appear to face higher barriers. This relief, however, is likely to be temporary. The direction remains toward higher and more coercive trade barriers: what has changed is the instrument — and the speed.

The ruling narrows one pathway for executive tariff action; it does not eliminate tariff authority. Tariffs imposed under Section 232 on steel and aluminium and under Section 301 for unfair trade practices are unaffected. It also leaves open a Pandora's box of non-tariff tools—embargoes, licensing requirements, and transaction bans—that can be used to curtail trade.

One constant of this administration is the President's proclivity

to use tariffs as a first-response policy tool. The ruling constrains speed, not ambition, and should not be mistaken for the end of a high-tariff regime. The administration has made this clear: Trump has referred to other "methods, practices, and statutes" that could be used to impose tariffs "higher than before". Executive orders signed that night directed the Office of the US Trade Representative to initiate investigations into "unreasonable" and "discriminatory" trade practices under Section 301. This route is likely to become the vehicle for resurrecting tariffs that have been struck down.

What the ruling has unambiguously done is deepen uncertainty. The Section 122 tariff can be imposed for 150 days and extended further only with congressional approval, creating a rolling cliff edge. Other authorities will be invoked in sequence, challenged in court, and either upheld or struck down. Trade policy risks not disappeared; it has become episodic, legalistic, and harder to price. Restrictions may reappear in different forms.

How should India read this? Its recent trade deals have become more valuable. A bilateral agreement anchored in treaty law cannot be undone by a single ruling or executive order. In a world of shift-

ing tools and legal contestation, durability is a source of comparative advantage. Even the Trump administration has stated that the US will continue to honour its legally binding trade agreements.

These agreements also reflect a broader shift in India's policy stance. In recent trade deals, India has reduced tariffs across a wide range of products. This signals a recognition that imports are necessary for exports and that exports remain central to growth and job creation. This change in mindset is welcome and should be reinforced.

The agreement with the EU is the more consequential one, not only because of market size but also because of the stability and discipline it provides. The US framework matters for a similar reason. As Washington experiments with post-IEEPA alternatives, exporters and investors need a floor for the bilateral relationship. Even a broad framework agreement and an implicit tariff ceiling provide predictability.

In a world of persistent uncertainty — one this ruling has only reinforced — India's strategy is openness and predictability. That is essential to leverage the China-plus-one opportunity. India should stay the course.

The writer is assistant professor at Johns Hopkins University and affiliated with CRIER and the Carnegie Endowment

Bengal's politics still follows Mukul Roy's blueprint



SUMAN NATH

MUKUL ROY's rise to power in Bengal's politically charged environment was rather unconventional. He didn't rely on impassioned speeches. Instead, his influence was built brick by brick through meticulous record-keeping and constant communication. Looking at his career after his untimely death reveals a strategy that has become ingrained in Bengal's political structure.

Roy was a modern-day Chanakya. His rise shows that in West Bengal, grassroots influence is as much about logistical skill as political beliefs. In the end, however, Roy's life also serves as a stark warning: The very political machine he crafted could ultimately

contribute to its architect's undoing.

While Mamata Banerjee was the TMC's ideological heart and public face, Roy designed its operational backbone. From 2001 to 2011, he navigated the complexities of rural West Bengal, influencing local party units and gaining the loyalty of key leaders who controlled access to pollings stations. He understood a simple truth: Politics is fundamentally a management game, extending far beyond ideological alignment. His role in the 2011 "parivar" (family) movement was critical; he ensured that the TMC's organisational reach extended into every local community and marketplace. At the peak of his power, he was arguably the second most influential person in the state, the trusted insider who understood the intricate details of political operations. To truly grasp Roy's significance, one

must compare his methods to the rigid, top-down "party society" model of the CPI(M). While the Left depended on ideological indoctrination and a Politburo-led structure, Roy pioneered a more distributed, post-ideological franchise approach. He replaced disciplined party members with a loose network of local power brokers. Where the CPI(M) saw an organisational network, Roy saw a logistical network. His aim wasn't ideological uniformity but concrete results, transforming West Bengal's political landscape from a top-down driven structure into a competitive arena of political patronage.

The Saradha and Narada scandals cast a long shadow over Roy's political career. These represented the first cracks in the TMC's carefully crafted image of integrity. Roy's name became deeply associated with the nexus of political funding and systemic exploitation. His handling of the investigations shaped his subsequent political path.

Roy's political approach was fundamentally transactional. As central investigative agencies tightened their focus, the "architect" began to strategically reposition himself within the political arena.

Roy's move to the BJP in 2017 was a watershed moment. He brought not only his personal influence but also the TMC's strategic

playbook. He equipped the traditionally urban-focused BJP with the tactics needed to compete in Bengal's rural areas, significantly contributing to its strong showing in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. However, his return to the TMC in 2021, after the BJP failed to win the state polls, was met with considerably less enthusiasm.

Roy leaves behind a political system where the organisational structures are liquid, competitive, and yet effective, though now primarily with a transactional purpose

where the organisational structures are liquid, competitive, and yet effective, though now primarily with a transactional purpose. He essentially professionalised political switching, redefining the role of the political "worker" as a "contractor" and transforming the "voter" into a strategic "target".

The writer, a political anthropologist, teaches Anthropology at the Government General Degree College, Keshriy

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Shirtless protest

FREE CITIZENS of a free country are free to protest in a form of their choice ("Did Youth Congress's 'shirtless protest' at AI summit hurt India's image? That is the wrong question," IE Web, February 23). The only condition is that protest must be peaceful. The space for protest in a democracy cannot be denied even if the manner of protest is not to the liking of the government of the day. The "shirtless protest" was unconventional yet innocuous and largely succeeded in drawing public attention.

David Milton, Chengannur

Right to choose

THE SUPREME COURT has repeatedly affirmed that the right to choose one's partner is intrinsic to personal liberty. Against the jurisdiction, the Gujarat proposal does not appear to be constitutionally sound ("Gujarat move on parental consent is regressive," IE, February 23). To insert parental consent into adult marriage registration is to privilege custom over liberty.

SS Paul, Nadia

Tariff twist

THE RECENT twists in US President Donald Trump's tariff policy highlight how fragile and unpredictable the global trade system has become ("Space opens up in tariff saga, India can use it," IE, February 23). Frequent changes in rates and legal disputes create confusion for businesses and economies. For India, this is a reminder that overdependence on any single market carries risks. While continued engagement with Washington is important, equal focus must be placed on strengthening domestic manufacturing, boosting competitiveness, and expanding trade partnerships with Europe and Asia. In a world where policies can change overnight, India's greatest strength will be consistency, clarity and long-term planning.

Parul Rana, Zirakpur

LEGAL

Kingfisher jingle gets 'sound mark' tag: The process, the litmus test

Amaal Sheikh
New Delhi, February 23

A BRAND doesn't always speak through a logo. Sometimes, it rings. Earlier this month, Kingfisher's iconic jingle "Oo la la le o" secured a sound mark registration.

A sound mark is a non-conventional trademark in which a sound — instead of words, symbols or designs — tells the consumer who is behind a particular product or a service. If anyone associates it with one commercial source, it may qualify for registration.

India's first registered sound mark was in 2008 when Yahoo's "yodel" was accepted by the trademarks registry. ICI Bank later secured protection for its corporate jingle. From the Netflix "ta-dum" to the Nokia start-up tune, certain sounds trigger instant recall. Trademark law recognises that recall value, and in India, such audio identifiers can be registered. This approach draws from international developments.

Legal framework

The Trade Marks Rules, 2017, state under rule 26(5) that the application for a sound trademark must be filed "in the MP3 format not exceeding thirty seconds' length recorded on a medium which allows for easy and clearly audible replaying accompanied with a graphical representation of its notations".

This requirement represents a non-visual mark on a register designed for visual entries. Before 2017, applicants relied largely on written descriptions or sheet music.

An applicant must also clearly state the mark is a "sound mark", else it could be treated as a word or device mark.

GLOBAL CONTEXT

In *Shield Mark BV v. Joost Kist*, the Court of Justice of the European Union said that sounds may be registered if reproduced clearly and precisely. It held that musical notation could satisfy the requirement of graphical representation, while vague descriptions or onomatopoeic words would not.

During scrutiny, the registrar questions the distinctiveness or similarity with earlier marks. Once satisfied, the mark is published in the trademark journal. This opens the door to opposition from third parties, in which case the matter proceeds to a hearing. If no opposition is filed, a certificate of registration is issued.

A trademark typically lasts for 10 years and can be renewed multiple times.

Test of distinctiveness

Like all trademarks, sound marks must also satisfy the test of distinctiveness. The sound must not be common, generic or purely functional. It must connect the consumer or upon hearing the sound, connect it to a particular trader.

Certain categories are harder to qualify for. Simple tunes consisting of one or two notes, commonly used chimes, nursery rhymes for children's goods, and music associated with a region may fail the distinctiveness test. Sounds that result directly from the nature of a product, like the ordinary sound or noise of the engine or the opening of a can, may face objections during registration.

Consumer perception is the primary emphasis. Where inherent distinctiveness could be doubted, applicants rely on evidence of use — advertising expenditure, direction of use, market surveys and media coverage — to show that the sound has acquired distinctiveness over time.

Drishti IAS
On All Online, Pendrive Courses & Test Series
50% OFF
35th to 28th February
Call Now: 87501 87501

HEALTH

PM Modi's call for organ donation highlights India's deceased donors challenge

Anonna Dutt
New Delhi, February 23

IN THE latest episode of 'Mann Ki Baat', Prime Minister Narendra Modi narrated stories of how deceased organ donors can save lives. He mentioned 10-month-old Aalin Sherin Abrahim, whose family decided to donate her organs. He also spoke of organ recipients like Delhi's Lakshmi Devi, who travelled to Kedarnath last year after a heart transplant, West Bengal's Gaungang Banerjee, who had been to Nathu La pass twice after a lung transplant, and Rajasthan's Ramdev Singh, who is excelling in sports after a kidney transplant.

This is third time that the Prime Minister has spoken about organ donation and transplantation, with his previous mentions seeing a surge in the number of pledges and donations. Over the years, ongoing awareness drives have increased

numbers, too. The number of transplants using organs from deceased donors was highest in 2024 — the last year for which data is available. There was an increase of 16% as compared to the previous years, taking the total number to 3,403, according to data from the National Organ and Tissue Transplant Organisation (NOTTO).

There has also been a surge in the number of transplants with organs from related donors at the same time, but there are still some crucial gaps in the ecosystem.

What the numbers show

The number of deceased organ donors crossed the 900 mark for the first time in 2016, dropping in the following years, before going up to the same levels in 2022 after the second wave of the pandemic. There were 930 deceased donors in 2016, followed by 773 the next year, which increased to 941 in 2022, according to NOTTO data. There

How the numbers stack up

ORGAN	2024	2023
Total transplants	18,911	18,378
Living donor transplants	15,505	15,435
Deceased donor transplants	3,403	2,935
Kidney	13,476	13,426
Liver	4,901	4,491
Heart	253	221
Lung	228	197
Pancreas	44	27
Small bowel	9	16

SOURCE: NOTTO

were 2,265 transplants using organs from deceased donors in 2016, dropping to 2,110 in 2017, and going back up to 2,254 in 2018. The number of deceased donor transplants

increased to 2,694 in 2022. These numbers have kept on increasing ever since.

After another mention by the Prime Minister in 2023, a survey of 1,093 people found that 82.9% respondents were more willing to pledge and donate organs after listening to the episode. The government has since introduced an Aadhar-linked platform for pledging organs. "We are inspired by the PM's campaign... We are in need for everyone to join the initiative and create more awareness about how many lives we can save by donating organs," said Dr Anil Kumar, director, NOTTO.

More deceased donations needed

There remains a huge shortfall in the number of patients in need of a transplant and the number of organs available. India needs 1.75 to 2 lakh kidneys each year but just 13,476 kidney transplants happened in

2024. When it comes to liver, heart and lungs, there were 4,901 transplants in 2024 as against the estimated need for around 50,000. And, there were only 44 pancreas transplants in 2024 as against the estimated need for 2,500 a year. Besides, organs such as heart and lungs are harvested only from deceased donors.

Importantly, deceased organ donation rate in India continues to be very low at 0.77 per million population, below the rates reported by neighbouring countries such as Thailand (6.2), China (5.5), Sri Lanka (3.38), and Japan (1.18). That figure is 48 in Spain, which has one of the highest deceased donations. This is concerning for India considering that 1.73 lakh deaths happen due to road traffic accidents every year, with most of the victims eligible to be organ donors.

Promoting organ donation

NOTTO has done away with the

a challenge in an event of this scale.

This is despite Delhi having fared well in the G20 event in 2023, even though that was a staggered event unlike the AI summit.

Having combined a trade event with a G20-type tech leaders summit was clearly a problem, as was how smaller tech entrepreneurs were treated at the event. This does raise question marks on the government's ability to foster and execute at scale, especially when it comes to newer, frontier segments of industry.

Star power and investment commitments

India managed to pull together a marquee lineup that few countries outside the US could manage. Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Anthropic's Dario Amodei, Google DeepMind CEO Demis Hassabis, and Microsoft President Brad Smith were all present, alongside French President Emmanuel Macron, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, and a string of other heads of state.

The summit secured investment commitments of over \$250 billion for infrastructure and about \$20 billion for venture capital deep tech investments, according to Vaishnav.

OpenAI and AMD both announced partnerships with Tata Group. These are large numbers, though India still lacks the domestic private capital ecosystem to match the headline figures.

India's domestic AI push

One of the summit's more substantive domestic moments came from Sarvam AI, the Indian startup that announced it had trained a 30-billion-parameter model and a 105-billion-parameter model from scratch using a mixture-of-experts architecture.

The models, designed with multilingual Indian-language capability, represent a meaningful step for India's homegrown AI development.

It was not, by most accounts, a DeepSeek-scale disruption — but it was a credible demonstration that India can build at some level of the AI stack. Microsoft's Brad Smith said there would be "a variety of different DeepSeek moments" to come, and that some of them would happen in India.

It was not, by most accounts, a DeepSeek-scale disruption — but it was a credible demonstration that India can build at some level of the AI stack. Microsoft's Brad Smith said there would be "a variety of different DeepSeek moments" to come, and that some of them would happen in India.

Despite the cacophony and the obvious lack of foundational capacities, India was a part of call for tech leaders. It's the market that holds the promise, at least for adoption.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

AI Summit: India makes strong start, yet to arrive



Soumyarendra Barik

NEW DELHI wrapped up the India AI Impact Summit 2026 on February 21, with its organisers billing it as the world's "largest and most historic" AI summit.

The six-day event, which kicked off February 16 at Bharat Mandapam, drew heads of state, global tech executives and thousands of visitors — a remarkable feat for a country that is still catching up to the United States and China on the AI frontier. And the result was mixed.

The summit achieved real diplomatic heft, but exposed the limits of both India's AI ambitions and its capacity to host an event of this scale.

The summit positioned New Delhi as a convening power in global AI governance discussions, producing a declaration with broader country sign-on than any previous summit in the series. It brought together the most prominent names in AI under one roof and generated large investment commitments.

But at the same time, the summit's voluntary framework, the logistical difficulties that inconvenienced ordinary visitors and delegates alike, and some embarrassments around domestic AI claims all point to the gap between India's ambitions and its present reality.

For India, the summit was a beginning, not an arrival.

A diplomatic win

The headline outcome of the summit was the New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact, which was endorsed by 88 countries and international organisations, including the US, China, Russia, the UK, France, and a wide range of developing nations.

That count comfortably exceeded the 61 signatories at the previous Paris AI Action Summit in February 2025, something that India's IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnav was quick to point out. The breadth of endorsement — spanning geopolitical rivals, major economies, and the Global South — gave India grounds to claim it had built a broader consensus than its predecessors.

The declaration's substance, however, is more measured. It lays out a shared vision for collaborative, trusted, and inclusive AI.

The commitments, though, are voluntary, with no enforcement mechanism.



PM Narendra Modi and other delegates attend the CEO Roundtable at the India AI Impact Summit. @NARENDRAMODI

The White House's position made the limits of the declaration plain: senior US official Michael Kratos told the summit that Washington "totally rejects global governance of AI", framing its AI posture as one of dominance rather than coordination.

China, the world's second-largest AI power, was also largely absent from proceedings, albeit not from headlines. The declaration is a political document; whether it translates into anything substantive remains an open question.

Changing themes: From safety to trade

When the UK government organised the first summit in this series, at Bletchley Park in November 2023, the explicit mandate was narrow and serious: to build shared understanding of the risks posed by frontier AI models and to begin coordinating government responses to those risks.

The Seoul summit in May 2024 carried that thread forward. But, by the time France hosted the third summit in Paris in February 2025, the momentum had already begun to dissipate. The emphasis in Paris shifted to boosting the AI sector and setting aside safety concerns — a far cry from Bletchley's founding spirit.

India inherited and deepened this trajectory. Delhi's pitch centred on inclusion, economic opportunity, and investment. The result was an event that functioned far more as an AI trade expo than a governance forum. Investment pledges, product launches, bilateral partnerships, and CEO appearances dominated the programme.

New Delhi Declaration

Endorsed by 88 countries and international organisations, the declaration lays out a shared vision for collaborative, trusted, and inclusive AI.

The commitments, though, are voluntary, with no enforcement mechanism.

ENERGY

To make India full member, IEA needs to amend founding charter

Amitabh Sinha
New Delhi, February 23

AT ITS recent annual ministerial meeting in Paris last week, the International Energy Agency (IEA) welcomed the progress being made on India's request for full membership of the organisation. Currently, India is an associate member of IEA, which is a leading intergovernmental body that works on global energy security and policy, and, now increasingly, on climate change and energy transition.

India's membership request is not straightforward. IEA would have to amend its founding legal framework, which restricts membership only to member countries of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

The agency

IEA was created in 1974 as one of the responses to the global oil crisis, triggered by the decision of the major Arab oil-producing countries to impose an embargo on oil supplies to countries seen to be supporting Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The

embargo led to unprecedented rise in oil prices and fuel scarcity.

This exposed the vulnerability of major industrial countries — also the biggest consumers of oil. These countries, which had formed OECD a decade earlier, decided to act together to reduce or manage their dependence on imported oil in the future. One result of this was the establishment of IEA by 17 OECD countries.

IEA's original mandate was to ensure that oil supplies were kept stable, and potential disruptions in future were anticipated and prevented through timely action. It also developed an elaborate mechanism to deal with oil emergencies in future, making it mandatory for every member country to maintain certain minimum strategic stocks of oil that can be used to neutralise supply disruptions. The emergency mechanism has been used several times, including the 1991 Gulf War and in the wake of Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Although many more countries became IEA members later, membership was open only for OECD countries. Now, there are 32

Then vs Now

When IEA was set up, its member countries accounted for more than 60% of global energy demand.

With associate members such as India, China and Brazil, the IEA family now accounts for 80% of global demand.

full members, and last week, Colombia (OECD member since 2020) was inducted as 33rd.

In 2015, IEA opened the doors for non-OECD countries to become associate members (13 as of today). They participate in policy discussions and activities, but do not have decision-making rights. India became one in 2017.

India's quest for membership

India has been seeking full membership for the last few years. In October 2023, it submitted a formal request. The issue of India's full membership has come up in India's bilateral discussions with the US as well.

The move arises mainly from the desire to have a role in IEA's decision-making process, helping guide global energy policies. IEA has also evolved into a useful knowledge platform for energy-related matters, and hosts one of the most comprehensive energy databases.

Agreeing to India's request, however, would require IEA to amend its founding charter. Since India isn't inclined to seek

OECD membership, IEA would have to either amend its eligibility criteria for members, or make an exception for India. Current deliberations suggest that an amendment to IEA's legal framework might be on the cards. Recently, even Brazil, also a non-OECD member, has sought full membership.

IEA has repeatedly supported India's bid, and has said it was actively considering its request. At last week's meeting, the delegates "made a decision for India. Current deliberations suggest that an amendment to IEA's legal framework might be on the cards. Recently, even Brazil, also a non-OECD member, has sought full membership.

IEA's engagement with India has also increased significantly in recent years. It has published several India-focused reports and data.

India also engaged IEA recently to do a special report on its LIFE (Lifestyle for Environment) initiative, which revealed that widespread adoption of simple lifestyle changes had the potential to avoid global emissions by as much as two billion tonnes by 2030.

request to register in the domicile state or age limit for receiving an organ. It is also working on creating a national portal for organs, or make an exception for India. Current deliberations suggest that an amendment to IEA's legal framework might be on the cards. Recently, even Brazil, also a non-OECD member, has sought full membership.

"There is a digital waiting list where the details of anyone in the country in need of organ transplant are added and allocated as per policy. This is a very transparent policy and anyone in need for organ can get it through this network," said Dr Kumar.

Among states, Tamil Nadu has the highest number of deceased donor transplants, making it one of the biggest organ transplant hubs in the country. Delhi tops the charts when it comes to living donor transplants. Delhi conducted nearly 2,500 kidney transplants and nearly 2,000 liver transplants with living donors.



AI for all

The AI Impact Summit was a sign of things to come in India

The attendance at the AI Impact Summit, in New Delhi, showed an extreme enthusiasm for Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies by digitally connected Indians. While statistics shared by AI firms have frequently cited India as the biggest user base outside the U.S., the crowds over the week were the biggest indicator of just how keen many Indians are to adopt this technology. At its core, the summit was a continuation of a series of annual multilateral discussions on AI, and 89 countries have signed a declaration laying out a voluntary set of commitments to share knowledge on AI democratisation. The summit's context comes with foreboding challenges for India: namely, deploying and diffusing a technology whose capital and infrastructure reside abroad, and finding a place in the global AI ecosystem that will place Indians well in the economic transformations that this technology's adoption promises. India's data centre capacity is growing healthily, but the AI moment calls for further momentum, a difficult task when the costs of graphics processing units (GPUs) driving AI push up the cost of domestic deployment so much, not to mention the additional electrical capacity that must be built. A national strategy that relies overwhelmingly on becoming a hub for the deployment of models, with less emphasis on their training and finetuning, could pose risks; after all, with fewer labour costs, the advantage that India has will be smaller than in the IT era.

On the international cooperation front, it is disappointing that India has so eagerly enabled the U.S.'s hands-off impulses for AI. This is a technology with enormous scope for economic and social disruption. Countries must use the annual AI forum to collectively build tools and safety standards that can exercise actual leverage over how LLMs diffuse throughout society. Leadership of the Global South entails empowering countries that are individually vulnerable to collateral damage in an era of great power rivalries. AI is increasingly defining that era more and more acutely. Consensus at all costs is not the appropriate approach. As a country of enthusiastic AI adopters, India has the leverage and capacity to articulate an optimistic but prudent way forward for AI governance, and the summit declaration showed no signs of this power. The summit's central pillar remains an important one: for AI to be a net good, its capabilities need to be democratised. As India closes its digital divide, there cannot be an inference gap. If the summit made anything clear, it was that India is as capable of organically contributing to worldwide growth as it has the capacity, should it choose, to be a force to shape its orderly growth.

Stick together

India and Brazil have realised the importance of their groupings

Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's India visit last week sent important messages for both India-Brazil ties, and for solidarity in the developing world, as two Global South powers focused on global governance and leadership. After his talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India and Brazil agreed to try and double trade to \$30 billion by 2030, and signed agreements on critical minerals, steel mining, and digital cooperation to diversify beyond China-led supply chains. Mr. Lula, along with French President Emmanuel Macron, was among about 20 leaders at India's AI Impact Summit and was later accorded a state visit. The 80-year-old Brazilian President's presence was important, as he faces elections later this year, which may make it difficult for him to attend India's BRICS summit if it coincides with his campaigning for a fourth term. It also came amidst fresh turmoil over U.S.-imposed trade tariffs, after the American Supreme Court struck down the reciprocal tariffs. India and Brazil were both the highest taxed countries by the U.S. — 50% tariffs each — and both faced further possible tariffs over BRICS ties, Iran trade, and Russian oil imports. India and Brazil are also key members of the BRICS grouping of developing nations, the India-Brazil-South Africa (BISA), G-4 with Germany and South Africa on UNSC reform, and co-founders of the biofuel alliance for alternative energy; each of these has faced challenges from Mr. Trump's policies on trade, territorial sovereignty, multilateralism and the UN, and fossil fuels. Amid such uncertainty, Mr. Modi and Mr. Lula reaffirmed their commitment to protecting the multilateral order.

Before leaving India, Mr. Lula, who is set to visit Washington next month, did not mince words while speaking to journalists about the challenges posed by the U.S. government. As a former trade union leader, he said he believed that the only way of tackling geopolitical uncertainty unleashed by the U.S. was for countries to "unite", rather than cutting deals individually with Washington, which leave smaller nations at a disadvantage. The words are particularly important for both Delhi and Brasilia, as both have negotiated with the Trump administration on tariffs, but have not so far signed trade deals with the U.S. The U.S. court ruling offers an opportunity to reset the terms of the agreements, and it is significant that New Delhi has postponed a meeting of trade negotiators this week to give the U.S. and India time to assess the ruling. India and Brazil, and their developing world partners, should coordinate the next steps and stay engaged with Washington. Mr. Lula's warning is clear: it is easy to break a single stick, but far more difficult to do so if the sticks are bundled tightly together.

The quiet crisis of adolescent mental health in India

The passing of three adolescent girls in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh, earlier this month, is a case that deeply unsettled the public. The intense media attention reflects collective grief — but treating this tragedy as an isolated incident risks ignoring a larger reality. India faces a growing, largely neglected crisis in child and adolescent mental health, rooted in early vulnerability and worsened by an unregulated digital environment.

Mental health challenges are no longer limited to adults or older teens. Clinicians increasingly see anxiety, depression, attention disorders and behavioural issues in much younger children. Yet, many families, schools and even parts of the health-care system still view these as "adult issues". In fact, emotional and behavioural disorders can appear as early as four or five years of age. Early trauma, neglect and chronic stress can disrupt emotional and cognitive development, often resurfacing with greater intensity during adolescence.

These conditions have also grown more complex. Where children showed a single diagnosis, comorbidities are now common — attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with anxiety, depression with compulsive digital use, learning difficulties with emotional distress — making early recognition crucial.

The extent of the problem

Population-level data mirrors what clinicians observe daily. Findings from the National Mental Health Survey and subsequent studies suggest that between seven per cent to 10% of Indian adolescents have diagnosable mental health conditions, and five per cent to seven per cent of school-aged children have ADHD. Yet early signs — withdrawal, impulsivity, sudden behavioural changes — are often dismissed, leading to academic, social and long-term emotional harm. India faces an acute shortage of trained child and adolescent mental health professionals. With fewer than 10,000 psychiatrists for a population exceeding 1.4 billion — and only a small fraction specialising in child mental health — the gap is stark. Shortages of clinical psychologists, child psychologists and psychiatric social workers further strain an already fragile system. Families are left to navigate fragmented care largely on their own.

Childhood vulnerability has been amplified by a transformed digital landscape. The rise in mental health concerns parallels the spread of smartphones and low-priced Internet data, now used by over 800 million Indians — many of them children. The COVID-19 pandemic further embedded screens into daily life including education, recreation and social interaction.

With schoolwork, communication and entertainment all on the same device, boundaries have blurred. Internet addiction which is marked by loss of control, irritability, sleep disruption and social withdrawal, is now a routine clinical concern.

As early as 2019, the World Health



Dr. Chandrakant Lahariya

is a practising cardio-metabolic physician, health policy expert and a specialist in parenting and child development



Dr. Deepak Gupta

is a leading child and adolescent psychiatrist

Organization issued guidelines and had cautioned against excessive screen exposure among children and adolescents, highlighting its adverse effects on sleep, attention, emotional regulation and overall wellbeing. These recommendations predated the pandemic. It is important to understand that the excessive screen use does not cause neurodevelopmental conditions such as ADHD or autism spectrum disorders. However, it can significantly exacerbate symptoms, delay diagnosis and displace the human interaction essential for healthy brain development during periods of heightened neuroplasticity. In vulnerable children, this displacement can have lasting consequences.

Against this backdrop, parents and families have to assume a central role. They are not merely caregivers but a child's first mental health buffer — as the earliest observers of emotional change and the most consistent source of psychological safety. Trauma-informed parenting, which recognises how stress, loss and adversity shape behaviour, must extend beyond clinical settings into everyday life. Listening without judgement, noticing changes in sleep, mood or social engagement, and seeking help early can dramatically alter outcomes.

Support groups are proven to further strengthen this protective environment. Parent support groups reduce isolation, normalise help-seeking and enable shared learning. Adolescent peer-support groups provide safe spaces for emotional expression, resilience-building and the development of coping skills. Evidence consistently shows that such collective, community-based approaches are more effective than isolated, clinic-centred interventions.

Schools are a weak link

Schools, however, remain a critical weak link. Academic performance continues to dominate institutional priorities, often at the expense of emotional wellbeing. Examinations, rankings and competition define school culture, while structured attention to emotional regulation, stress management and happiness remains limited. This imbalance is neither benign nor sustainable. Mental wellbeing is foundational to learning, creativity and long-term productivity; without it, academic success is fragile and transient.

A further challenge lies in the gap between evidence and practice. India's research base on child and adolescent mental health, digital behaviour and early intervention has grown steadily. Yet, translation into routine care remains slow. Paediatricians — often the first point of contact for families — must routinely inquire about emotional wellbeing, sleep patterns, screen use and peer relationships, and not just physical growth. Teachers, counsellors, psychologists and all professionals working with children need structured training to identify early signs of mental health problems and Internet-related harms. Stigma continues to delay care, with

families often seeking help only during crises.

In today's context, child and adolescent mental health is intricately linked to social media and Internet use. These concerns were explicitly acknowledged in India's Economic Survey 2025-26, released in January 2026, which highlighted rising mental health challenges among young people and proposed a range of preventive strategies. Several Indian States, drawing on precedents in Australia, France and South Korea, are considering regulatory steps to limit adolescent social media use. This is an idea whose time has come, provided it is implemented thoughtfully, alongside education and support rather than punitive controls.

Actions to implement

Policy and programmatic action must now align with reality. India can strengthen existing platforms — the National Mental Health Programme, school health services under Ayushman Bharat — health and wellness centre initiative, and tele-mental health initiatives — by introducing routine school-based screening, training teachers and frontline workers in early identification of child and adolescent mental health issues, and reinforcing referral pathways. Earmarked funding for child mental health initiatives, clear guidelines on digital use in schools, and affordable community-based counselling, especially for low- and middle-income families, are urgently needed.

Implementation, however, faces practical hurdles. Stigma surrounding mental health remains pervasive, and child psychiatry carries an even heavier burden of fear and misunderstanding. Concerns about labelling, judgement and long-term consequences often delay help-seeking until distress escalates into crisis. Normalising conversations around mental health within families, schools and health-care systems is not optional; it is a public health imperative.

The Ghaziabad case must not remain just a headline. Preventing similar tragedies requires coordinated action between schools, paediatricians, mental health professionals, and communities. Even modest, timely interventions can change developmental paths. While telepsychiatry and digital platforms have expanded reach, access remains unequal: extending these services to underserved families, alongside investment in training and interdisciplinary care, must be a priority.

Parents need guidance on early warning signs and healthy digital use. Schools should make mental wellbeing part of daily learning. Paediatricians must screen for emotional and behavioural issues, and community support networks strengthened. Policy must treat mental health as central to child development.

Equally important is a need to shift in what we value as outcomes. Childhood should foster wellbeing, resilience, and connection — not just competitiveness. Neglecting it now will carry far higher social and economic costs later.

India's energy shift through the green ammonia route

At the inaugural session of the India Energy Week (IEW), in January 2026, Prime Minister Narendra Modi positioned India's ambitions at the centre of the global energy discourse, highlighting investment opportunities worth \$500 billion across the sector. As India raises its ambition from energy security to energy independence, the affordability of clean energy such as green hydrogen and its derivatives is critical to the long-term competitiveness of India's energy transition. But from fertilizers to clean energy and marine fuel, there are now green ammonia applications which are wide-ranging. Green ammonia — produced by combining nitrogen with green hydrogen — is currently leading in the adoption of green hydrogen, with its strategic adoption advanced across regions such as the European Union (EU), India and South Korea.

Aggregated procurement mechanisms are starting to lay the foundation for a global green ammonia market. Some noteworthy examples include H2Global's tender of green ammonia under the EU's hydrogen import strategy, South Korea's Clean Hydrogen Portfolio Standard (CHPS) tender for clean ammonia procurement as a bulk fuel, and the recent tender concluded by the Solar Energy Corporation of India (SECI) under the Strategic Interventions for Green Hydrogen Transition (SIGHT) programme of India's National Green Hydrogen Mission.

Green ammonia auction

Compared to these global procurement practices, India's green ammonia auction under SECI demonstrates broader market participation, attracting 15 bidders and resulting in seven unique successful awardees. Under the SIGHT programme, SECI floated a tender in June 2024 for an aggregated demand of up to 724,000 tonnes of green ammonia annually across 13 fertilizer plants in India. These tenders concluded

Pawan Mulukutla

is Executive Program Director — Integrated Transport, Clean Air and Hydrogen at WRI India

Anuraag Nallapaneni

is Program Lead — Hydrogen at WRI India

Sneha Malhotra

is Program Associate Director — Energy Innovation and Technology at WRI India

The country's green ammonia auction model has the potential to redefine global standards for clean energy adoption

in August 2025, and offered a 10-year, fixed-price offtake agreements to successful bidders. This clarity in price and offtake provided producers with the market certainty required for investment. The auctions established a significant breakthrough in cost-competitive green ammonia procurement, setting new global benchmarks, almost 40%-50% less than the prices from the H2Global auction

The tender process faced multiple extensions and revisions, primarily to resolve concerns around risk allocation, payment security, and clarity on offtake and pricing conditions, raised by both project developers and offtakers. These refinements successfully addressed concerns, leading to a balanced win-win framework for all stakeholders.

In this auction, seven bidders secured a total of 13 delivery contracts for green ammonia. Notably, one company won six contracts for 3,70,000 tonnes/year. These contracts include production subsidies of ₹8.82 a kilogramme, ₹706 a kg, and ₹5.3 a kg for the first three years and a 10-year fixed price supply agreement to existing fertilizer manufacturers in India.

The discovered prices of green ammonia across these tenders range from ₹49.75 and ₹64.74/kg (\$572 and \$744 a tonne). In India, the green ammonia price is as high as \$515 a tonne. When factoring in the newly discovered price of green ammonia, supported by longer-term contracts, the cost gap has significantly narrowed.

On delivery and transportation

Notably, a standout feature of SECI's tender is the pre-identification of delivery points, as most fertilizer plants where the green ammonia is to be delivered are located near coastal areas, enabling the transportation of green ammonia through shipping as well. The contracted volumes of green ammonia contribute to approximately 30%

of the total ammonia being imported, offering price predictability and greater insulation from global gas market volatility, currency risks and geopolitical pressures. In locations where grey ammonia costs are higher, green ammonia procurement increases its appeal for scale-up.

Propelling the momentum

India's approach is increasingly shaping the clean ammonia landscape worldwide, owing to its combination of low renewable energy costs, large-scale logistics, robust contract design and targeted incentives. As more countries seek reliable clean ammonia imports to decarbonise industry, power and transport, India's successful auction model is well placed to shape emerging global market structures and accelerate adoption at scale.

However, sustaining the momentum created by India's green ammonia auctions will require coordinated and sustained action from policymakers, project developers and financiers. Developers must focus on strong technical and financial due diligence, integrate hybrid renewable systems with storage, and adopt transparent monitoring frameworks to ensure long-term operational viability. Policymakers, in turn, need to provide stable and harmonised regulations on grid access, banking and incentives, while strengthening safety standards and aligning certification frameworks with evolving global norms.

Long-tenor, blended finance facilities, backed by extended offtake agreements and dedicated risk-mitigation instruments, can further enhance project bankability and crowd in private capital. Together, these measures can reinforce investor confidence, accelerate scale-up, and firmly position India not just as a participant but also as a global leader in clean ammonia markets.

The views expressed are personal

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The price of membership

India's entry into the Pax Silica alliance marks a shift from exclusion to inclusion in key technology coalitions. The challenge now lies in meeting scrutiny and conditionalities that test its industrial capacity. Heavy reliance on PLI schemes

exposes structural gaps. While telecom has advanced, battery manufacturing lags and upstream solar segments remain weak, highlighting the limits of capital subsidies without strong technology partnerships, skilled labour and R and D

depth. Though Pax Silica promises trusted supply chains, it also brings export controls, and technology transfer guardrails. **Sowbalya S.U.**, Trichy

A former Director General of Police, Tamil Nadu, who passed away on February 22, was a remarkable personality known for his integrity, erudition, and deep knowledge of police procedure and law, honed over his long tenure in the Central Bureau of

Investigation. His genuine simplicity encouraged junior officers to approach him freely and learn the intricacies of criminal investigation. He was also an accomplished Sanskrit scholar, whose discourses on scriptures, especially the Narayaneeyam, captivated

audiences far and wide. Personally, his demise is a great loss, as his guidance taught me many subtle nuances of the law. **R.K. Raghavan**, Chennai

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

Be part of Community and Get Early Access to All.

✓ I Give My Earliest Newspapers updates from 5 AM in Private channel with All Editions

◆ Indian Newspaper

- 1) Times of India
- 2) The Hindu
- 3) Business line
- 4) The Indian Express
- 5) Economic Times
- 6) Financial Express
- 7) Live Mint
- 8) Hindustan Times
- 9) Business Standard

◆ International Newspapers channel

[European, American, Gulf & Asia]

◆ Magazine Channel

National & International
[General & Exam related]

◆ English Editorials

[National + International Editorials]



Rethinking tribal women's inheritance rights

The question of women's inheritance rights in tribal communities remains unresolved. Customary laws of most tribal communities deny absolute property rights to their women, and the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, which grants daughters inheritance rights in ancestral property, keeps tribal women out of its purview. Until recently, however, the Supreme Court had in some cases granted inheritance rights to tribal women who had 'Hinduised', i.e., adopted Hindu customs and traditions after abandoning their customary practices. This inconsistent approach — excluding tribal women from inheritance rights in some cases due to the acceptance of exclusion clauses under Hindu laws, while granting rights in others because of 'Hinduisation' — created uncertainty for tribal women whenever questions of inheritance arose.



Shalini Saboo
Junior Fellow, Centre for Contemporary Studies, Prime Ministers Museum and Library, Teen Murti House, New Delhi

communities. The Court brought to light the fact that the High Court had overstepped its jurisdiction by directing legislative changes. It affirmed that inheritance falls under the rubric of the customary practices of communities unless the Central government officially intervenes. The Supreme Court's decision came just months after it recognised, in *Ram Charan v. Sukhram*, that excluding daughters from ancestral property violates their fundamental right to equality. It invites not only deep analysis, but also partially answers certain questions. Is 'Hinduising' a tribe the only way to secure inheritance rights for tribal women? Should Scheduled Tribes be granted inheritance rights solely on the basis of religion, disregarding their unique social and cultural characteristics? Can they not be given equal inheritance rights by expanding any other statute? Or, in the absence of consistent statutory and customary law guaranteeing tribal women inheritance rights, should tribal women continue to face discrimination under the pretext of upholding tradition?

Defining Hindu
On defining the term 'Hindu', the Supreme Court, in *Sastry Yagnapurushadji v. Muldas Brudardas Vaishya* (1966), said that "unlike other religions in the world, the Hindu religion does not claim any one prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not subscribe to any one dogma, it does not believe in any one philosophical concept, it does not follow any one set of religious rites or performances, in fact, it does not appear to satisfy the narrow traditional features of any religion or creed. It may broadly be described as a way of life and nothing more". A person can be a Hindu either by birth or by conversion. Conversion means a bonafide intention to follow a particular faith with an unequivocal conduct expressing sufficient evidence of conversion.

Now that the Supreme Court has ruled that the Hindu Succession Act does not apply to tribal communities, a separate law could be introduced to govern inheritance among indigenous populations

Reaffirming an old principle
This came to an end when, on October 8, 2025, the Court delivered a verdict, upholding the core inheritance provisions of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956. A Bench of Justices Sanjay Karol and Prashant Kumar Mishra stated that the Act cannot be applied to Scheduled Tribes under any circumstances. While this observation was not new, it reaffirmed the law's principle of providing special protection to indigenous communities under the legal system.

The verdict was given in the case of *Nawang v. Bahadur*. The civil appeal challenged the order dated June 23, 2015, passed by the High Court of Himachal Pradesh at Shimla, pertaining to a particular property case. The High Court had said that tribal daughters who had been 'Hinduised' ought to have an opportunity to inherit property under the Hindu Succession Act. The Supreme Court overturned that order stating that only Parliament had the authority to extend the Act to tribal

Congress tightens grip, but tests lie ahead

The party cannot afford to be complacent even after winning the municipal polls

STATE OF PLAY

R. Ravikanth Reddy
ravikanth.ramassayam@thehindu.co.in



The results of the 2026 Telangana municipal elections mark another milestone in the Congress's steady political consolidation in Telangana. Before this, the party won the 2023 Assembly elections; secured eight seats in the 2024 Lok Sabha polls, which was as many as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP); and won a majority of sarpanch positions in 2025. Together, these victories have strengthened the Congress's organisational confidence and reinforced the public perception that the party is the new pole of stability in Telangana.

The municipal results have also served as an internal stabiliser for the leadership, Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy appears to have firmly consolidated his position. Challengers and sceptics within the party seem to have resigned themselves to the reality that the Chief Minister is politically unshakable, at least for the foreseeable future.

It is not uncommon, however, for a ruling party to perform well in local body elections. The advantages of incumbency, visibility of welfare schemes, administrative access, a favourable bureaucracy, and the perceived ability of ruling party MLAs to get work done often weigh heavily on voter psychology. This phenomenon was evident in 2024 as well, when the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) swept over 95% of municipal bodies and captured the Zilla Parishad chairperson's post in all the districts.

However, a comparison between 2020 and 2026 also

highlights why the present Congress victory carries deeper political meaning. Unlike the BRS's sweep of 2020, the Congress secured just over 70% of municipal wards this time. Yet, this outcome is significant precisely because Congress faced two strong Opposition parties. The BRS still commanded a sizeable presence with 37 MLAs (including 10 defectors), while the BJP entered the contest with eight MLAs and eight MPs.

This stands in contrast to 2020, when the Congress was organisationally battered, reduced to just six MLAs, with 12 legislators defecting to the ruling BRS, and a mass migration of grassroots cadre. The BJP then had only one MLA, though it had four MPs. The Congress's journey from that nadir to its current dominance shows the scale of its revival.

The Congress has emerged as the single largest party this time. Securing 39.80% of the vote share, it finished 11.05% points ahead of the BRS. This gap is striking when viewed against the backdrop of the 2023 Assembly elections, where the difference between the two parties was just 2%. The Congress had already widened this lead in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, polling 40.1% while the BRS secured just 16.7%, with much of its vote share shifting to the BJP.

The municipal polls reveal an interesting reversal. While the BRS recovered a signifi-

cant portion of its lost vote share, largely at the expense of the BJP, the Congress not only retained its base but also expanded it further. The BJP, which had polled nearly 35% in the Lok Sabha elections, slipped to a surprising 15.68%, which is a huge setback, especially in urban areas where it is considered strong.

The scale of the Congress victory is evident in seat distribution too. Of the 2,996 wards across 123 urban local bodies, it secured 1,347, winning 99 out of the 123 municipalities and corporations that went to polls. The party emerged victorious in 68 of the 81 Assembly segments where municipal elections were held, despite major urban centres such as Hyderabad, Warangal, and Khammam being excluded from this round.

Mr. Reddy himself set the campaign narrative in the final days, while adopting a decentralised approach that gave ministers and MLAs autonomy but with accountability. He also deftly diverted attention from sensitive urban governance issues towards broader political themes.

Yet, the Congress cannot afford complacency. Nearly 38 municipalities delivered hung verdicts, underlining local dissatisfaction and factionalism. The BJP's victory in Karimnagar Corporation and the BRS's continued presence in several municipalities signal that urban Telangana remains politically competitive. Moreover, incumbency fatigue, governance delivery in urban areas, and internal party management will become bigger challenges as the Assembly elections approach. Transforming the present momentum into a second Assembly victory will depend on whether the Congress is able to address its weaknesses.

Why upper caste support matters for the BJP

Sustained majority-level support suggests that upper caste voters view the BJP as their primary political vehicle at the national level

DATA POINT

Sanjay Kumar
Vibha Attari

In recent weeks, there have been debates and protests in universities across India over the University Grants Commission (UGC) (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026, designed to promote fairness in higher education. The Supreme Court put the regulations on hold after concerns were raised that the key provisions were vague and prone to misuse.

While the protests focused on educational policy, they also revealed political tensions, particularly among upper caste voters. This is a constituency that is historically significant to the BJP. Although the initial anger was directed at the UGC rules, it soon extended to criticism of the BJP. This was especially true of upper castes who may have been most affected if the regulations were implemented. The episode highlights the continuing electoral importance of upper castes for the party.

Survey evidence from the National Election Study (NES) conducted by Lokniti-CSDS shows that upper caste Hindu voters have steadily consolidated behind the BJP and its allies over the past three decades (Table 1). While upper castes form a modest share of the electorate, their cohesion and concentration in key States enhance their influence.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, about 60% of upper caste voters backed the National Democratic Alliance, with 53% voting directly for the BJP. Around 20% backed the Congress-led alliance and 14% voted for the Congress.

During the coalition era (1996-2004), upper caste voters leaned towards the BJP, though support had not yet reached majority levels for the party. The 2009 election marked a brief weakening. From 2014 onwards, consolidation

became clear: upper caste support for the BJP crossed 50% and has remained above that level. This sustained backing suggests that upper caste voters increasingly view the BJP as their main political choice at the national level.

State-level data (2014-2024) show that this consolidation is geographically widespread. In Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, support for the BJP remained above 60% across three Lok Sabha elections. Delhi and Himachal Pradesh show similar stability (Table 2). In Telangana, where the BJP was historically weak, upper caste support rose sharply from 12% in 2014 to 53% in 2024. In West Bengal, support surged in 2019 before moderating in 2024, yet remained much higher than a decade earlier. In Assam and Odisha, upper caste voters have consistently favoured the BJP. Despite shifts in overall vote share, together, this evidence indicates that upper caste support for the BJP is neither regionally confined nor episodic. It forms a durable pillar of the party's coalition.

Assembly elections provide a stricter test of alignment, as they are shaped more by regional leadership and local issues. If upper caste support were driven only by national mobilisation, it would likely be more volatile in these contests. The evidence instead shows continuity. In Uttar Pradesh, support rose from 71% in 2017 to 78% in 2022 (Table 3). In Madhya Pradesh, it increased sharply between 2018 and 2023. Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh remain competitive, yet upper caste support for the BJP is strong. Even in States dominated by regional parties, the BJP's upper caste base has remained significant.

Across elections, upper caste voters remain a stable and strategically important constituency for the BJP. This explains why policy debates seen as affecting upper caste interests can carry political implications that extend beyond the issue at hand.

Voting patterns

The data were sourced from the National Election Study (NES), 1996-2024 conducted by Lokniti-CSDS and the various State Assembly election studies conducted in different States by Lokniti-CSDS

All the figures are in percent

TABLE 1: Upper caste Hindu votes for the BJP and Congress: Lok Sabha elections 1996-2024

Year of election	BJP	BJP allies	NDA	Congress	Congress allies	UPA/INDIA
1996	35	4	39	25	-	25
1998	36	14	50	25	3	28
1999	42	20	62	20	-	20
2004	36	17	53	22	7	29
2009	28	7	35	25	9	34
2014	47	9	56	13	3	16
2019	52	7	59	12	5	17
2024	53	7	60	14	6	20

TABLE 2: State-wise upper caste Hindu votes for the BJP and Congress: Lok Sabha elections 2014-2024

State	BJP 2014	BJP 2019	BJP 2024	Congress 2014	Congress 2019	Congress 2024
Bihar	77	76	53	1	2	2
UP	74	80	77	7	5	7
MP	64	75	72	24	24	20
Rajasthan	60	70	65	20	22	23
Chhattisgarh	46	72	74	17	16	17
Haryana	40	63	54	15	27	35
Delhi	62	75	71	10	12	14
Himachal	60	68	70	35	29	30
Jharkhand	77	63	58	7	5	14
Uttarakhand	64	80	67	30	16	22
Assam	65	55	44	23	13	20
West Bengal	21	57	43	4	3	4
Odisha	26	42	49	9	10	5
Karnataka	64	71	66	35	16	22
Telangana	12	38	53	15	25	29

Notes: Bihar: Include BJP allies (14% in LS 2014), (47% in LS 2019), (29% in LS 2024); Haryana: INLD-28% (2014 LS), Delhi: AAP (21% in LS 2014), (12% in LS 2019), (12% in LS 2024); Jharkhand: JMM (10% in LS 2014), in 2019 3% of JMM included in BJP; West Bengal: in LS 2014 (AITC-40%, LF-29%), in LS 2019 (AITC-31%, LF-9%), in LS 2024 (AITC-43%, LF-17%)

Sanjay Kumar is a Professor and political analyst. Vibha Attari is a researcher working with Lokniti-CSDS. Views expressed by the authors are personal, do not reflect views of their institution.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 24, 1976

Photo-setting for books: Plant in Bangalore

Bangalore, Feb. 25: The Macmillan group of companies, the internationally known publishers, have selected Bangalore for locating their modern type-setting plant because of its climate, which is suited to men and woman as also the computers in the plant, as Mr. Harold Macmillan put it.

The former British Prime Minister and President of the Macmillan group of companies inaugurated the plant here this afternoon.

The Rs. 40-lakh-plant has been set up for photo-setting pages of texts composed for printing. The film negatives will be composed with the aid of computerised monoketboards and film-setters. However the printing of the books would be done in the United Kingdom and Australia with the use of the films exported from Bangalore. The investment in the project will be doubled next year.

After the inauguration of the most modern type-setting project, Mr. Macmillan said his company had begun a "new phase of association between the U.K. and India which would open up a new field of exports for the latter." He envisaged that the value of exports of films from the plant would go up to Rs. one crore a year by 1978. Production would begin in a month or two.

He recalled that the company opened its branch in India over 100 years ago. To-day its operations in India were being carried on by an Indian company called the Macmillan Company of India Limited.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 24, 1926

Emigrants from Fiji

A representative of "The Hindu" interviewed the emigrants last night and was able to gather the following particulars concerning the present condition of the Indian labourers in Fiji, the wages obtaining there and the facilities afforded to them for settlement and comfortable living. Their general appearance, to begin with, betokened extreme poverty, great suffering and hardship.

Enquired about the general conditions in Fiji they all represented, without one single exception, that Fiji was no doubt a good and comparatively healthy place to settle down but they would never advise their brethren in India to leave their homes.

Notes: Haryana 2014: INLD (26), Delhi 2020: AAP (41), Delhi 2025: AAP (30), West Bengal 2016: AITC (43), West Bengal 2021: AITC (40), West Bengal 2024: AITC (40), Karnataka 2018: JD(S) (18), Karnataka 2023: JD(S) (14), Telangana 2018: TRS/BRS (44), Telangana 2023: TRS/BRS (36)

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of rape cases reported in Odisha last year

2,994 Odisha Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi informed the Assembly that 2,994 rape and 7,382 molestation cases were reported in the State in 2025. The CM said 1,183 cases of sexual harassment and 115 attempt to rape cases were also reported. PTI

Number of Maoists who surrendered in Chhattisgarh in 2 years

2,704 Chhattisgarh Governor Ramen Deka declared that the State is on the verge of eliminating left-wing extremism, citing a massive crackdown with 532 Maoists neutralised, more than 2,700 surrendering and 2,004 arrested in the last two years. PTI

Flights disrupted due to drones during the Lunar New Year

50 Unauthorised drones disrupted more than 50 flights at Vietnam's Danang international airport during the Lunar New Year holiday. Two separate incidents last week saw flights delayed or forced into holding patterns when authorities detected drones flying close to aircraft. AFP

Amount utilised for flood management post-2014 in J&K

487 in ₹ crore. The Jammu and Kashmir government has expended over ₹487 crore on a series of flood management initiatives under various phases of the flood management programme, in the aftermath of the 2014 deluge that ravaged the Valley. PTI

Amount required by Ukraine to rebuild from Russia's invasion

588 In \$ billion. Ukraine needs \$588 billion to rebuild from the destruction caused by Russia's four-year invasion, a figure almost three times the country's annual economic output, the World Bank and other institutions said. AFP

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

Follow us [facebook.com/thehindu](https://www.facebook.com/thehindu) [X.com/thehindu](https://www.x.com/thehindu) [instagram.com/thehindu](https://www.instagram.com/thehindu)

On the independence of the EC

An independent Election Commission is the bedrock of Indian democracy. To ensure that it remains so, various safeguards are built into the basic structure of the Constitution

LETTER & SPIRIT

C.B.P. Srivastava

Free and fair elections are key to a successful and vibrant democracy, a maxim included in the Basic Structure of the Constitution via *Indira Gandhi versus Raj Narain* (1975). However, in recent times, the fairness of the electoral process in India has been under question for many reasons, culminating in a resolution by the Opposition alliance to remove the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC). These controversies centre around the issue of alleged 'vote theft', and the manipulation of electoral rolls in the much-talked about Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

It has been alleged that the Election Commission (EC) has allowed massive irregularities in voter lists, specifically targeting minority and Opposition-supporting voters. It was alleged that the SIR in Bihar was rushed and designed to delete voters in order to target minorities. The names of approximately 65 lakh voters have been deleted during the SIR exercise which was challenged in the Supreme Court.

This is quite a casual way of doing away with a citizen's 'right to vote'. Adult franchise as provided in Article 326 of the Constitution is the bedrock of democracy. Any procedural impropriety would affect its merit and sanctity.

On selecting the EC

The process of appointing election commissioners had caused controversy when the Government passed the Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Office and Terms of Office) Act, 2023, which regulates the appointment and removal of the CEC and election commissioners, replacing the 1991 Act. The 2023 Act stipulates that election commissioners should be appointed by the President based on a selection committee comprised of the Prime Minister, a Union Minister and the Leader of Opposition. It was alleged that the passing of the Act was in contravention of the decision of the Supreme Court in *Anoop Baramwal versus Union of India, 2023* in which the Court held that the Chief Justice of India should also be included in the committee. However, this provision was removed which created a controversy on the grounds that the independence of the EC would be adversely affected. The Act has been challenged again in *Jaya Thakur versus Union of India, 2024*. The next hearing for the same is scheduled for March 2026.

The Constitutional mandate

The Constitution of India, under Article 324, provides for a permanent Election Commission with powers of superintendence, direction and control of the elections of the President, Vice-President, Parliament and of the legislature of the States. This constitutional basis and permanency of the Commission creates a background for its independence. The 2023 Act provides that the CEC will hold office for six years or until the age of 65, whichever is earlier. By far the most significant provision ensuring independence of the EC is the provision for the removal of the CEC and other election commissioners. Clause (5) of Article 324 says that the CEC can be removed only in the manner prescribed for the removal of a Supreme Court judge under Article 124(4), which are either



Speaking out: Activists from various groups stage a protest against the SIR at Freedom park in Bengaluru on February 7. ALLEN EGENUSE. J

proved misbehaviour or incapacity. Under Article 324(5), the CEC's conditions of service cannot be varied to their disadvantage during their tenure.

The removal of other election commissioners is done by the President on the advice of the CEC. However, the Supreme Court in *Vineet Narain versus Union of India, 1997* held that the CEC shall not give his advice *suo motu*. This provision strikes a balance between the executive power and the independence of the election commissioners.

The CEC's position

Article 324 provides for an EC with a CEC and other commissioners, and also includes a provision for regional commissioners. In 1989, the commission was made multi-member but the two additional posts were abolished in 1990. Again on October 1, 1993 after drawing strength from clause (2) of Article 324, it was made a multi-member commission permanently which was validated by the Supreme Court in *T. N. Seshan versus Union of India* (1995).

Interestingly, Clause (3) of Article 324 provides that when any Election Commissioner is so appointed the CEC, he/she shall act as the Chairman of the EC. The language of Article 324 makes it crystal clear that the CEC is appointed and commissioned as the commissioner having certain exclusive powers, and in case of making the Commission multi-member, he shall preside over the meeting as its chairman. The idea behind this provision is to ensure that the conduct of elections is done by an administrator and at the same time to make the decision of the Commission consensus-based or democratic. Such provisions also ensure the independence of this constitutional body.

The procedure to remove the CEC is

very complex and rigorous. It is a quasi-judicial Parliamentary procedure. The complexity of the process ensures its independence from any possible arbitrary action by the government. While the Representation of the People Act of 1950 and 1951 focuses on electoral procedures, voter registration, and candidate qualifications, Section II of the CEC and other ECs (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Terms of Office) Act, 2023 gives the procedure to remove the CEC and other Commissioners.

For the removal of the CEC, Article 324 (5) shall be read with Article 124(4) in order to understand the grounds for removal and the procedure.

Section 3 of the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968, deals with the investigation into misbehaviour or incapacity by a commission member. It says that if notice is given to the Lok Sabha, at least 100 members must sign, while in the case of the Rajya Sabha, the minimum number of signatories to such a motion shall not be less than 50. Following this, the Speaker or, as the case may be, the Chairman may admit or refuse the motion.

The Speaker or Chairman thereafter constitutes a three-member committee comprising the Chief Justice of India or a Supreme Court Judge, the Chief Justice of a High Court and a distinguished jurist.

In order to ensure coordination between the two Houses of Parliament, a provision is made that if the notice is given to both Houses on the same day, the committee shall be constituted only after both Houses accept the motion.

Further, definite charges must be framed and communicated on which investigation needs to be conducted. The CEC should be given reasonable time and opportunity to present his statement of defence. This is a provision which ensures the protection of the Doctrine of

Natural Justice by way of protecting the 'Rule of Fair Hearing'. This is again one of the most significant features of India's Constitution. In the case of allegations of any physical or mental incapacity, medical examination by a medical board appointed by the Speaker or Chairman, as the case may be, needs to be conducted.

The political angle

Though the Opposition has said that it will adopt democratic tools to move the motion against the CEC, it is unlikely to get passed as the ruling alliance holds sufficient majority in Parliament. The ruling government has rejected the allegations of any bias. The moot point is that constitutional bodies must be well-respected by all, be it citizens, ruling parties or the Opposition; otherwise, it sends a wrong signal to the masses across the country.

All political parties need to consider that constitutional or statutory bodies operate according to the provisions provided in the Constitution or in the respective statutes. While dissent against the actions of such bodies is not wrong, it should also be considered that the politicisation of the Constitution or constitutional bodies would be detrimental to Indian democracy.

The political safeguard provided by the Constitution must be taken care of and any dilution would be politically sensitive mainly because it would affect fairness in the electoral process and in the balance of power between the Government and independent and credible democratic institutions. The rule of thumb in Indian democracy is that it thrives on a blend of liberality and command, by balancing the authority of the state with the liberty of its citizens.

C.B. P Srivastava is President, Centre for Applied Research in Governance, Delhi.

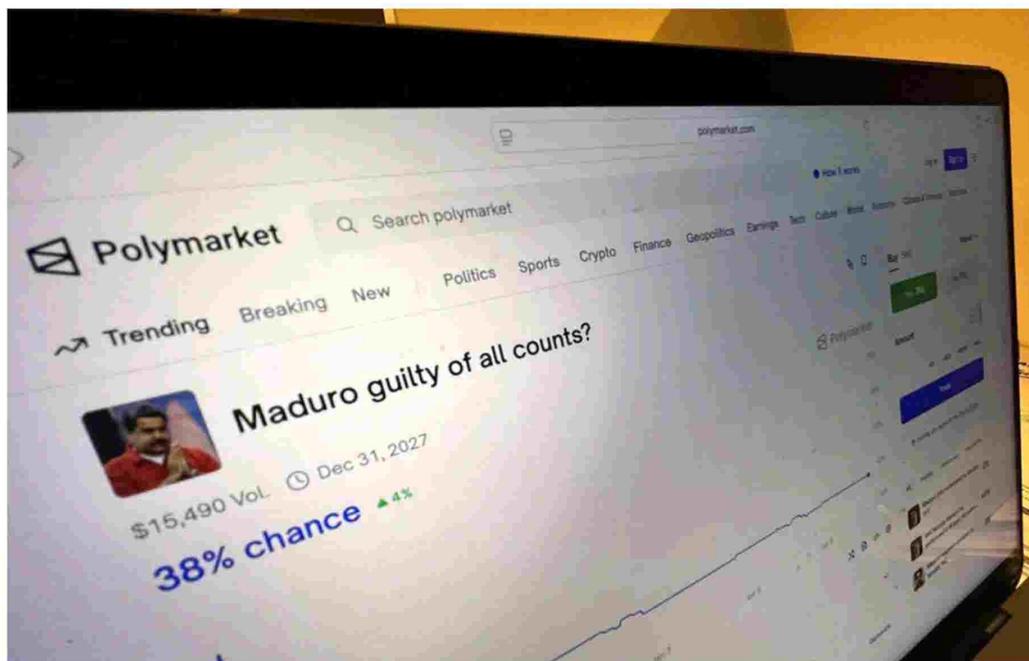
THE GIST

It has been alleged that the Election Commission (EC) has allowed massive irregularities in voter lists, specifically targeting minority and Opposition-supporting voters.

Article 324 provides for an EC with a CEC and other commissioners, and also includes a provision for regional commissioners.

Though the Opposition has said that it will adopt democratic tools to move the motion against the CEC, it is unlikely to get passed as the ruling alliance holds sufficient majority in Parliament.

CACHE



Dangerous game: The Polymarket prediction market website on January 9 in Philadelphia, AP

The explosive rise and inherent risks of prediction markets

Polymarket and Kalshi, two popular prediction market platforms, allow users to bet on anything from Bitcoin prices to bombings, raising a host of legal and ethical red flags. Such prediction markets are also sparking interest in India

Sahana Venugopal

The story so far:

In a booming section of the Internet, gamblers do not restrict their bets to sports teams and horses. They also bet on the possibility of Israel launching strikes against Gaza, the U.S. election results, and the possible return of Jesus Christ, and the number of tweets Elon Musk might post on a given day. These bets are placed on prediction market platforms like Kalshi and Polymarket, where speculators bet on the outcomes of real world events including wars, the Oscars, ongoing court cases, gold prices, government proceedings, and even the local weather.

How do prediction markets work?

A prediction market is a platform where users buy units of a 'probable event' to make a profit when that event happens (or not). Generally, users can fund their trading accounts through crypto, credit/debit cards, or bank transfers. A platform fee may or may not be charged. Once set up, users can browse topics such as science, sports, culture, finance, etc. to find an event they want to bet on. Kalshi and Polymarket both claim to be the largest prediction market platforms. For transactions, Polymarket uses the USDC stablecoin – a non-official cryptocurrency pegged to the value of the U.S. dollar – via the Polygon network.

Take a real question from Polymarket, as of February 4: "Will anyone be jailed over Epstein disclosures?" Here, the answer 'Yes' was worth 19 cents at the time, while 'No' was worth 82 cents. Clearly, users were betting on the latter outcome. Users choose to buy 'Yes' or 'No' "shares," and these values may continue to change based on new developments. A Polymarket calculator showed that buying \$100 worth of 'Yes' shares meant the user would get \$499.43 in case anyone was jailed due to the Epstein disclosures. If they bought \$100 worth of 'No' shares, they would get \$121.95 in case the situation panned out as they predicted. Remember the "unit" prices can change drastically at any time. Users can also choose to sell their "shares" before the stipulated deadline, in case they want to cash in their profits or cut their losses.

Prediction markets are surging in popularity because of their design, ease, and social media virality. Kalshi and Polymarket give speculators the confidence to bet on real-world events they are familiar with, instead of forcing them to research unfamiliar asset classes or learn about technical investment options and indicators. Zooming out, prediction markets claim that such economies are focused on crowdsourced truth or crowd wisdom, and that there is less chance of bias and deception, since a large number of people bet on outcomes

they truly believe will happen.

Regarding the controversial West Asia-related prediction markets that allow bets on future air strikes, Polymarket's website stated: "After discussing with those directly affected by the attacks, who had dozens of questions, we realized that prediction markets could give them the answers they needed in ways TV news and X could not".

Kalshi tells its users that they "have the ability to make the same smart trades and strategic investments that were once the exclusive domain of the financial elite".

Why are they being criticised?

Those opposing prediction market platforms list risks including the promotion of irresponsible gambling, people being encouraged to bet on violence, the rapid spread of false news, and the potential for insider trading due to powerful individuals becoming involved in sensitive markets where privileged information results in profits.

In January 2025, Kalshi announced that Donald Trump Jr. had joined as a strategic advisor. Mr. Trump Jr. claimed on X that people close to him used Kalshi during the election night to know that Mr. Trump had won "hours ahead of the fake news media". In August, media outlets reported that the Trump Jr.-linked venture capital firm 1789 Capital invested in Polymarket, and that he had joined its advisory board. Both Kalshi and Polymarket are also

active on social media platforms like Elon Musk-owned X and Meta-owned Instagram, where they post clickbait-style news snippets to their huge followings and depict their users' bets as though they are fact-based statistics.

Moreover, both Polymarket and Kalshi have published fake news in the past. In fact, Amazon's Jeff Bezos once disputed Polymarket's claim that he asked Gen Z entrepreneurs to get "real world jobs" at McDonalds or Palantir before starting a business. Meanwhile, the Axios outlet reported that Kalshi falsely posted about U.S. and Denmark discussions, leading to an official clarification from Denmark.

Are prediction markets regulated?

This is a grey area. Prediction markets are regulated in some jurisdictions while banned in others. Kalshi reported it was regulated by the U.S. Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), but it faces restrictions and legal challenges in multiple U.S. states. Meanwhile, 33 countries are completely restricted from accessing Polymarket, including the U.S., Germany, the U.K., and Singapore.

Prediction markets are also sparking interest in India. In recent months, multiple Reddit users have created threads to ask whether betting via platforms such as Polymarket is legal in India. Other Redditors explored ways to make money off prediction markets without attracting legal scrutiny.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What is the meaning of "roller coaster ride"? (Rani Gurunathan, Erode, Tamil Nadu)

A roller coaster is a ride which one finds in many amusement parks. It is a small railway which goes up and down steep slopes and sharp curves. As it comes down the steep slopes, the roller coaster suddenly and sharply changes direction, often causing the people in the carriages to scream in excitement or fear. When you say something is a roller coaster ride, it means it is full of unexpected ups and downs. A situation which is impossible to control is often referred to as a roller coaster ride. Here are a few examples.

Life with our new boss has been a roller coaster ride. Anand's relationship with his father has been a constant roller coaster ride.

What is the meaning of "vertically challenged"? (M. Mohamed Hussain, Nellai District, Tamil Nadu)

People who are short, generally, don't like to be told that they are short. When you tell someone that he is short, he feels hurt. If you are talking to someone who is short and want to refer to his/her height without hurting his/her feelings, you can say that he/she is "vertically challenged". It is the politically correct term.

Can the word "any" be used with plural nouns? (S. Manikantan, Chandra Layout, Bangalore)

Yes, it can. When the word "any" is followed by a countable noun, the noun is usually plural. Here are a few examples. If you have any questions, please talk to our Manager. We don't need to buy any cassettes. Do you have any one rupee coins?

What is the difference between "occupation" and "designation"? (V. K. Vithal, Gulbarga, Karnataka)

The word "occupation" refers to the kind of work you do; it refers to your job. You may be a teacher, an accountant, a salesperson, a police officer, etc. These are all examples of different kinds of occupation. The word "designation", on the other hand, refers to the title that you have been given. For example, when you join the university as a teacher, you may join as "Lecturer". Lecturer is a designation, it tells other people where you are in the teaching hierarchy. When you get a promotion, you become a Reader, and later a Professor. Your designation changes from Lecturer to Reader, etc. But the occupation of all three – Lecturer, Reader, and Professor – is the same – teaching.

When you talk about the "chemistry" between two people, what are you talking about? (N. Balasubramanian)

When you refer to the "chemistry" between two individuals, you are talking about the attraction and understanding between them. Uma refused to marry Satguru because there was no chemistry between them. My boss and I have the wrong chemistry. We just can't stand each other. The first time they met, there was an immediate chemistry. Published in The Hindu on September 7, 1999.

THE DAILY QUIZ

On February 24, 1920, Adolf Hitler announced the Nazi Party's 25-point programme in Munich. A quiz on Hitler's various security groups

Vasudevan Mukuntth

QUESTION 1

In September 1919, Adolf Hitler joined the German Workers' Party (DAP), a small nationalist group in Munich founded by _____. On February 24, 1920, the DAP renamed itself 'NSDAP', later colloquially called the Nazi Party. Fill in the blanks.

QUESTION 2

In 1921-22, the NSDAP set up a paramilitary wing called the Sturmabteilung, or SA for short, and used it to intimidate its opponents and to stage rallies. What was the colloquial name for members of this wing, which was based on the colour of their uniforms?

QUESTION 3

Hitler didn't trust the Sturmabteilung, so in

1923 he created a separate unit in charge of his personal security. However, this unit was abolished after the event known as X that year, failed and landed Hitler in prison. Name X.

QUESTION 4

In 1925, Hitler created Y, whose name was German for 'Protection Squadron'. For Hitler's purposes, it replaced the Sturmabteilung. Thanks to the leadership of Heinrich Himmler from 1929, it went on to become one of the most powerful and feared organisations in Nazi Germany. Name Y.

QUESTION 5

Name the event of February 23, 1933, that Hitler used as a pretext to arrest communists en masse, skewing the elections on March 5 in the NSDAP's favour and eventually leading to Hitler getting the power to make laws without parliament.



Visual question:

Name this leader who, despite his dislike of Hitler, made choices that sowed political instability and allowed Hitler to consolidate power.

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

1. Name Rajinikanth's debut film. **Ans: Apoorva Raagangal**
 2. The names of Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth's characters in *16 Vayathinile*. **Ans: Kamal was Gopalakrishnan aka 'Chappani' while Rajinikanth played the villain 'Parathi'**
 3. The Tamil version of the Telugu *Andamaina Anubhavam*. **Ans: Ninaitale Inikkum**
 4. The last time the two shared the screen as full-fledged co-leads was in this 1979 fantasy film. **Ans: Allauddin Alibutha Vilakkum**
 5. Rajinikanth's first full-length comedy film. **Ans: Thillu Mullu**
 6. In their only Hindi film to date, this legend enacted the role of Kamal's sibling. **Ans: Geraftaar and Amitabh Bachchan**
 7. This person is directing and composing the music for the reunion film. **Ans: Nelson Dilipkumar and Anirudh Ravichander**
- Visual: Name this acclaimed K. Balachander work. **Ans: Moondru Madichu**
- Early Birds: Sunil Madhavan| Arun Kumar Singh| Tito Shiladityaj| Renuka Jadhav| R. Sivakumar

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

Word of the day

Unsolicted: not requested or sought

Synonyms: unasked-for

Usage: He keeps giving me and my friends unsolicted advice.

Pronunciation: newsth./live/ unsolictedpro

International Phonetic Alphabet: /nʊsə'ɪsɪtɪd/

CORRECTION: In the article 'Why are apple traders in J&K worried?' published in these columns on February 23, the extent of land under apple orchards should read as 1.73 lakh hectares, and not as published. The error is regretted.

TUESDAY - FEBRUARY 24, 2026

Intelligent summit

India should focus on AI regulation, education, skilling

The recently concluded AI summit was a signal moment in the country's digital journey. With packed halls, global CEOs, innovators, policymakers and researchers under one roof, the event underlined India's ambition not merely to consume Artificial Intelligence but to shape it. A key highlight was the buzz around home-grown large language models (LLMs).



Players such as Sarvam AI and BharatGen unveiled models tailored for Indian languages, governance needs and sector-specific use cases. The emphasis was clear — that India's AI story must go beyond English-speaking urban elites and address agriculture, healthcare, education and public service delivery. If these models deliver on scale, costs and linguistic diversity, they could democratise AI in a way global platforms have not fully achieved. Equally significant was the adoption of the Delhi Declaration which is a voluntary, non-binding framework endorsed by over 88 nations. The declaration seeks to anchor AI development in shared values. In a world increasingly fractured over technology governance, even a voluntary alignment signals recognition that AI's risks and rewards are global. Global technology leaders such as Sam Altman, Sundar Pichai and Vinod Khosla had interesting observations to make. On one hand, they suggested that AI is edging closer to systems with 'superintelligent general intelligence'. On the other, they were candid about the disruption ahead. Jobs will change, work will be redefined and productivity gains may not translate neatly into wage growth.

For India, that warning should be the real takeaway. If AI enables companies to do more with fewer workers, or with differently skilled workers, the ripple effects on income distribution and demand could be profound. The response must begin with education. Schools and colleges need to urgently rejig curricula to prepare students for a world where humans collaborate with machines. Foundational digital literacy, critical thinking, interdisciplinary learning and ethical reasoning must move from the margins to the core. Coding alone will not suffice; understanding how to work alongside AI systems will be as crucial as building them. Industry, too, must shoulder responsibility. Companies deploying AI at scale should commit to structured workforce transitions, identifying roles at risk, mapping emerging opportunities and investing in training. The cost of transition cannot be borne solely by displaced workers.

Finally, regulation requires foresight. Allowing industry to craft its own guardrails may spur innovation in the short term. But as AI diffuses at population scale, stronger institutional frameworks will be necessary to manage risks, from bias and misinformation to systemic shocks in labour markets. The experience of social media is instructive. Policymakers globally reacted years after platforms became ubiquitous, by which time data breaches and manipulation had taken root. India must ensure not to repeat that lag.

OTHER VOICES.



The New Delhi Declaration will help fight AI colonialism

One certainty about artificial intelligence is the speed with which it has advanced in recent years — a reflection of its increasing relevance in many of our lives. Yet it would be a mistake to conflate pace with progress if the technology grows unevenly across geographies and within nations, and as long as the guardrails necessary to protect the vulnerable from potential associated threats are insufficient. It's no longer enough to ask in what ways AI can benefit humanity, but instead how it can be made to work for everyone. The New Delhi Declaration, endorsed by 86 countries during last week's India AI Impact Summit, represents a decisive step towards answering this question. The premise of the declaration is simple: AI must be shared equitably across humanity, and not concentrated in the hands of a few. (DIBAL, FEBRUARY 23)

CHINA DAILY

Modernisation evidenced by festival's opening-up

China's special nine-day shopping campaign during the Spring Festival holiday has demonstrated how a society once rooted in agrarian rhythms has rewired itself for the digital age without severing its cultural roots. Consider the numbers. In just the first four days of the holiday, Hainan's offshore duty-free sales hit 970 million yuan (\$140.51 million), up 15.8 per cent year-on-year, and average daily sales at key retail and catering enterprises nationwide rose 8.6 per cent year-on-year. Flight bookings to China surged more than 400 per cent around the holiday period. These are not merely statistics; they are signals of a society shifting from export-led growth to consumption-driven resilience. (DELINGS, FEBRUARY 23)

AI: Blinded by optimism

NEVER BEFORE. We are not facing another industrial revolution. We are facing the industrialisation of cognition. That difference must serve as the basis for our policy response



R KRISHNA KUMAR

As the recent AI Summit concluded, one question lingered in public discourse: Will I lose my job? While many responses from the stage were optimistic or evasive, the IMF Managing Director's warning of significant employment disruption turns this question from casual curiosity into a legitimate concern. There are three core issues in the current 'AI revolution' that need serious attention. The first is job loss, the second is the major shift it brings to education, and the third is its impact on the healthcare sector. We will concentrate on the first two.

Many delegates responded to the first issue, recalling past technological shifts, such as the Industrial Revolution, the mechanisation of mills, and the computer revolution. Some mentioned retraining and predicted an increase in client-facing roles. Overall, they seemed to avoid addressing the core issue. Every technological revolution has brought both benefits and displacement. The Industrial Revolution shifted labour from agriculture to manufacturing. The transition was gradual. Mill automation displaced workers but expanding service sectors absorbed them. The computer revolution became a productivity tool, creating entirely new industries. The present AI revolution is fundamentally different. Earlier revolutions replaced physical drudgery. Generative AI tools are not merely machines; they are digital entities capable of performing reasoning, synthesis, and structured decision support. This revolution

replaces cognitive abilities. It attempts to build a powerful digital clone with superhuman abilities.

HIERARCHY OF COGNITION

Every profession has a hierarchy of cognition. Juniors use operational cognition, which encompasses algorithmic execution. As we move up the ladder, algorithmic execution is replaced by cognitive compression, the ability to compress years of knowledge into a capsule for decision-making. The AI revolution is, in fact, a form of cognitive automation capable of mastering both types of cognition. Entry-level white-collar roles across sectors are clearly vulnerable, not just computer programmers. But it is a mistake to assume senior roles are immune. AI's ability to compress millions of documents into actionable knowledge capsules challenges even experienced professionals.

The real competition is no longer the colleague sitting next to you. It is a system with vast computational memory, continuous retraining, and no cognitive fatigue. The term "retraining" becomes ambiguous when the competitor is being retrained faster and at scale. The question one has to answer is: Can I go up the value chain faster than AI? Can I be the David in my fight with the Goliath?

The real danger for India is the possible erosion of the demographic

The pedagogical transformation required is enormous. We have to move to open-book and AI-assisted learning and examination formats, besides faculty retraining

bulge, especially among white-collar youth. If this segment weakens, consumption slows, investment patterns shift, and the macroeconomic impact becomes significant. Unlike previous revolutions, displaced youth today have limited alternative sectors to absorb them quickly. Large-scale manufacturing is not an alternative, as its contribution to employment is only through a trickle-down effect. Agricultural absorption is unrealistic. Informal sectors lack stability. If cognitive automation spreads faster than job creation in adjacent sectors, the demographic boon risks becoming a demographic bane.

A frequently proposed safety valve is large-scale employment as AI evaluators, auditors, or regulators. This is intellectually comforting but structurally flawed.

Meaningful evaluation requires mastery of the domain equal to or greater than that of the system being assessed. When AI continuously re-trains and aggregates global knowledge, staying consistently ahead of it becomes unrealistic for large populations. Presenting AI monitoring as a mass employment solution risks becoming another evasive reassurance rather than a credible strategy.

In sum, no level of the hierarchy is safe. It is a fallacy to claim that only junior-level programmers will be affected. Anyone who sits at a computer for their job is at risk of losing their seat.

HIGHER EDUCATION CHALLENGE

Higher education faces a disruptive challenge: what to teach, how to teach, and how to assess. When ChatGPT is banned in institutions, it often becomes the most valuable resource after graduation. This creates a clear contradiction. Our educational system

is primarily solution-based — aimed at producing correct answers from given input data within a structured system. Meanwhile, industry increasingly requires decision-making amid uncertainty, relying on strong domain expertise. AI tools are excellent at what a graduating student can do, and also have the cognitive depth to make decisions. There is a risk that a graduating student will face a massive wall, regardless of the discipline.

The pedagogical transformation required is enormous. We have to move to open-book and AI-assisted learning and examination formats, faculty retraining with the changed world in mind, shift from information delivery to decision architecture, and emphasise critical reasoning and contextual judgment. If we do not restructure higher education, we risk graduating students trained for a world that no longer exists.

AI challenge cannot be faced with blind optimism. The solutions are not easy to find. Strengthening MSMEs, reinventing manufacturing, and accelerating "Make in India" initiatives may provide partial buffers. Small-scale sectors have thrived on innovations. But policy responses must move beyond slogans. AI is a double-edged sword. Its benefits in productivity, healthcare, and design are undeniable. Yet its fodder — data centres, computational scale, and rapid self-improvement — gives it unprecedented momentum ahead of humans.

We are not facing another industrial revolution. We are facing the industrialisation of cognition. That difference must serve as the basis for our policy, educational, and economic strategies.

The writer is Institute Professor, Indian Institute of Technology Madras

Data centres, GCCs powering India's tech stack

Global enterprises rely on India teams for engineering leadership, data strategy, AI model development and cybersecurity

Sindhu Gangadharam

If there's one shift shaping global technology conversations today, it's the recognition that infrastructure drives innovation. AI ambitions, digital platforms, and cloud adoption all depend on strong digital foundations. Data centres have therefore moved from background enablers to strategic assets. At the same time, India's Global Capability Centres (GCCs), continue to deepen their role in global engineering, product development, and advanced digital innovation. Together, these trends are influencing how the next generation of technology gets built, increasingly from India.

AI has raised expectations from infrastructure. Training large models, running enterprise AI workloads, enabling real-time analytics, all require sustained compute power, secure environments, and resilient connectivity. Infrastructure choices now directly influence how quickly organisations can experiment, deploy, and scale AI solutions.

According to a new Macquarie Equity Research report, India's data centre capacity is poised for massive expansion, set to double by 2027 based on under-construction capacity and may grow fivefold by 2030 if pipeline capacity is fast-tracked. Investment activity across Bengaluru, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Pune, and NCR reflects both enterprise demand and hyper-scale expansion.

Many GCCs are anchoring advanced engineering, AI development, cybersecurity operations, and digital platform ownership from India, naturally increasing the need for high-performance domestic infrastructure. AI workloads themselves are evolving. Generative AI, digital twins, automation platforms, and real-time analytics require specialised infrastructure, such as GPU clusters, advanced cooling systems, and low-latency connectivity. These requirements are shaping the design of newer data centre facilities.

COMPUTATIONAL BACKBONE

India's experience with population-scale digital platforms continues to influence engineering thinking. Aadhaar, UPI, and other digital public infrastructure demonstrated how reliable large-scale digital systems can operate. That exposure has created engineering confidence around scale, resilience, and performance. Data centres provide the computational backbone that allows organisations to translate that confidence into enterprise AI deployments.

India's GCC ecosystem continues to scale in both size and strategic depth. The country now hosts over 1,700 centres employing close to two million professionals, with industry estimates from Nasscom placing the ecosystem's value contribution at upwards of \$50 billion annually. The mix of work has also shifted steadily. A growing share of



DATA CENTRES. Provide the computational muscle for AI

new GCC investments focus on AI engineering, cloud platforms, cybersecurity, and advanced analytics rather than traditional IT or business process support. Global enterprises increasingly rely on their India teams for engineering leadership, enterprise data strategy, AI model development, and cybersecurity architecture.

Automotive companies are building connected mobility platforms, embedded software, and digital twin capabilities from India. Financial institutions are advancing AI-led risk modelling, fraud detection, and real-time analytics programmes here. Healthcare organisations are expanding data-driven research, clinical analytics, and patient insight platforms through India-based teams. As GCC mandates expand, infrastructure requirements naturally grow alongside them. Advanced AI workloads, cybersecurity operations, and real-time analytics environments require high-performance computing

infrastructure, low latency connectivity, and strong data governance frameworks. Data centres increasingly support this layer, particularly where enterprises require proximity between engineering teams, data infrastructure, and innovation programmes.

AI sovereignty has quickly become part of mainstream technology conversations. Governments and enterprises are thinking about trusted infrastructure, secure data ecosystems and responsible AI development. India's deep digital talent pool, expanding compute infrastructure, strong enterprise participation, and digital public infrastructure that has already operated at population scale created favourable conditions for trusted AI development. Collaboration across industry, academia, and policymakers will help ensure innovation progresses responsibly. Access to domestic compute capacity, secure data environments, and strong research ecosystems will determine how quickly India can translate its talent advantage into scalable AI innovation.

India stands as the second largest AI/ML/Data Analytics talent pool. Which also translates to the speed of translation from experimentation to enterprise deployment. Academic partnerships, startup innovation, enterprise R&D, and infrastructure create a strong innovation loop.

The writer is Chairperson, Nasscom, and MD, SAP Labs India

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

Marine bio-fertilizers

This refers to how sea microbes can protect agrifields' (February 23). Marine bio-fertilizers show good market potential as they improve soil health, increase nutrient use, and reduce chemical use. Before large-scale launch, clear government guidelines are necessary. Reliable safety data, field results, and environmental approval will build buyer confidence. Farmers usually prefer the quick returns of chemical fertilizers, so awareness programmes are needed to explain

the steady and long-term benefits of microbial inputs. Hence, gradual market entry is practical. With clear policy support and monitoring, sea microbes can create a stable agri-input market and maintain farmer trust. S Balasubramanyam Villupuram, TN

Renegotiate trade pact

Apropos 'Tricky pitch' (February 23), the US Supreme Court's strike against executive overreach under the International Economic

Emergency Powers Act provides a critical strategic opening for New Delhi. While the ruling temporarily dismantles reciprocal tariffs, the administration's pivot to Section 122 and the looming threat of Section 138 signify that protectionism is merely changing shape, not disappearing. India must avoid the reactionary impulse to walk away from existing framework deals. Instead, the current legal volatility in Washington should be leveraged to renegotiate terms from a position of relative strength. By focusing on

digital sovereignty and agricultural standards, India can transform a confused trade environment into a bilateral pact that prioritises economic pragmatism over shifting geopolitical alignments. Persistence, not retreat, remains the smartest play. K Chidanand Kumar Bengaluru

School education

This refers to 'School education will change, if children were to vote' (February 23). Voting is a democratic

exercise, which demands knowledge and maturity from voters. Children are their own limitations. Hence, they cannot step up to the plate. One feels, schools and parents should take full responsibility of catering to the needs of children, be it curriculum, evaluation or standard of teaching. Of course, they may get the views of children on the aforesaid and articulate them in appropriate forums to optimise the potential of children. S Ramakrishnaayee Chennai

Haze over Ukraine war

Four years on, a ceasefire still seems far-fetched

Sridhar Krishnaswami

It is a date that few in the comity of nations would want to observe, certainly not Russia or Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin ordered his tanks to roll into Ukraine in what was termed a "special military operation" in a wishful thinking that his invasion would be over in a few days and that the Ukrainians would capitulate quickly.



STUMBLING BLOCK. The demand for territorial concessions

At the end of four years Moscow seems to be nowhere close to achieving its objectives, and the conflict has heightened European tensions, drawing in nations through American sanctions as a way of punishing Russia.

It is not as if Moscow and Kyiv are not talking but only in the nudging of President Donald Trump who has sought to employ a series of ways to get the warring parties to the table — coaxing, cajoling, threatening, and loud rhetoric.

All these seem to have impacted the neighbourhood but not so much the principals. The latest round of parleys in Geneva that included the US showed that Russia and Ukraine are still far apart. There is one thing that stands between them for a ceasefire: territory or territorial concessions.

LITTLE HEADWAY

The talks have been variously described as "difficult" and "challenging", even "businesslike" or "not easy". Or as one senior Russian official has been quoted: "This is complex work that requires alignment among all parties and sufficient time." In a nutshell: Russia is demanding the Eastern Donbas that includes the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk.

That's a definite non-starter for Ukraine; it is of the view that ceding territory means vulnerability to another attack, drawing references to the 1938 Munich Treaty that allowed Adolf Hitler to annex Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia. Further, President Volodymyr Zelensky said in a recent interview that giving up Donbas would be rejected by Ukrainians in a referendum.

For a person who believes that he is put through a lot of pressure and that it was "not fair" to be told "better come to the table, fast" by President Trump, President Zelensky is wary of giving up heavily secured and fortified areas in the east, especially in the

absence of any firm security guarantees from the West. The idea that there could be a stabilisation force as a way of assuring Kyiv has also run into trouble, with Moscow bluntly saying that this European force would be fair targets.

Moscow and Kyiv would also have to address the status of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant that sits in the frontline and is under Russian control. Its safety has been a source of concern since it has taken hits in the bloody conflict, but nuclear inspectors who have examined the plant have vouched that there has been no radiation leaks.

STATUS OF NUKE PLANT

In demanding its return, Ukraine has said that this power plant, Europe's largest, can be in a Kyiv-Washington control framework, something that President Putin is unlikely to sign off easily.

For now all attention is on a ceasefire and defining the frontlines on what could be a future Ukraine that is already devoid of Crimea which Russia captured in 2014. But the bigger question is if President Putin would insist on linking the lifting of sanctions to a Ukrainian peace deal.

Complicating this is the talk of using frozen or seized Russian money for the reconstruction of Ukraine that could run into hundreds of billions of dollars. With Russia itself hurting economically, it would be wishful thinking that President Putin allows the West to keep or spend a huge pile of his money.

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

Energy options after US verdict

India can use the space created by the US Supreme Court ruling to diversify oil purchases without capitulating on Russian oil

CAPITAL IDEAS.

RICHA MISHRA

After the US Supreme Court struck down President Donald Trump's sweeping tariffs, now the debate is will India enhance buying Russian oil once again? Indian officials have been maintaining that price, supply stability and national energy security are paramount. India imports the bulk of its crude requirements and has used discounted Russian oil to manage economic pressures.

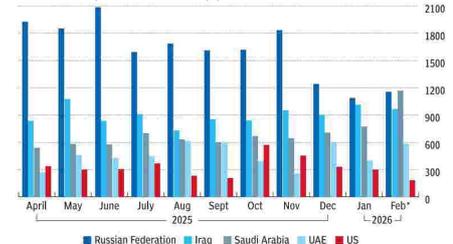
However, the purchase of Russian oil did drop. Russia was replaced by Saudi Arabia for the top supplier position looking at the numbers February 1-23. The top five suppliers to India are Saudi Arabia, Russian Federation, Iraq, United Arab Emirates and the US, currently. According to Prerna Prabhakar, Fellow at the Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEEP), "India has consistently refrained from formally commenting on its purchases of Russian oil, maintaining that its energy policy is guided by national interest rather than geopolitical pressures. In this context, the recent Supreme Court ruling may reduce immediate legal pressure on India to curtail such imports."

"However, it would be prudent to remain cautious rather than assume the matter is settled. Given the unpredictability of the Trump administration and the indication that alternative legal routes could be explored to reimpose restrictions, the situation remains fluid. A calibrated and watchful approach may therefore be more appropriate than a premature renegotiation or strategic shift," she said.

Prabhakar has a point here — a watchful approach is what is needed. Umud Shokri, Energy Strategist and Senior Visiting Fellow at George Mason University, said: "The Supreme Court knocking down Trump's 'global tariffs' under emergency authority doesn't magically end US pressure on countries buying Russian energy, but it does blunt



India's top crude oil suppliers (monthly average; thousand barrels per day)



Source: Kpler * till Feb 22

one of the bluntest instruments Washington had been waving around." On pressure over Russian purchases, he said, the immediate effect is that the US loses some tariff-creditability as a one-step punishment tool, especially if tariffs were being used as a bargaining chip in broader trade talks. "That said,

The smart play for New Delhi is to honour enough of the deal to keep the relationship warm while quietly renegotiating the pieces that hurt most

the US still has plenty of other levers that don't depend on that particular tariff authority: targeted sanctions, financial restrictions, shipping/insurance pressure, and "secondary sanctions" style threats," he said.

Recent analysis has described the US using trade negotiations and tariff threats specifically to push India on Russian oil imports, and that pressure doesn't vanish just because one legal pathway got blocked, he cautioned.

Can India turn this to its advantage? "Potentially, yes, in a very practical way: if a big chunk of 'tariff leverage' is now legally constrained, India can negotiate trade terms with less fear of

sudden, blanket tariff punishment, and instead push for clearer, rule-based outcomes (MFN tariffs, narrower trade remedies, or negotiated carve-outs). Indian trade-policy voices are already framing the ruling as a reason to reassess the trade bargaining landscape," he said.

On the energy side, India can also use the moment to diversify without capitulating: gradually reduce exposure to Russian barrels where it makes commercial and diplomatic sense, while preserving flexibility and insisting on sovereignty over import choices, Shokri said.

Well, his argument does have a point. Reporting and analysis around early 2026 have already pointed to US efforts to steer India towards alternative supplies (including US crude), and to India's partial reduction rather than a full stop.

That "managed adjustment" approach is exactly how India turns pressure into bargaining space instead of a binary yes/no fight, he said. Vandana Hari, Founder and CEO of Vanda Insights, said, "The SC decision does put a question mark on the interim trade deal, including its implicit provision of India pivoting away from Russian oil. But I doubt Indian refiners will rush back into Russian oil. They have been actively diversifying the basket, and it would be good to stay on that path in the long run, anyway."

According to Tracy Schuchart, Senior Economist, Ninja Trader Live, Ninja Trader Group: "Yes, unambiguously. India just got handed leverage it didn't have 24 hours ago."

"Now the most the administration can do unilaterally is 15 per cent under Section 122, and that expires in five months. After that, any new tariffs require formal investigations that take months or Congressional action that's politically uncertain heading into midterms. India knows all of this," she said.

The smart play for New Delhi is to honour enough of the deal to keep the relationship warm while quietly renegotiating the pieces that hurt most, particularly the energy procurement commitments and agricultural market access, she pointed out.

The structural gaps in infrastructure finance

Saurabh Bandyopadhyay

The Union Budget has reaffirmed India's reliance on public capital expenditure as the central pillar of its growth strategy. Public investment has expanded rapidly over the past five years. Central government capital expenditure has risen sharply in both absolute terms and as a share of GDP, marking a clear break from the fiscally constrained post-2012 period. This sustained push has helped crowd in private investment.

However, execution capacity has not scaled up at the same pace. Project monitoring data continue to show a sizeable pipeline of stalled or delayed infrastructure projects, with time overruns and cost escalations remaining widespread. Land acquisition challenges, regulatory clearances, weak project preparation and financing stress are repeatedly cited as binding constraints, particularly in highways and urban infrastructure. The divergence between rising allocations and uneven outcomes suggests that India's infrastructure challenge is now less about spending levels and more about delivery systems.

Three structural gaps in infrastructure finance merit closer attention. First, India does not lack project announcements; it lacks bankable projects. Too often, projects

are launched before land is secured, demand risks are rigorously assessed, or revenue and risk-sharing frameworks are clearly defined. The result is predictable: delays, cost overruns and growing risk aversion among long-term investors.

A professionally managed and adequately funded project preparation framework — covering feasibility studies, environmental and social safeguards, and financial structuring — can materially improve execution quality. International experience shows that relatively small upfront investments in preparation significantly reduce downstream fiscal and contractual stress. Without this foundation, higher capital outlays risk translating into stranded assets.

NON-DEBT INSTRUMENT Second, asset monetisation has emerged as an important non-debt financing instrument, particularly in the transport sector. Recycling capital from mature, revenue-generating assets into new infrastructure can ease fiscal pressures while sustaining investment momentum.

But credibility is key. Transparent valuation, competitive bidding, service-quality safeguards and clear ring-fencing of proceeds for fresh capital formation are essential to ensure monetisation strengthens, rather than undermines, public balance



NEEDED. Adequate project preparation

sheets. Absent these guardrails, monetisation risks being perceived as a short-term fiscal expedient rather than a durable financing strategy.

Third, despite the scale of infrastructure spending, India's financing base remains relatively narrow. Banks and budgetary resources still dominate, while long-term domestic investors — pension funds, insurance companies and provident funds — play a limited role.

Expanding the use of long-dated, inflation-linked infrastructure bonds, strengthening pooled municipal finance mechanisms and providing regulatory clarity for institutional investment in infrastructure funds would better align financing tenors with asset lifecycles.

Recent RBI data indicate that States have increased capital expenditure as a share of GDP in recent years, reflecting a welcome shift towards growth-enhancing spending. However, aggregate improvement conceals wide

inter-State variation in fiscal space, project readiness and execution capacity. Many States continue to face weak project pipelines, limited own-source revenues and rising committed expenditures. In this context, Central support — through long-tenor, concessional loans for State capital expenditure — would yield stronger results if increasingly linked to measurable improvements in project preparation, financial reporting and user-charge frameworks.

One of the most under-emphasised aspects of India's infrastructure strategy is operations and maintenance. Inadequate lifecycle funding leads to rapid asset deterioration, eroding economic returns and raising costs.

Climate risks compound this challenge. Floods, heat stress and extreme weather events are shortening asset lives and increasing maintenance burdens. Integrating maintenance planning, climate-resilient design standards and risk-sharing mechanisms into infrastructure finance frameworks would significantly improve value for money and protect public investment.

The challenge now is institutional: ensuring that projects are prepared better, financed smarter and maintained properly across both the Centre and the States.

The writer is Senior Fellow at NCAER, New Delhi. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

February 24, 2006

Long-distance calls turn cheaper; subsidy cut 33%

Telecom tariffs are set to take a big tumble with the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India today announcing reduced access deficit charges. The decrease in the total subsidy amount, which is used to fund rural telephony, will enable all telecom operators to lower STD rates to ₹1 a minute from the present average tariff of ₹2.50 a minute.

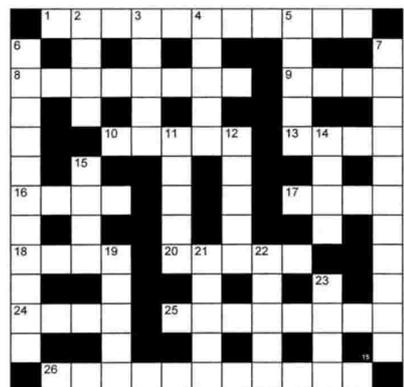
IPO scam: Transit remand for accused

The four key accused in the Initial Public Offer (IPO) scam have surrendered before the CBI and will be produced in the special CBI Court in Mumbai on Friday. The CBI has been granted transit remand of the four — Deepak Panchal, Jayesh Khandwalla, Parag Zhaveri and Dhendra Dora.

Tatas interested in nuclear power

The Tata Group will be interested in getting into nuclear power as and when the Government permits the domestic private sector into this field, according to Mr Ratan Tata, Chairman, Tata Sons. At the same time, Mr Tata believes that the country's power strategy should be coal-based, adopting new coal technologies to control air pollution.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2623



EASY

ACROSS

- 1. Headlong, without deliberation (11)
- 8. Contrivance, trickery (8)
- 9. Brought into the world (4)
- 10. Privately, apart (5)
- 13. Labyrinth (4)
- 16. Not fat (4)
- 17. Gratis (4)
- 18. Flat-bottomed river craft (4)
- 20. Brewing, baking agent (5)
- 24. Notion (4)
- 25. Loud, harsh (8)
- 26. At _____, in issue, quarrelling (11)

DOWN

- 2. Duty list (4)
- 3. Turned-back sleeve ends (5)
- 4. Given running rate (5)
- 5. Blank-leaf book (5)
- 6. One suffering irresistible drowsiness (11)
- 7. Fore-runners, ancestors (11)
- 11. Seemingly fate-mocked condition (5)
- 12. Something in addition (5)
- 14. Sprightly, off-handed (4)
- 15. Chess front-piece (4)
- 19. Sound of plucked string (5)
- 21. Put name down for (5)
- 22. County, rural district (5)
- 23. Make one's way (4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 1. Make it rain and hurl oneself headlong into action (11)
- 8. Bit of trickery seen if one is put in wrong care (8)
- 9. Brought into existence by old boy backing the Navy (4)
- 10. Privately, 24s may be revised (5)
- 13. Complicated system of extracting one from the corn (4)
- 16. Be inclined to have little flesh on one's bones (4)
- 17. Is not tied up for nothing (4)
- 18. Back a horse one can move with a pole (4)
- 20. It leavens, and is easy to mix on tabletop (5)
- 24. Thought one to be almost deaf (4)
- 25. Loud, grating way it sent dirt packing (8)
- 26. At such, its quarrelling about. George's lad gulping hydrogen (11)

DOWN

- 2. Duty cycle that originally turns up in part (4)
- 3. Blow the ends of one's sleeves (5)
- 4. Regulated rate at which one walked up and down (5)
- 5. Record may have something in it, book perhaps not (5)
- 6. He keeps dropping off in order to conceal trip (11)
- 7. Can't see dem'ped by previous history (11)
- 11. Satirical form of one right, only left out (5)
- 12. There's more to him than playing in a crowd (5)
- 14. Jaunty pen lost her head (4)
- 15. Take a chess piece to unclue (4)
- 19. Nasal tone gnats makes flying up round top of window (5)
- 21. Come on stage of National Theatre ere it's changed (5)
- 22. She is about to put one right in the county (5)
- 23. Make one's way to the West End (4)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2622

ACROSS 1. Somebody 4. Oval 8. Col 9. Drake 10. Run 11. Larceny 12. Elide 13. Prosecution 17. Rinse 18. Debauche 20. Ado 21. Sauce 22. All 23. Tone 24. Pediment
DOWN 1. Sickly 2. Molar 3. Diary 5. Vertigo 6. Lender 7. Detestable 9. Dress sense 14. Rounddown 15. Truant 16. Pellet 18. Drupe 19. Crave

Terror plot

Hand of foreign nationals underscores vulnerability posed by porous borders

The recent foiling of a terror plot in the national capital, allegedly involving Bangladeshi nationals, is both a moment of relief and a warning that threats to India's internal security continue to evolve in complexity and intent. The swift action by Delhi police, aided by intelligence inputs and inter-agency coordination, prevented what could have been a catastrophic attack on civilian and symbolic targets. Yet, the incident raises deeper questions about cross-border radicalisation, intelligence preparedness and the fragile balance between openness and security. Preliminary investigations, reportedly supported by the National Investigation Agency and the Intelligence Bureau, suggest that the plot was not an isolated act of desperation but part of a larger ideological and logistical framework. The involvement of foreign nationals underscores the persistent vulnerability posed by porous borders, forged identities and sleeper networks that exploit urban anonymity. Terrorism today is less about organised battalions and more about small, determined cells capable of inflicting disproportionate harm.

The repercussions of such a plot extend beyond immediate security concerns. First, it highlights the urgent need to strengthen border management. Agencies like the Border Security Force operate under immense pressure, but technological upgrades, biometric tracking and real-time intelligence sharing must become standard practice rather than reactive measures. The threat landscape has shifted from conventional infiltration to covert embedding within civilian spaces. Second, there are diplomatic implications. India and Bangladesh share a historically cooperative relationship in counterterrorism, with the Government of Bangladesh taking decisive steps in recent years to dismantle extremist networks. Incidents like this risk straining public perception, even when state institutions on both sides remain committed to mutual security. It is crucial that the actions of a few do not undermine the broader trust painstakingly built between the two nations.

Third, the social repercussions must be handled with care. Security failures often trigger suspicion against entire communities, which can deepen alienation and inadvertently aid extremist narratives. The responsibility of the Government of India lies not only in ensuring vigilance but also in preserving social cohesion. Counterterrorism must remain precise and intelligence-driven. At another level, the foiled attack is a testament to the quiet efficiency of India's intelligence apparatus. India's response must therefore be equally adaptive - combining hard security measures with diplomatic engagement and social resilience. It is a test for India's democratic stability.

Perception gap

Entry-level hiring of women has improved but pipeline at senior level narrows dramatically

A study by All India Management Association in collaboration with KPMG delivers a sobering reminder that India's corporate ambitions rest on an incomplete foundation. Even as boardrooms boast of diversity policies and inclusion pledges, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, particularly in positions with real decision-making authority. The study's key finding is stark: While entry-level hiring of women has improved significantly over the past decade, the pipeline narrows dramatically at middle and senior management. The so-called 'leaky pipeline' continues to drain talent long before women reach CXO and board positions. In many sectors, women account for a healthy proportion of the workforce but occupy only a fraction of top executive roles. Representation is even thinner in revenue-generating and operational leadership assignments - the very roles that traditionally lead to the corner office.

The reasons are structural rather than individual. The report highlights persistent biases in promotion practices, lack of sponsorship networks, uneven access to mentorship and the disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities. Hybrid and flexible work models introduced after the pandemic have helped, but flexibility without cultural change often sidelines women from high-visibility assignments. Informal networks, where crucial decisions are shaped, remain male dominated. Another telling insight is the perception gap. Many organisations believe they are meritocratic and gender neutral, yet women respondents report slower career progression and fewer stretch opportunities. Diversity dashboards and compliance metrics have created awareness, but numbers alone cannot dismantle entrenched norms. True inclusion requires rethinking performance evaluation, succession planning and leadership grooming.

The economic cost of this imbalance is immense. Multiple global studies have linked gender-diverse leadership to stronger financial performance, better governance and improved innovation outcomes. India aspires to be a \$5 trillion economy, yet under-utilising half its talent pool is not merely unjust, it is economically irrational. Encouragingly, the study also points to what works: Structured leadership development programmes for women, formal sponsorship initiatives, transparent promotion criteria and accountability at the highest levels. Companies that tie diversity outcomes to executive compensation demonstrate measurable progress. Change accelerates when CEOs treat inclusion as a business imperative rather than a CSR checkbox. The glass ceiling in India is no longer invisible, it is measurable. The challenge is whether India Inc is willing to break it, not with rhetoric, but resolve.

A tech sovereignty challenge!

AI must be approached cautiously as it risks deepening monopolies



Shivaji Sarkar

Artificial Intelligence was supposed to be India's next moonshot moment - the arena where its vast pool of engineers, data scientists and entrepreneurs would finally challenge Western technological dominance on equal terms. It was a confident global showcase but had its mix of successes and failures. Glitches, mismanagement, confused coordination and embarrassing no-shows did cast a long shadow over India's prestigious AI summit on the one hand and on the other, the lineup of world leaders and global AI companies sent out a favourable message for India. To some, the gap between rhetoric and readiness seemed to look wider.

This was meant to be India's declaration that it is not merely a market for global tech giants but a maker of world-class technologies. Yet the optics offered a different story, despite duos coming Modi's way. Delays, diluted participation and lack of clear outcomes suggested a system still struggling with basics - planning, delivery and accountability. For a country that speaks of leading the digital century, logistical issues could harm its reputation.

The shocking incident of a private university, Galgotias University, showcasing a Chinese robot as its own, symbolises the state of affairs in the private Indian education system. Also, that research except for some specialised government institutions is a sham and a PhD degree may not be worth.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has tried to reframe the conversation with his 'Manav Vision', an AI philosophy centred on humanity, inclusion and social good. It is an attractive idea. It reassures a world wary of algorithmic excess and surveillance capitalism. But vision statements, however noble, cannot



India must therefore move with caution, clarity and self-reliance -- neither starry-eyed nor submissive.

substitute for execution. Without strong domestic capabilities, ethical slogans risk sounding like consolation prizes.

Resource gulping monopoly

The real concern is not a botched summit but whether India is serious about technological sovereignty. Today, India is largely an AI user, not a developer. Even leading engineering institutes lack robust teaching models and original research capacity. AI must be approached cautiously as it risks deepening monopolies, concentrating power and undermining democratic, humane systems.

With only about ₹10,372 crore (\$1.2 billion) allocated, India can ill afford a capital-intensive, energy-guzzling technology that fuels inflation, strains resources and delivers limited jobs. The global AI rush is already unsettling markets; rising costs and weak returns could hurt currencies and growth. Ironically, even Pakistan plans \$1 billion in investment, while Iran is committing far less but more cautiously.

As investments soar and employment shrinks, AI risks becoming a monopoly-driven, job-killing model. India must prioritise self-reliance and measured adoption over blindly chasing a costly technological race. The Time magazine has highlighted the issue this week: The

People vs AI. The backlash to the irresponsible and exploitative promotion of AI at all costs is growing. It says, "Politicians who choose to do the bidding of Big Tech at the expense of hardworking Americans will pay a huge political price."

For decades, India has been content to play the role of back office to the world - coding for others, servicing others, building platforms owned by others. In software services, this model worked. In AI, it will not. Artificial Intelligence is not just another industry; the West calls it foundational power (India needs to question it). Whoever controls AI controls data, defence, finance, health, agriculture, media - practically every lever of modern life. To depend entirely on Western platforms would be to accept a subtle form of digital colonisation.

Why is India consumer, not producer?

Today, most of India's AI stack rests on foreign infrastructure: American cloud providers, Western chip designers, proprietary models built in Silicon Valley. Even our brightest startups often seek validation, capital and exits abroad. If this continues, India will remain a consumer of intelligence rather than a producer of it. That is not sovereignty. That is dependency dressed up as global integration. The danger is not abstract.

Algorithms decide what citizens risk, what they buy, what loans they receive, even what narratives dominate public discourse. If these systems are owned and trained elsewhere, national priorities become secondary. Data flows outward, profits flow outward, strategic control flows outward. India cannot afford to become a digital tenant in its own house.

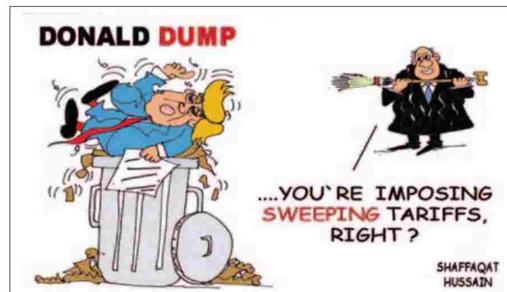
What is needed is not protectionism but purposeful independence. Domestic data centres, indigenous AI models trained on Indian languages, locally developed chips and homegrown platforms must become policy priorities. Investment should favour deep tech, not just app-based conveniences. Marketing should project Indian products globally, not merely resell Western solutions under local branding. Venture capital must be encouraged to stay patient rather than chase quick foreign acquisitions.

Above all, the state must stop confusing grand announcements with substance. Big-ticket summits and glossy brochures cannot replace long-term ecosystem building. Real capability grows quietly in labs, factories and classrooms, not on ceremonial stages. And here is where another uncomfortable truth emerges: India's universities, which should be the crucible of innovation, are often failing at the moment.

Too much "academic" research has slipped into what can only be called humbug - papers written for promotion metrics, conferences attended for travel grants, jargon-heavy studies with little practical value.

Therefore, dependence, not delay, is the real danger. A country that imports intelligence without building its own capacity does not modernise, it mortgages its future. India must therefore move with caution, clarity and self-reliance -- neither starry-eyed nor submissive. -INFA

The author is former senior editor, The Financial Express & Prof. IIMC. Views expressed are personal.



YOUR LETTERS

India's AI: Beyond buzzwords

The recent AI summit highlights India's potential to pivot from a back office hub to a global AI architect. While the trillion dollar race is exhilarating, our success hinges on moving beyond symbolic pledges. With India's AI market projected to reach \$71 billion by 2027, we must address the red tape. To fuel frontier models, we need more than just investment - we need a massive upgrade in our infrastructure, which currently consumes nearly 2% of global electricity. Democratizing education via AI is noble, but we must ensure human-centric safeguards don't become bureaucratic hurdles. India's UPI success proved we can scale innovation and regimes should ensure AI leap is powered by sustainable energy, not just soaring rhetoric.

Dr Vijaykumar H K, Raichur.

An ever-growing partnership



Prof D K Giri

The joggling by Emmanuel Macron, the President of France, on the streets of Mumbai is not only a story of routine physical exercise, it is also a sign of the fast-growing friendship between two countries. The bilateralism between France and India is deepening by leaps and bounds. The elevation of the ties into a Special Global Strategic Partnership indicates how the relationship is becoming comprehensive and multi-dimensional. The partnership has stood the test of time.

Emmanuel Macron was on a three-day visit to India, which began on February 17, 2026. His visit aimed at strengthening bilateral ties, focussing on areas like trade, defence, innovation and technology. The highlights of the visit included the launching of India-France year of innovation, the elevation of partnership, AI Impact Summit and defence cooperation, mainly the procurement of 114 Rafale fighter jets and joint production of helicopters. The visit reflected the growing strategic convergence between India and France with shared interests

in the Indo-Pacific and global stability. The main driver for this growing partnership is the adherence to strategic autonomy in the foreign policies of both countries. Let us recall that during the Cold War, as the erstwhile India for its non-aligned approach, France was more accommodative to India than its fellow-member countries in NATO. This was because France did not succumb to American pressure and refused to completely toe its line. In 1998, when India carried out the nuclear test, France was the only western power that did not impose economic sanctions on New Delhi. Not only that, Paris did not withhold cooperation with India in nuclear energy.

France has been the first country in the world that recognises India as an independent power centre, a credible democracy, offering economic opportunities for the world. There has been a consensus in French politics that if the European Union has to carve out an independent political identity apart from alignment with America or China, it must embrace India. This perspective was amply manifested in Macron's latest visit to India. Macron asserted that both countries oppose domination of any kind from India-Pacific to any field of technology in any part of the



world. He likened friendship with India to a sovereign alliance. Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his response said, "Both countries believe in a multipolar world and are working diligently to make it happen." He implied that France and India will collaborate on global issues without being beholden either to America or China. It is possible that a "third way" may be created. This option is not without any ground. In recent times, Europe has been hurt by China's aggrandising policies and the insulting behaviour of the US President Donald Trump. France feels bound to explore the third way.

The ties between France and India in the defence sector are growing stronger by the day. It is evident from the facts that France is next only to Russia in exporting defence equipment to India. It will be no surprise if France overtakes Russia in near future if one takes into account the increasing

number of agreements on the sale of fighter jets, submarines and the joint production of defence material. To counter China and consolidate power in Asia, France is set to co-manufacture Rafale aircrafts, H-125 helicopters, HAMMER missiles, scorpene submarines and the fifth generation of jet engines.

Notably, France does not sell any deadly weapons to China or Pakistan whereas Russia has been supplying sophisticated weaponry to China, and America to Pakistan. The collaboration between France and India is not limited to export of arms. Keeping the importance of emerging technologies in strategic thinking, France and India have constituted a Joint Advanced Technology Group which will co-develop emerging technologies, secure military supply chains and maintain the competitive strategic advantage. This group also included critical minerals, collaboration on AI, digital technology, aerospace and innovation. This initiative falls under the broader framework of 2026 India-France Year of Innovation. In the light of such agreements, Prime Minister Modi said, "Our partnership may grow boundlessly from the deepest ocean to the highest mountain." -INFA

The author is a Prof of Practice, NIIS Group of Institutions. Views expressed are personal.

Send your letters to the Editor, Lokmat Times, Lokmat Bhavan, Pt Jawaharlal Nehru Marg, Nagpur - 440012. E-mail: ltedit.ngp@lokmat.com

THE ASIAN AGE

24 FEBRUARY 2026

To ensure Opp. stays united, Congress should be realistic

The single most important factor that stops the INDIA bloc of Opposition political parties from evolving into an effective platform that can take on the government is the refusal of the Indian National Congress to recognise its strengths and weaknesses and act accordingly, especially when it deals with its regional allies. The latest instance is the grand old party's attempts to bully the DMK in Tamil Nadu into appointing a number of seats for the forthcoming assembly elections that is grossly disproportional to its electoral strength in the state.

The DMK has been holding the Tamil Nadu fort against the saffron assault on its own, but has been graciously accommodating its allies, especially those at the national level. The Congress, the left parties and the Indian Union Muslim League are the beneficiaries of this policy. The Congress fought an election on its own last in 2014 Lok Sabha election when it managed to get 4.73 per cent of the popular vote, winning none of the 39 seats it had contested. Fast forward to 2024, the party, as a member of the Secular Progressive Alliance led by the DMK, won all the nine seats it contested and polled 10.67 per cent votes in an election which the alliance swept. In the 2021 Assembly election, the party won 18 of the 25 seats it was allotted.

The DMK had singlehandedly managed to get a majority in the 2021 Assembly seats and repeated the winning spree in the local body elections, byelections and Lok Sabha elections that followed. Additionally, the party has a new ally in the DMK founded by the actor Vijayakanth, and once a formidable player in state politics. It is in this background that the Congress has been giving contradictory signals from all the vantage points that it is unhappy with the DMK and has kept its options to forge an alliance with Tamilara Vettri Kazhagam of actor Vijay. The party's national leaders from the state have been acting cozily with the actor-politician, in an effort to send a signal to the DMK, which, however, refuses to acknowledge it.

Every party is ambitious about its future, and the Congress also. But it fails to be pragmatic and realistic to achieve its goals. Its ambitions get the better of its legitimacy to lead the Opposition.

The Congress acts as if it has too many options though it has very little. Tamil Nadu has been its steadfast ally for a decade on the national stage and has been a major supporter of Rahul Gandhi as the leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha. The DMK, which rules a state which sends 39 members to the Lower House of Parliament has been the pillar of strength of the INDIA bloc while Trinamool Congress leader and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee blows hot and cold.

How the Congress lost and went down with the entire Opposition in the Bihar Assembly election is for everyone to see, how it refused to even acknowledge the presence of its INDIA bloc allies in elections in Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh Assembly elections is also on record. How the party fails to design a cohesive Opposition strategy and execute it in Parliament where it has substantially higher numbers than last time is also evident.

Every party is ambitious about its future, and the Congress also. But it fails to be pragmatic and realistic to achieve its goals. Its ambitions get the better of its legitimacy to lead the Opposition coalition. Pressuring its allies into conceding demands that have nothing to do with politics is not going to do the Congress good, not for its brand of politics either. It must play its politics with its feet on the ground. It must learn from the BJP, its arch-rival, on how it makes every ally feel important, and still gets its way.

Peace in Ukraine will help Russia

Today (Feb. 24) is the fourth anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The four years of grinding war of attrition, which began as Mr Vladimir Putin's euphemism of 'special military operation', have served no one, bringing mayhem and destruction to Ukrainians while Russia has been sinking all its resources and its soldiers into a war that it appears incapable of ending.

As many as 1.8 million soldiers on both sides are said to have been killed or gone missing in action, with Russia losing 1.2 million soldiers and Ukraine around 600,000. The Russian economy, boosted initially by war spending, is tanking now, its oil revenues and its budget deficit rising even as its people are tired but unable to speak out against a war that has lasted longer than the Great Patriotic War fought against the Nazis in World War II.

As an indescribable fatigue sets in and drones fly both ways across boundaries, near enough to Moscow for the major airports to be shut over the weekend, the objectives of a megalomaniacal Mr Putin, whose revanchist mission of annexing Ukraine and reshaping the destiny of the former Soviet Union and Europe has hardly been fulfilled, are in jeopardy. His troops may have taken close to 30 per cent of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea in 2014, but progress on the war front is being measured in yards these days as Ukraine's famed 'unbreakability' has kicked in. US President Donald Trump may have boasted that this was a war he could stop on his first day back in office, but too he is too inexperienced as evidenced in his disinterest. Not without logic does Mr Narendra Modi keep reminding Mr Putin that this is not the 'era of war', certainly not even for a feared military machine whose brazen land grab has been halted in its tracks, with missiles aimed at Ukraine's electricity and its budget deficit rising even as its people are tired but unable to speak out against a war that has lasted longer than the Great Patriotic War fought against the Nazis in World War II.

As an indescribable fatigue sets in and drones fly both ways across boundaries, near enough to Moscow for the major airports to be shut over the weekend, the objectives of a megalomaniacal Mr Putin, whose revanchist mission of annexing Ukraine and reshaping the destiny of the former Soviet Union and Europe has hardly been fulfilled, are in jeopardy. His troops may have taken close to 30 per cent of Ukrainian territory, including Crimea in 2014, but progress on the war front is being measured in yards these days as Ukraine's famed 'unbreakability' has kicked in. US President Donald Trump may have boasted that this was a war he could stop on his first day back in office, but too he is too inexperienced as evidenced in his disinterest. Not without logic does Mr Narendra Modi keep reminding Mr Putin that this is not the 'era of war', certainly not even for a feared military machine whose brazen land grab has been halted in its tracks, with missiles aimed at Ukraine's electricity and its budget deficit rising even as its people are tired but unable to speak out against a war that has lasted longer than the Great Patriotic War fought against the Nazis in World War II.

If the czarist president were to pause for a moment and think where Russia might stand in the coming months in an era of free trade bringing prosperity to his people, he might just be inclined to be satisfied with what little pieces of Donetsk that Ukraine may be willing to sacrifice for the cause of peace. After four years of death and destruction, peace in Ukraine will be a victory for the world.

THE ASIAN AGE

Kaushik MITTAL
Editor

K. SUBRAMAN
Printer & Publisher

The Asian Age office is located at:
New Delhi: Jawaharal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi-110002. Phone: (011) 22211224.
Publish and Print on behalf of and for:
Deccan Chronicle Holdings Limited, Jawaharal Nehru National Youth Centre, 219 Deen Dayal Upadhyay Marg, New Delhi 110 002 or RFL, Intertech Ltd, C-9 Sector III, Noida 201301.
London: Quakermark Ltd, 8th Floor, Block 2, Elizabeth House, 30 York Road, London, SE1 7JQ.
Rajm: Registration number: 57290/94

Subhani

GO GLOBAL NOW—
USA, UK, UAE, FRANCE,
GERMANY... SELL YOUR
PRODUCT WORLDWIDE



US court forces Trump's tariff reset: World in fix?



K.C. Singh

Since US President Donald Trump unleashed his "Liberation Day" global tariffs over a year ago, the world has struggled with the disruption. It was further complicated by the American motives being not purely trade-related. Tariffs became a weapon to compel compliance with President Trump's geopolitical preferences and biases.

Different nations reacted in different ways. Some quickly swallowed their pride and chose compromise, even at the cost of economic interests. This produced apparently unequal trade deals, justified tactically to avoid confrontation and await Mr Trump's difficulties to multiply both at home and abroad. The European Union opted for this line, although subsequently Mr Trump's Greenland annexation demand created disharmony. Others like China retaliated by withholding US access to Chinese rare earths, compelling a US climb-down and lowering of tariffs from punitive levels. A temporary trade truce has followed. Yet others, like India, held protracted trade talks while the US meanwhile imposed 25 per cent punitive tariffs for importing Russian oil. Some nations, to appease President Trump, even committed huge investments in the US. For instance, Japan offered to invest \$50 billion, while South Korea promised \$30 billion. The model that emerged for effective handling of President Trump was to provide him head-on, line-creating concessions, employable by him domestically to boost success. He justified the massive tariffs as enabling the balancing of trade, forcing manufacturing to shift to the US mainland and reducing dependence on foreign products.

Pakistan provided yet a different model for US-handling, involving a mix of flattery, by endorsing Mr Trump's claims of mediating the ceasefire after India's Operation Sindoor, and economic and financial allurements. In the latter category fell Pakistani support for the Trump family's cryptocurrency business as well as promised US access to Pakistani rare earths and chemicals.

President Trump's social media claims about his tariff policy generating a trade surplus and massive job creation was contradicted by economic and trade data revealed just before the US Supreme Court ruling. The trade deficit was up, especially in goods. With China, the US trade deficit did fall, but overall, US exports also fell, especially agricultural exports to China. Manufacturing has fallen by 80,000. Thus, President Trump's claims on Truth Social that the trade deficit had dropped by 79 per cent and would entirely disappear this year proved fallacious.

Perhaps he was misled by the US access to Chinese rare earths to the lowest level since 2009 in October. However, it surged again in the following two months. The "US Liberation Day" tariffs had been imposed under the Internal Emergency Economic Power Act of 1977. The Supreme Court ruled that "IEEPA does not authorise the President to impose tariffs". It reasoned that the framers of the US Constitution did not vest taxing power in the executive branch. That immediately raised two issues. One, what happens to the almost \$100 billion of tariffs already collected by the US government and their likely reimbursement to American importers. Two, the status of the already concluded trade deals, most with higher tariff numbers and one-sided conditions favouring the US? For India, the second issue is immediately relevant because the India-US trade deal still awaits formalisation. Therefore, would the

The US Supreme Court has weakened the negotiating position of the US. With President Trump headed to China for a three-day visit starting March 31, the effectiveness or otherwise of the reconstructed US tariffs strategy should emerge. China has positioned itself strongly behind Iran.

Indian commitments, such as not importing oil from Russia, still stand?

President Trump lambasted the US Supreme Court judges, especially his own nominees. The 6-3 split verdict indicates that half the conservative judges, numbering six out of the nine, had shifted sides. President Trump immediately imposed fresh 10 per cent global tariffs under Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act. They were raised soon after to 15 per cent.

US trade representative Jameson Greer has maintained that they had found means to "reconstruct" the tariffs eliminated by the Supreme Court. The new section used, however, relates to a balance of payments deficit enabling tariff imposition, not trade deficits. Moreover, these are valid only for 150 days. Thereafter, it requires US congressional approval. Thus, President Trump can no longer dangle tariffs like the knights twirling the chain masses. There are procedures which must be followed, both before imposing tariffs and afterwards.

Thus, the US is planning to use two other sections of the same law. Section 301 allows imposition of individual country tariffs if discriminatory trade practices can be established. This involves examining possible industrial excess capacity, suspected forced labour, the pricing of pharmaceuticals, discrimination against US tech companies and trade in seafood, rice, etc.

Another employable legal provision is Section 222 of the 1982 Trade Act, relating to national security. That has already been used for higher tariffs on steel, aluminium and cars. It there-

fore appears that the Trump administration is likely to insist that commitments under already finalised trade deals must be abided by, otherwise they will unleash fresh tariffs under these other provisions of the law.

One thing is nevertheless clear: The US Supreme Court has weakened the negotiating position of the US. With President Trump headed to China for a three-day visit starting March 31, the effectiveness or otherwise of the reconstructed US tariffs strategy should emerge. China has positioned itself strongly behind Iran, having transferred more lethal offensive and defensive weapons. Logically, the US should not attack Iran before the China visit. But Trumpian logic can vary.

Beijing is unlikely to offer one-sided concessions. The trade negotiation, coming after the US court ruling, strengthens the Chinese position. This writer, speaking on a television show, had suggested on the day the India-US trade truce was announced that perhaps India could have waited till the expected court ruling on tariffs.

The United States is, meanwhile, focusing on Section 301 investigations on the trade practices of Brazil and China. While the US wants a firm commitment on the export of Chinese rare earths, China also needs a stable trading environment to overcome its domestic economic trials and top-level Army purges. In conclusion, President Donald Trump can at best be embarrassed and partially constrained by court rulings. Only a serious setback in the global economy in the term elections to the US Congress can bind his hands. India's dilemma is that, like most of the developed world, it has to engage and not confront the US, to buy time. However, that stance has domestic political implications as it hurts the government's projection of strategic autonomy and vocal leadership of the Global South.

The writer is a former secretary in the external affairs ministry. He tweets at @ambkingsh.

LETTERS

REGRESSIVE NORTH

The Gujarat government has made it obligatory to take parental approval for registration of marriages, in a bid to curb "love jihad". How many girls are cheated by Muslim boys under false pretences? Are the existing laws not enough? What about young people's right to choose their partner? What if they have regressive parents? This is clearly a message to BJP supporters that the life of minorities is being made uncomfortable. Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma has been blatant in harassing Muslims. This attitude is evident all "double-engage sarkars", be it Uttarakhand or Uttar Pradesh. There is little development in these states. They take pride in building a "Hindu Rashtra", which essentially means harassing minorities! It may be just coincidence; all these states are north of the Vindhyas! The southern states are comparatively more progressive and have better law and order.

Anil Bagarkar
Mumbai

TERRORISING BENGAL

THE CENTRE'S decision to deploy 480 companies of Central forces to West Bengal long before the announcement of elections is simply to terrorise the state's ruling party and the electorate. Surprisingly, the home ministry didn't deem it necessary to discuss this with the state chief secretary before dispatching forces, which sadly exposes how the ruling party at the Centre ignores the presence of an elected government in the state. The high-handedness by the Centre needs to be stopped.

Arun Gupta
Kolkata

MIZO CIVIC SENSE

TO ENSURE that coaches of the Guwahati-Aizawl train service don't get dirty, Mizos tie their foot waste in small bags and hang them neatly beside their seats! Not laws, rather an in-built culture, inspires them. This is their way of life: train coaches get treated as shared property, deserving respect and dignity. Guided by Thawmmingaina, the Mizo elite, these passengers are also extremely cooperative towards each other. If anyone falls ill or finds themselves in any kind of trouble, they take turns to look after and care for them. Mainland India has a lot to learn from Mizoram and its citizens in other areas too, such as upholding women's rights, family values, equality and the spirit of service, community and togetherness.

Kajal Chatterjee
Kolkata



Aakar Patel

Targeting Muslims: What 'Gujarat Model' means for the rise & rise of the 'New India'

The Bharatiya Janata Party has been governing Gujarat for about 30 unbroken years now. Nationalists in Gujarat are a two-party state, but the Congress has not won an election, either Vidhan Sabha or Lok Sabha, since before the Babri Masjid was pulled down. In this period the BJP has had the full scope and freedom to develop a structure of governance and law. Around 20 years ago, after the 2002 pogrom, there came into currency the phrase "Gujarat Model". We will take a look at what this model is and what it can reveal about "New India".

The first element of the Gujarat Model is the political exclusion of Muslims. There has been no Muslim BJP legislator or minister in Gujarat for decades and the party does not give them even tickets to contest. Absolute exclusion for the sake of exclusion. This has been replicated in "New India", where the BJP in the last three Lok Sabhas has won two majorities and a substantial plurality but with zero Muslims. Today, the BJP has around 90 Rajya Sabha MPs, but with no Muslims.

The second element is through laws that are aimed at minority persecution. Illegal cattle slaughter is extensively an economic crime (Article 48 of the Constitution is about animal husbandry and improving breeds). But no while collar crime attracts life in prison, as Gujarat's laws on cows do. Duping banks and investors of thousands of crores

does not attract life. The reason is that cattle slaughter has been made into a religious matter and this has been replicated around the country. Laws criminalising possession of beef came only starting in 2015 (first with two BJP states, Maharashtra and Haryana) and the lynchings started. Now the phenomenon is national.

Rajasthan's Cabinet has said it will replicate Gujarat's law which forcibly and legally ghettoises Muslims and prevents them from renting and buying property outside their ghettos. Laws criminalising marriage between Hindus and Muslims began to be legislated in 2018, starting with Uttarakhand, and are today in seven states. Laws and policies on citizenship and mass disenfranchisement are in place today and being rolled out across India.

This connects with the third element, which is targeted persecution through use of the state machinery. The New York Times reported this week that in Uttar Pradesh's Sambhal, the government apparatus that is so often acted to in a neutral manner is today being misused by a majoritarian state. This has become the norm actually. Across BJP, BJP state governments began to use bulldozers to raze homes and businesses, mostly to Muslims, in violation of the law. Two reports, one by my organisation Amnesty International India and another by the

Citizens and Lawyers Initiative, have recorded the manner in which governments have encouraged lawlessness and then stepped in with bulldozers.

The justice system has looked away from this for the most part and there is complicity in those organs of the State which could curb excess and violence against individuals.

The fourth element is the manner in which the narrative around India and its communities is being shaped. The language is deliberate and it is meant to project division. It has been successful at doing this. One way in which we can tell is that what used to be unusual and episodic is today endemic. Violence against individuals purely because of the faith they were born into is now normal. The total lack of action from the State, judiciary and media has made it so. Undoing it will not be easy and can only happen if there is not only a stop but a reversal of course, which is hard to see.

The fifth element of the Gujarat Model is a low priority on human development. Gujarat ranks low in the HDI index, which is made up of three elements: income, health and education. This is the basis of the intellectual opposition to the Gujarat Model and the distressing by many of the Kerala Model, which focused on the development of individuals.

The privileging of capital and its interests as hallowed over the interests of people, our sixth element,

is one of the unspoken but understood and accepted facets of the Gujarat Model. It is communicated through maxims like "government has no business to be in government".

While all of the other five elements have found acceptability in society, it is this sixth one that is slightly problematic. It is why the Prime Minister chafed at being the head of a "suit boot ki sarkar" and constantly and tiresomely talks about his humility and his *bakri*.

The idea of a handful of corporate entities, run mostly by Gujarati businessmen of a particular community, owning most of the ports, mines, airports, refineries, spectrum and other goods associated with government patronage is not easy to sell to Indians. This is so especially because the benefits of this have not come to Indians who remain more or less in the same condition as they were in 2014. No amount of government generated data can alter their lived reality. It will likely be the one that will cause the structural failure of the model in time.

However, for now and for the foreseeable future, it is hard not to accept that the Gujarat Model has won and it is the base on which our New India has been constructed.

The writer is the chair of Amnesty International India. Twitter: @aakarpatel



Freebies are fiscal poison

The Supreme Court's recent observations on electoral freebies come at a critical moment for Indian democracy. Questioning whether indiscriminate subsidies and cash transfers amount to appeasement, a bench led by Chief Justice Surya Kant warned that such practices threaten fiscal stability and national development. The Court's intervention serves as a crucial reminder that democracy is undermined when public funds are deployed as electoral bait. For an election to be meaningful, citizens must vote freely and fairly, based on informed choice, not financial inducement. Yet, India's electoral landscape has drifted from manifesto-driven governance toward competitive populism, with direct benefit transfers tilted suspiciously close to polling dates.

This evolution from material giveaways to direct cash transfers represents a troubling shift. Previously, states like Tamil Nadu and Bihar distributed goods such as saris, television sets, and bicycles—schemes framed as developmental aids. Today, money is electronically transferred into bank accounts on the eve of elections under the guise of government programmes. In recent Bihar and Maharashtra elections, such transfers—particularly to women, who constitute half the population—were widely believed to have influenced outcomes. When incumbents use state resources to deliver immediate financial benefits, the principle of a level playing field is severely compromised. For instance, the Opposition can only promise, while the ruling party can implement it. Tamil Nadu's promise of free electricity ahead of Assembly elections reflects a nationwide pattern where ruling parties convert governance into electoral advantage.

The economic consequences are equally severe. Every rupee spent on indiscriminate giveaways is denied to roads, schools, hospitals, and long-term infrastructure. States pleading poverty for development projects somehow find resources for universal freebies. The Supreme Court has wisely distinguished between targeted welfare and blanket subsidies: supporting those below the poverty line aligns with constitutional commitments, but extending benefits to affluent households is fiscal imprudence masquerading as compassion. Subsidies must remain transparent and subject to legislative scrutiny. India faces a fundamental choice between empowering citizens and cultivating dependency. Welfare is essential; appeasement is corrosive. A democracy that trades votes for subsidies risks mortgaging its future, eroding both economic stability and the sanctity of the ballot.

A democracy that trades votes for subsidies risks mortgaging its future, eroding both economic stability and the sanctity of the ballot

Not just a matter of going shirtless

With more arrests and detentions on Monday of those involved in the shirtless protest at the AI Impact Summit in Delhi, the Delhi Police have now arrested or detained five young men, all Congress workers, from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi. The men had stormed into one of the halls at the Summit bare-chested with T-shirts in their hands, protesting the Indo-US Trade Deal and India-related disclosures in the Epstein Files. One of the slogans on the T-shirts read "Compromised PM". The Delhi Police have addressed this as a law-and-order issue and alluded to the youth being inspired by the Gen Z protest in Nepal.

It is important to note that while there may have been embarrassment at the global event, which drew stinging repartee from the Prime Minister himself, there was no violence or anti-national posturing during the protest. While the law-and-order aspect must be addressed, it would be grossly unfair to limit the entire discourse and action to this. The protest must be evaluated for its manner and tactics, there is a raging debate about the shirtless-ness, its use of the global summit space, and the democratic articulation of the right to protest. To go shirtless during an international summit was silly and juvenile, but the unusual—even risqué—act drew the attention of the national and the international media to the controversial issues of the trade deal and Indian links in the Epstein Files. The opaque terms of the deal have raised a storm, while the mention of the former cabinet minister Hardeep Singh Puri and industrialist Anil Ambani in the Epstein Files has brought embarrassment. Neither the government nor the people involved have convincingly explained or denied. Where legitimate ways of focusing on these failed, the shirtless protest succeeded. It garnered attention across the board. In these aspects, the tactic, though in poor taste, succeeded.

The democratic articulation of dissent was its most significant aspect. Opposition leaders across the spectrum expressed discomfort at the shirtless-ness, but the fact remains that this tactic by Congress workers came on the heels of the party leader and Leader of Opposition, Rahul Gandhi, repeatedly being stopped from dissenting in the Parliament and the mainstream media offering little space to ask questions of the government about the trade deal or the Epstein Files. The shrinking space for critiques pushed dissenters to adopt unusual tactics. It is a comment on the lack of robustness in India's democracy. The Delhi Police, which arrested people protesting air pollution earlier, cracking down on the shirtless protesters shows their moral bankruptcy. While the cops and the national conversation focus on the shirtless-ness, even those who condemn the poor tactic acknowledge that the protest, in an era of the attention economy, made the issues visible, compelling the nation's attention.



The Road Ahead
JAYAPRAKASH NARAYAN

The Supreme Court made several sharp comments on Thursday (Feb 19, 2026) regarding indiscriminate distribution of largesse to voters undermining the state's primary responsibility of collective goods and services and genuine welfare obligation. The Chief Justice wisely refrained from giving a direction, saying the Court did not want to "cross our limitations and comment or decide on the purpose of a welfare scheme or how it should be given".

This restraint and refusal to intervene judicially is constitutionally sound and enhances the Court's credibility. At the same time, the Court gave expression to the anguish and concern most thinking citizens feel about fiscal profligacy and unchecked populism at the cost of core functions of the state and imperatives of investment and economic growth. This gives us an opportunity to examine the issue in a dispassionate and non-partisan manner and arrive at a mature consensus to protect the future.

It would be unwise and unproductive to tell political parties what kind of electoral promises they should make. But there is a line that is sometimes crossed. The

DMK's promise of free colour TVs in the run-up to the Tamil Nadu Assembly election in 2006 is one such case. The matter went to the Supreme Court, and in 2013, the Court directed the Election Commission, in the absence of legislation, to frame guidelines regarding electoral promises under Article 324 in consultation with recognised political parties and include them in the Model Code of Conduct. So far, no such action has been taken by the Election Commission.

The nature of the electoral promises apart, it is clear that unchecked populism at the cost of core functions of the state, infrastructure, promotion of growth, and enhancing the incomes of the poor is driving many states into a debt trap and fiscal crisis. This author made the case for fiscal responsibility in the columns on several occasions.

What can be done now? The Constitution makers anticipated this problem and made provisions to address the future fiscal challenges. Article 360 expressly states that "if financial stability and credit of India or of any part thereof is threatened", the President may make a declaration to that effect by a proclamation. But that is an extreme step after a full-blown crisis

develops. The critical issue is that the Union has the responsibility to ensure the 'financial stability' and 'credit of India'.

The Union is endowed with the authority and responsibility to avert the fiscal crisis in states under Article 293. Under Article 293, a state may not without consent of the Government of India raise any loan if it owes money to the Union or if any Union guarantee is in place. The Union may impose conditions for granting such a consent as it 'may think fit to impose'. This salutary provision is not utilised by successive governments for fear of political backlash and out of sheer neglect over time. In a highly polarised political climate, any denial of consent to loans or imposition of conditions will be portrayed as an act of hostility to the state.

Worse still, innocent voters may be incited by saying that while the state government, out of goodness of their heart, wants to extend welfare to the people, the Union is maliciously preventing them from doing so!

The Union, just like the states, is governed by a political executive, and every party wants to maximise its vote share in a state and is reluctant to risk the voters' wrath to protect fiscal discipline. We need a constructive debate

in the country to protect the future. Otherwise, several states will enter a debt trap from which recovery will be difficult. The Union has been exhibiting impressive fiscal discipline in recent years. But several states are borrowing heavily for current expenditure without creating durable and productive assets or enhancing the earning capacity of the people. This is robbing the children of their future, as they have to repay the debt as future taxpayers without inheriting assets. Such conduct is contrary to the ethos of Indian society and detrimental to our future as a country.

What is the way out? Perhaps we should follow the golden rule: governments should borrow exclusively for investment purposes, not to finance current consumption. Many governments have revenue deficits. But our economy is growing at 7%. The nominal growth probably will be over 10% in the long term, and government revenues will grow at the same rate. All we need to do is either freeze revenue expenditure at current levels until the revenue deficit is nil or at least allow expenditure growth well below, say, 2-3% per annum. In a few years' time the debt will be manageable; a road map can be provided for each state, taking into account their spe-

cific circumstances, and the condition may be imposed under Article 293(4) to reach nil revenue deficit in a finite time frame for consenting to any new debt.

How do we enforce such a condition without partisanship? The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) is a credible constitutional authority. The task of keeping track of the finances of the states in real time, ensuring transparent public accounts, taking into account off-budget loans and pending bills, etc., may be entrusted to the CAG, and the consent or denial of a loan may be based on the CAG's recommendation, reviewing transparent data and evidence.

Some states are already in impending crisis. The Constitution gave us the tools. There are practical and relatively painless ways of applying the fiscal rules. The rules can be enforced in a transparent, credible, and non-partisan manner. The task is urgent. The time is ripe. We should act without delay. Any dithering or failure will jeopardise India's growth prospects at a critical juncture in our national life.

The author is the founder of Lok Satya movement and Foundation for Democratic Reforms. Email: diploksatta@gmail.com / Twitter @gp_loksatta



Rational Analysis
S MURLIDHARAN

The BJP has always been accused of performing operation lotus, or Kamala, to reduce the Congress' strength in an assembly. Engineering a split is much more difficult, given the two-thirds defection required by the anti-defection law. So, the second best was operation lotus—contrive large-scale resignations from the Congress so that the truncated Congress is close to a minority government. The rest is simple. The Congress' plan in the Lok Sabha seems to have been more brazen, not to gain a majority, for which it is placed hopelessly in terms of numbers, but to catch the eyeballs of the TV audience of the Lok Sabha proceedings.

Shikhandi was a significant figure in the Hindu epic, Mahabharata. Born as a daughter (Shikhandini) to King Drupada but raised as a male and later transitioning to a man. As the reincarnation of Amba, seeking revenge against Bhishma, Shikhandi was pivotal in the Kurukshetra war, acting as the cause of Bhishma's downfall because Bhishma refused to fight someone he considered a woman. Lord Krishna, the war strategist for the Pandavas, placed Shikhandi in front of Arjun as a protective shield. Bhishma couldn't pierce through the shield, and Arjun rained arrows on the help-

Did Congress plan operation Shikhandi on PM Modi?

Can ONOE, which clubs Lok Sabha and Assembly elections to the jointly held quinquennial polling, reduce the tension among political parties?

less and vulnerable Bhishma. Was the Congress counting on PM Modi being similarly disarmed in the face of some ten women MPs laying siege to him when he was about to reply to the presidential address? To be sure, no physical attack would have been planned, but the spectacle of PM Modi warding off his women interlocutors would have embarrassed him and the BJP much to the amusement of the opposition. The plan with unpredictable results, however, came unstuck with the Speaker, Om Birla, stopping Modi in his tracks. He pre-empted the possible operation Shikhandi by asking Modi not to present himself in such a hostile atmosphere.

People resort to gimmicks when they are frustrated. Both operation Kamala and the putative operation Shikhandi belong to the gimmick genre. But then the Congress has been desperate with a string of Assembly defeats after a reasonably good performance in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections. Rahul Gandhi, the scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, is getting restless. He thinks being blue-blooded, the prime minister's chair rightfully belongs to him, and Modi is its usurper if not a pretender. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, he hurled the abuse "chor" (thief) against Modi in the context of Rafale fighter plane purchases from the French government, which the Modi government inter-

posed so as to make it a government-to-government deal to prevent the charge of kickbacks rampant in private seller-state purchaser defence deals. He had the mortification of having to apologise to the Apex Court for bringing it into the murky waters of politics. Charges of EVM being manipulated and vote chori, in which the Chief Election Commissioner was a willing ally of the Modi government, then followed in his desperation to discredit his arch rival without a shred of evidence.

That said, the Westminster model of parliamentary democracy has quite a few warts, including the first-past-the-post system (FPPS) and the speaker being the handmaiden of the ruling dispensation. There is no reason why the speaker needs to be an elected member of the ruling party or alliance. The CAG doesn't remain beholden to the ruling dispensation. Likewise, the office of the speaker must be delimited from party politics and affiliations. Let the speaker be the senior-most retired CJI. And if he is disinclined, the next senior most, and so on. Much of the angst and accusations of the opposition benches are against the speaker for his alleged partisan role. Any disciplinary action by such a disinterested speaker, including calling in the marshals to physically remove the obstreperous members, would be more ac-

ceptable. No no-confidence motion should lie against him or her. Given the long hours devoted by the speaker to his job, invariably ad hoc speakers from a panel have to do duty during the speaker's brief or long absence. Such interim speakers too should be sworn of party affiliations. At the end of the day, the speaker occupies a quasi-judicial office. A sense of fairness and evenhandedness goes a long way in removing bitterness and acrimony in house proceedings.

The wisdom of the live telecast of the parliamentary proceedings is also debatable. Members tend to play to the galleries, not of the two houses but of the viewers ensconced in their homes. Fiery and comical harangues make for free entertainment. For the opposition, rushing to the well and gheraoing the prime minister are good photo-and-e-ops.

The bottom line—wasteful precious resources and taxpayers' money. Meaningful debates are rare in the milieu of unending hostilities between the treasury and opposition benches. The protection against defamation given by Article 105 to members of Parliament emboldens them, especially from the opposition benches, to hurl unsubstantiated charges. The BJP accused Arvind Kejriwal of AAP of never addressing the Delhi Assembly sine die so that he could convene it anytime whenever he

needed to let out his spleen from the cocoon of the floor of the assembly with television channels beaming his thundering charges. Mercifully, the Supreme Court revisited its own verdict in the JMM case of the nineties when it granted immunity to the JMM MPs from the charge of bribe-taking for voting in favour of the minority government headed by Narsinhna Rao. In review, it has conceded that Article 105 immunity didn't extend to criminal acts, including bribe-taking.

Can one nation, one election (ONOE), which clubs both the Lok Sabha and Assembly elections to the jointly held quinquennial polling, reduce the tension among the political parties? It is true that with the election pot boiling every year, there are mounting and ceaseless tensions. Ergo, the quinquennial celebrations of democracy would leave at least four years for the ruling dispensation to govern, though four years is too long a time for the opposition to bide and sulk. TV news channels, too, provide forums for all the political parties to expound their views through articulate spokespersons. But they are as cacophonous as the parliamentary proceedings, though couch potatoes lap it both.

S Murlidharan is a freelance columnist and writes on economics, business, legal and taxation issues.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Form Over Fame

A hat-trick duck by Abhishek Sharma proves there are no minnows in modern T20 cricket. Even strong teams like the Netherlands can challenge reputations. Selection must rest on current form, not past glory. Performance, accountability and adaptability alone guarantee a place in today's competitive squad.

A P Thiruvadi, Chennai

Prevent Temple Tragedies

The Morena temple roof collapse and recent stampedes highlight recurring negligence. Despite repeated warnings, unsafe structures and poor crowd control persist. Authorities must urgently identify and demolish dilapidated buildings and enforce safety norms. Preventive action, not post-tragedy regret, can save precious lives.

Hema Hari Upadhyay 'Akshat', Khachrod, Ujjain

Service Beyond Symbolism

A new administrative complex symbolising "seva" is welcome, but service must extend beyond architecture. Governance should ensure efficiency, transparency and timely grievance redressal. Institutions gain credibility when promises translate into policy impact. True tribute to service lies in tangible improvement in citizens' daily lives.

Insiaja Raj, Ujjain

Parliamentary Decorum Needed

The conduct of the Leader of Opposition in Parliament raises concerns about decorum and responsibility. Criticism of government is legitimate, but allegations require substantiation. Parliamentary debate demands adherence to procedure, respectful language and willingness to hear responses. Public representa-

Electoral Irony

The ECI has informed the SC of significant discrepancies in West Bengal's 2025 electoral roll during the ongoing SIR. In Assembly Constituency No. 283, Barabani (Asansol district), one individual has been recorded as the father of 389 voters, raising serious data integrity concerns. Similar anomalies have reportedly surfaced in other constituencies. The ECI termed these as 'logical discrepancies' requiring verification and corrective action. The revision process has triggered political debate, with CM Mamata Banerjee criticising aspects of the SIR exercise while the commission maintains it is ensuring accuracy and transparency.

tatives must uphold institutional dignity.

Sunil Okhade, Indore

Faith And Constitution

Your editorial rightly frames Sabarimala beyond a simple faith-versus-legal binary. Traditions evolve,



A.P. Thiruvadi, Chennai

but constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity cannot be sidelined as 'essential practices'.

The Supreme Court's clarity will determine whether living traditions adapt to constitutional morality or remain insulated exceptions. The verdict must reinforce con-

Serious Allegations Raised

Allegations linking Hardeep Singh Puri with Jeffrey Epstein demand

transparency clarification. When global figures resign over similar scrutiny, silence invites suspicion. Public office carries moral responsibility beyond legality. If such claims remain unanswered, public trust erodes. Accountability and openness are essential to protect governance from reputational damage.

Tharcus S. Fernando, Chennai

Lenten Season Begins

Ash Wednesday marks the start of Lent in Western Christianity, a 40-day period of prayer, fasting and reflection before Easter. Ashes, made from Palm Sunday branches, symbolise mortality and repentance. The season calls believers to spiritual renewal, humility and inner transformation over outward display.

Shantidurai D'Cruz, Chennai

Sri Lankan Parliament shows the way for India

As far as setting an illustrious example goes, it is a matchless move. With the salaries and perks of MPs and MLAs in India rising at regular intervals, with generous dollops of additional facilities to go along ending with a generous pension to enable them to subsist in their sunset years (base pension of Rs 31,000 per month), what has been undertaken by Sri Lanka deserves loud applause. On February 6, the Supreme Court had determined that the Parliamentary Pensions (Repeal) Bill can be passed in Parliament with a simple majority. Its main aim was to repeal the Parliamentary Pensions Law No 1 of 1977, which had established a

non-contributory lifetime pension to persons who have ceased to be members of parliament. The Sri Lankan government has gazetted the Parliamentary Pensions (Repeal) Act after it was passed by 154 votes in the 225-member House, with only two against. Ostensibly, this move is to fund other essential public services, given the not-so-secure financial status that the island-nation has been embroiled in for nearly five years now. But beyond tokenism, this move has been highlighted as fulfilling a key campaign promise of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who assured to do away with 'unjustified political perks. In Sri Lanka, a

member of parliament was entitled to a pension after serving a five-year term. In contrast, just look at what is happening in our nation. As an additional service pension, for every year of service beyond the mandatory five-year term, an extra \$2,500 per month is added to the base pension, including to all former essential public services, given the not-so-secure financial status that the island-nation has been embroiled in for nearly five years now. But beyond tokenism, this move has been highlighted as fulfilling a key campaign promise of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who assured to do away with 'unjustified political perks. In Sri Lanka, a

historically, the average age of the Lok Sabha has risen from 46.5 years in the First Lok Sabha to over 55 in recent sessions, indicating a long-term shift toward older representatives. The average age of Members of Parliament (MPs) in the 18th Lok Sabha (2024) is 56 years. This reflects an ageing trend in Indian politics, with 52 per cent of MPs being over 55 years, while only 11 per cent are 40 years or younger. Even if an MP ceases to be one after a single five-year term, the individual is thus part of the gray train, irrespective of age. Interestingly, with a population share of 11 per cent, senior citizens in India are among the worst

treated ones. In an impassioned speech in Parliament, Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut had said that the government should kill all the senior citizens after 65 years because the government is not ready to pay attention to these nation builders and queried if it is a crime to be one. The other side of the picture is that senior citizens in politics are given all the benefits possible to MLAs, MPs or ministers and they also get pension. Senior citizens have the right to change the government, do not ignore them. They have a lifetime experience of changing the government. Do not consider them weak," opined the mercurial MP. But will things change, is the moot question.

LETTERS

Engg education must move with the times

WITH reference to the article "The new blueprint for Engineering: Skills, speed and specialisation" by Prof Geeta Tripathi (THI Feb 23), I wish to emphasize the essential significance that engineering education must move with the times or risk being left behind in the fast lane of innovation. As Industry 5.0 builds upon AI, robotics, cloud computing and cyber-physical systems, the writing is on the wall: traditional degrees like engineering alone can no longer carry the whole weight of employability. Engineering education must balance theoretical depth with agility, speed and specialisation to build not just job seekers, but job creators.

Raju Kolluru, Kakinada

Galgotias episode is an eye-opener

WITH reference to the editorial "Upshots of the Galgotias Robodog controversy" (Feb 23), the Galgotias University episode at the recent AI summit has rightly drawn attention to deeper issues in private higher education. While the robodog claim caused immediate embarrassment, the bigger concern lies in inflated patent numbers and misleading performance claims that many institutions use for rankings and advertisements. This erodes trust among students and parents, who invest heavily expecting genuine quality. To address this realistically, the UGC and NIRF should tighten verification of patent data—perhaps by giving more weight to granted patents over filed ones—and conduct random audits of self-reported metrics. Private universities must also face stricter oversight on marketing practices. This would strengthen the overall credibility of Indian higher education.

SM Jeeva, Chennai-32

Regulators must get tough post-Galgotias

A propos "Upshots of the Galgotias Robodog Controversy". The editorial makes a fair point that the real victims here are the students, who now carry the stigma of a degree from an institution caught in a fraud. That is deeply unfair to young people who had no say in their university's conduct. NIRF and NAAC rankings are taken seriously by students and parents when choosing institutions, yet as the article notes, neither body adequately captures the gap between private and public universities on critical metrics like patent quality. Regulators must also crack down on misleading advertisements. This incident should become a turning point, not just another forgotten controversy.

A. Myilsami, Coimbatore-641402

Onus on NIRF and NAAC

THE Galgotias robodog controversy has raised uncomfortable questions about claims made by private universities and the systems meant to verify them. When exaggerated achievements go unchecked, it is students and parents who pay the price. Regulatory bodies such as NIRF and NAAC should refine their assessment methods, giving greater weight to verified research, patents granted, faculty quality and student outcomes. Periodic third-party audits and strict penalties for misleading advertisements would help restore credibility. Universities, too, must adopt transparent disclosure practices.

M Barathi, Bengaluru-560076

Govt must ensure strict verification

THIS letter refers to your editorial, "Upshots of the Galgotias robodog controversy" (Feb 23). While the incident itself is embarrassing, the systemic issues it exposes regarding our higher education landscape are a matter of serious concern. The disparity in patent approval rates between premier public institutions and certain private universities suggests that quantity is being prioritised over actual innovation. To address this, the NIRF and NAAC must refine their evaluation metrics to emphasize quality and peer-reviewed impact rather than just raw numbers, while the government should implement stricter verification of technological claims made by universities in their advertisements.

S. Kankunthala, Coimbatore-16

Need for a balanced reform agenda

THE Galgotias robodog controversy underlines how fragile credibility can be in higher education. While the ridicule faced by students is regrettable, the larger issue is the weak performance of many private universities in research and patent approvals. This gap must be addressed through stronger oversight and transparent evaluation. Ranking bodies should move beyond cosmetic indicators and place greater weight on measurable outcomes such as patents, publications, and employability. A balanced reform agenda—combining stricter regulation with incentives for quality research—can help restore trust and ensure students are not penalised for institutional lapses.

Abhinava Barathi, Chennai-23

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Minister launches Amazon's 10th corporate office in state

BENGALURU: Minister for Large and Medium Industries MB Patil on Monday inaugurated Amazon's newly constructed, fully equipped corporate main office spread across 11 lakh square feet (1.1 million sq ft) at Vinayaka Nagar near Yelahanka. Speaking on the occasion, he said, "This is Amazon's 10th corporate office in the State. The company, which has shared a two-decade association with Karnataka, plans to invest \$5 billion dollars in India over the next four years. This investment is expected to support 15 million small businesses and generate lakhs of employment opportunities. Karnataka will receive a significant share of this investment." He pointed out that Karnataka has an annual per capita income of over \$3,800 lakh, ranking highest in the country. The State also stands second in annual GST contributions to the national exchequer, contributing \$1.6 lakh crore.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

Life must be protected, not 'pactually' abandoned



PROF MADABHUSHI SIDDHAR ACHARYULU

WHETHER it is the Constitutional law or the Criminal law, suicide cannot be accepted under any circumstances. Life is for living. No one has the right to die, rather a duty to live and let others live.

The recent Supreme Court's dismissal of the appeal affirms a crucial criminal law principle: surviving a suicide pact does not erase legal responsibility when one has facilitated the other's death. The judgment, delivered by a bench of Justice Rajesh Bindal and Justice Mamohan, not only resolves a long-pending criminal dispute but also clarifies the jurisprudential position on abetment to suicide and the criminality inherent in mutual suicide arrangements.

Right to live under Article 21 cannot be extended to include 'right to die'. This significant case presents a delicate intersection of criminal liability, medical evidence, and the State's constitutional obligation to protect life under Article 21. Life is beautiful, whether killing oneself or joining a lover, may be a thrilling cinema, but not in reality. In a pact of dying together, if both die, there may be no criminal case, but all those who abetted will be a criminal offence and culpable.

A beautiful heroine, Pratyusha, ended her life following a mutual agreement (?), while the surviving lover became a criminal.

At a broader constitutional level, the decision reinforces that the State's duty is not merely to punish after death but to create legal and social conditions that discourage suicide, prevent emotional coercion, and protect the sanctity of life.

The tragedy of Pratyusha is therefore not only a criminal case but a societal warning: Love cannot justify self-destruction, despair cannot legitimise death, and survival cannot absolve complexity. The law,

ultimately, speaks with a humane yet firm voice: life is inviolable, and any pact to extinguish it invites both moral sorrow and legal consequence.

Analysis of the Pratyusha case

The recent dismissal of the appeal by the Supreme Court in the 23-year-old case concerning the tragic death of the south Indian actress raises profound questions about criminal abetment, evidentiary evaluation, suicide prevention, and the legal culpability of a surviving partner in a suicide pact.

The judgment also emphasises evidentiary discipline, rejecting sensational claims unsupported by medical proof while upholding culpability grounded in established facts.

Love, opposition and a fatal pact:

It is again a story of love, opposition, and a fatal pact. The prosecution's case, accepted by the courts, was that the actress and Gudipati Siddhartha Reddy were in a relationship despite opposition by his parents. In this emotionally charged setting, both allegedly consumed poison together. While she succumbed, he survived. He was thereafter convicted for: 1. Abetment to suicide; 2. Attempt to commit suicide.

The trial court imposed five years' imprisonment, later reduced to two years by the Andhra Pradesh High Court in 2004. The surviving accused pleaded insanity, while the victim's mother alleged rape, murder by strangulation, and inadequate sentencing.

The Supreme Court, after examining ocular and medical evidence, rejected allegations of rape and strangulation, holding that death was due to poisoning and that purchase of poison (neurotone) constituted abetment.

Survival as a liability!

The crucial legal principle reaffirmed by the Court is that a surviving partner in a mutual suicide pact can be legally culpable for abetment to suicide. This doctrine flows from Sections 107 and 306 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalise instigation, conspiracy, or intentional aid to commit suicide. The law does not treat suicide pacts as romantic acts of shared despair but as legally culpable agreements that normalise self-destruction. Thus, survival does not imply innocence. It may instead



The crucial legal principle reaffirmed by the Court is that a surviving partner in a mutual suicide pact can be legally culpable for abetment to suicide. The law does not treat suicide pacts as romantic acts of shared despair but as legally culpable agreements that normalise self-destruction. Thus, survival does not imply innocence. It may instead expose a participant to enhanced criminal scrutiny.

expose a participant to enhanced criminal scrutiny.

A judicial reasoning:

The oral pronunciation of the bench outlines a layered evidentiary assessment:

- Murder by strangulation ruled out
- Overwhelming ocular and medical evidence proved poisoning
- Rape allegations not established
- Related claims of rape and strangulation rejected
- Accidental consumption defence disbelieved
- Purchase of poison established abetment
- Unprofessional post-mortem report criticised
- Premature publication of medical findings condemned

These findings reflect the Court's reliance on forensic consistency, contemporaneous evidence, and legal causation, rather than speculative allegations emerging decades later.

Distinction between attempted suicide and abetment:

Attempts to commit suicide historically attracted punishment under Section 309 IPC, though contemporary mental health jurisprudence treats survivors with compassion. However, when a survivor is shown to have actively enabled the other's death, the law shifts focus

from mental vulnerability to criminal culpability.

Thus:

There survives may invite therapeutic response, while survival with facilitation invites penal consequences

Romantic myths vs criminal reality:

Popular culture often portrays suicide pacts as tragic expressions of love. Criminal law rejects this romanticism for three reasons:

- Sticide is not a private contract: A pact to die together cannot be legally validated because life is constitutionally protected. The State has an interest in preserving life, and consent cannot legitimise self-destruction.
- Power imbalance and emotional coercion: One partner may be more vulnerable. Emotional dependence can turn a "mutual pact" into subtle coercion.
- Survival distorts the pact: If one dies and the other survives, the survivor's role must be scrutinised: Was it equal participation, passive presence or active facilitation? The law, therefore, presumes that survival coupled with preparatory acts (like procuring poison) may constitute abetment.

State's duty to prevent suicide:

The constitutional guarantee of life under Article 21 imposes a positive obligation on the State:

- To protect individuals from self-harm
- To regulate circumstances enabling suicide
- To penalise those who facilitate self-destruction
- Suicide is not merely a private tragedy; it is a constitutional concern involving dignity, mental health, and social responsibility. Criminalising abetment ensures that despair is not converted into a shared criminal enterprise.

A doctrinal clarification:

This case reiterates a settled but often misunderstood principle—a suicide pact is not a shield against criminal liability. Participation in planning, procuring means, or encouraging the act can constitute abetment if one partner dies. Thus, the law treats suicide pacts not as mutual consent but as shared participation in a legally prohibited act, where survival triggers accountability.

Inclusive governance gets an urban mandate in Telangana

AMARAVATI NAGARAJU

THE outcome of the recent municipal elections in Telangana has done more than merely redrawing the political map of urban local bodies. It has reopened a substantive debate on representation, caste arithmetic and the evolving grammar of social justice in a rapidly urbanising State.

While local elections are often treated as peripheral contests, the scale and pattern of results across the State's 113 municipalities and corporations suggest a deeper political recalibration.

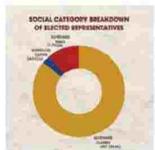
The Congress, which returned to power in the State promising 'praja palana' (people-centric governance), has secured control in 90 municipalities. What distinguishes this verdict, however, is not merely the number of urban bodies won, but the social composition of those who now head them.

Approximately, 66 of the 113 municipal chairpersons are from Backward Class (BC) communities, which roughly translates to 61 per cent of the

total. In municipalities secured by the Congress, 51 chairperson posts have gone to BC leaders. Representation extends beyond titular leadership: BCs account for more than 60 per cent of key positions including chairpersons, vice-chairpersons, mayors and deputy mayors. At the ward level too, more than 55 per cent of elected councillors are from BC communities.

At the corporation level, the numbers are equally striking. Four of the seven mayor positions are now held by BC representatives, marking a notable shift in the social profile of urban power centres. In a State where BC communities constitute a significant share of the population, and are deeply embedded in urban informal economies from small traders and artisans to service providers and lower-middle-class employees, this redistribution of political authority carries symbolic as well as practical weight.

The Congress leadership has projected this outcome as validation of its commitment to institutionalising social justice. In the run-up to the Assembly



elections, the party had promised caste enumeration and 42 per cent reservations for BCs in local bodies. While legal and procedural complexities surround the full operationalization of such quotas, the party appears to have moved proactively in ticket distribution. Reports indicate that over 53 per cent of party nominations in municipal elections were given to BC candidates exceeding the stated reservation benchmark.

Critics may argue that candidate selection is ultimately a political calculation rather than a moral gesture. Yet electoral endorsement by voters suggests that the strategy has resonated. Urban constituencies, often perceived as less driven by caste considerations than rural ones, have demonstrated that social

Urban local bodies are not ornamental institutions. They oversee critical functions: water supply, waste management, road infrastructure, public health, urban planning and local taxation. The composition of leadership in these bodies shapes budget priorities and administrative focus. Enhanced BC representation may therefore influence policy choices, particularly in areas like slum upgrading, small enterprise facilitation, market infrastructure and welfare delivery for lower-income households.

Telangana's municipal structure also accommodates representation for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minorities and other communities under constitutional mandates. The current distribution appears to reflect a layered inclusion rather than a zero-sum redistribution.

Whether this balance endures will depend on the government's administrative prudence. Politically, the municipal verdict strengthens the Congress's urban foothold at a time when local elections are increasingly interpreted as mid-term referendums. Consolidation among BC voters, a decisive social bloc in Telangana, could influence future Assembly and Parliamentary contests. Yet, as history repeatedly demonstrates, social coalitions are sustained less by symbolism and more by performance.

Broader implications merit closer scrutiny:

Urban local bodies are not ornamental institutions. They oversee critical functions: water supply, waste management, road infrastructure, public health, urban planning and local taxation. The composition of leadership in these bodies shapes budget priorities and administrative focus. Enhanced BC representation may therefore influence policy choices, particularly in areas like slum upgrading, small enterprise facilitation, market infrastructure and welfare delivery for lower-income households. At the same time, social justice in governance cannot be reduced to numerical dominance.

The Telangana model:

The durability of what some describe as the "Telangana model" of BC empowerment will hinge on governance outcomes. Transparency in municipal administration, efficient delivery of services and credible implementation of development schemes will determine whether expanded representation translates into substantive empowerment.

If the proposed 42 per cent reservation framework for BCs attains statutory backing and withstands judicial scrutiny, Telangana may find itself at the forefront of a renewed national conversation on caste enumeration and proportional representation. For now, the municipal results underscore a clear trend: urban politics in Telangana is being reshaped not just by party competition, but by an assertive reconfiguration of social representation. That sense, the elections mark less an end than a beginning, the start of a test of whether inclusion in office can meaningfully transform governance on the ground.



You cannot engrave on water nor would it with a knife, which is why the river has no fear of memories

Girish Kamad

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

MARRIAGE BETWEEN CONSENTING ADULTS NEEDS NO PERMISSION

THE law is clear: when two consenting adults decide to marry, no one—not family, society or the State—can interfere. Article 21 of the Constitution protects personal liberty, and the Supreme Court has often said that choosing a life partner is an individual decision. Despite this, the Gujarat government now wants to change the Gujarat Registration of Marriages Act, 2006 to require parental consent and mandatory notification for registration. Applications would need statements confirming that parents have been informed, electronically or in person. This is more than a simple procedural change; it is a direct attack on personal liberty.

This is also a clear contradiction. At eighteen, a person can vote, help shape governments and even run for some offices. The State sees adults as mature enough to decide the country's future. Yet, when choosing a spouse, that same adult is seen as unable to decide for himself or herself. How can an adult be trusted with political rights but denied basic personal freedom?

Kerala's controversial Hadiya case made this conflict clear. In 2016, Hadiya, 24, previously known as Akhila Ashokan, converted to Islam and married Shafiq Jahan. In 2017, the Kerala High Court annulled the marriage, called her "weak and vulnerable", and put her in her parents' custody. The court used *parens patriae*, a doctrine meant for minors or the mentally incapacitated. But Hadiya was neither—she had made her choice clear. In 2018, the Supreme Court restored her marriage, saying that parental concern cannot override an adult's constitutional freedom. The court said that the right to choose a partner is part of dignity and identity, and is at the heart of privacy, which cannot be violated.

Gujarat's proposed change must be understood in this constitutional context. These rules could make couples more vulnerable to pressure, especially in interfaith or inter-caste marriages, which families often resist. Warnings about men "posing" under false identities repeat the old and discredited "love jihad" story, turning private choices into political issues. This way of thinking comes from the age-old habit of controlling relationships, based on the idea that family honour and community approval should decide who someone marries. But in a constitutional democracy, the State should rise above these fears, not support them with laws. When two adults make a thoughtful choice, the law should stand by them, not over them.

HOCKEY INDIA MUST WAKE UP BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

LONG before cricket became a religion, hockey was India's first love. When the India men's team won back-to-back Olympic medals in 2021 and 2024, the romance was rekindled after decades of apathy. Yet, since the second of those medals, there has been an unmistakable dip in performance. It began with a seven-match losing streak in the Pro League 2024-25—the longest in a decade. India finished eighth. In the 2025-26 season, the home-leg results testified that nothing had changed. Their performance hit a nadir when they lost 0-8 to Argentina in Rourkela. So, when the Hobart leg began on February 21, all eyes were on India's much-needed change in attitude, hinting at a revival. But they started with a loss to Spain before drawing with Australia on Sunday.

The signs were ominous even before the team was named for the home leg. There were controversies surrounding former captain Manpreet Singh's omission. The junior players, who were not released last year despite pleas from India head coach Craig Fulton, were finally included in the team. There were also indications that the coach was miffed with Hockey India. The team that had boasted sparkling fitness two years ago seemed to be struggling in the last quarter of matches. There is a possibility that the Hockey India League at home has taken its toll. The players looked jaded and bereft of ideas when under pressure.

As is the case with teams in transition, the synergy is missing and communication appears to have broken down. The bigger worry is morale. Belief and confidence—ingredients on which a team's winning attitude is built—seem to be wavering. Captain Harmanpreet Singh was off-colour and was rested; Haridit Singh took his place. With the World Cup in August and the Asian Games in September, this is not a healthy augury. Women's hockey had its share of controversies when the team, after finishing fourth at the Tokyo Olympics, failed to qualify for Paris. In the lead-up to Tokyo, Hockey India was stringent with its policies. Focus on fitness was paramount. Spending time in national camps was non-negotiable, and star culture was not tolerated. It is time to find a new set of old glories to propel both the men's and women's teams to their old glories.

QUICK TAKE

SAFETY OF INDIANS ABROAD

THE safety of Indians in three countries came into focus on Monday. After the Mexican military killed cartel boss Nemesio 'El Mencho' Cervantes, Latin America's second largest economy erupted in violence, with schools, offices and airports shut and security personnel killed. The Indian mission opened a helpline for its distraught citizens. The same day, the Indian mission in Tehran asked its citizens to leave, given the heightening tensions there. Also on Monday, the National Human Rights Commission took suo motu cognisance of workers from Odisha stuck in Thailand, alleging months of unpaid wages and torture. Given the duty of care that comes with being one of the largest exporters of workers, India would do well to set up a round-the-clock information cell catering to the families of this increasingly vulnerable diaspora.

WE live in a wild, wild world. Gone are the days when life at work was predictable. Today, nothing is. One day there is a tariff war. Then there is peace, with a treaty to boot. And celebration of a win on both sides of the trade border. The next day, there is a tumult once again as the US Supreme Court turns it topsy-turvy again. Uncertainty is the norm. Nothing is permanent. But permacrisis is here for sure. A term that elevates crisis to a state of deep permanence. We might as well get used to it.

A lot of crazy things have been happening. Apart from the tariff war, gold, silver and copper prices have run amok. Indians who traditionally saved gold and silver under the guise of festive splurges, women's cravings, wedding gifts and other excuses are today laughing all the way to their bank lockers, or to their 'Godrej bureaus'. All of a sudden, the personal wealth of gold- and silver-conscious Indians has gone up. This applies to the great Indian middle, lower and upper income groups—in that pecking order.

And then there is the permacrisis in the job market. Everyone is suddenly insecure about their jobs. In the old days—that is, five years ago—it was the middle manager in the organisation who was worried. He or she had put in some 20 years of work and was in their late forties or early fifties. Youngsters and new recruits in their early thirties were replacing them. The jobs could be done at cheaper salaries and lower employee-carrying costs.

Voluntary retirement schemes were the talk of the town once again. A whole host of the challenged took this option and sat on the bench. This time in their homes, trying to dabble with other forms of earning to supplement the VRS corpus. The young employee who replaced this middle manager was laughing all the way to the bank. Their salaries looked good and their jobs secure.

Come 2026, and all this is challenged. Permacrisis is here in the jobs market for the young as well. In fact, the current crisis challenges the young more than the old. The remaining older folks in organisations are much more secure. They are happily not in the middle anymore. They are the decision-makers at the top. Their jobs are secure till the devil of sentient artificial intelligence enters the game.

As of now, the most insecure people in jobs across realms of work are in back-end data generation, sales and customer service. The entry-level is reducing in numbers and jobs at the back-end of sales, logistics, finance, legal and a whole host of verticals

With AI affecting most sectors, many entry-level jobs are vanishing from the market. Constant re-skilling and working multiple gigs could be ways for the young to survive the near future

WHEN THE ONLY THING CONSTANT IS A JOB CRISIS

HARISH BIJOOR



Brand guru & founder of Harish Bijoore Consults Inc



MANDAR PANDURAR

are being shaken, stirred and replaced by AI-enabled enterprise strategies.

Add to it the fact that organisations big and small are using the bogey of AI to foreclose a whole host of jobs they found unsustainable, and the permacrisis for the young is complete. The status of jobs is what we witness in your refrigerator. Eggs waiting to be beaten and chicken waiting to be eaten. Not as rough as that yet—but wait. The future will be tougher still.

Even as Vinod Khosla talks straight and loud, everyone else in the IT market is talking a language best understood by those with twin-tongues. It looks almost as if no one knows of the permacrisis ahead, or everyone knows and wants to present a comfort-façade that all is well. I wonder why.

The young are, therefore, challenged all across. This job insecurity is not only in engineering and technology enterpris-

es. It is there in every allied territory. And which piece of work is unallied to technology today? Even the Uber driver is worried of income drop as people use smart apps to compare prices and crunch cab-sharing schemes to book the cheapest ride. While AI is a great big angel for a small host of those in the developer economy, it's the big devil for a bigger host of people in the working class. Their incomes are getting crunched and their jobs are at risk, even as AI aggregators at the top are getting the valuations of their enterprise cranked up and running.

What then is the solution? How are the young and the dispossessed (of jobs) going to handle the crisis? And what must the young and the tense do?

Solution one is the need to re-skill, up-skill and cross-skill across the new technologies that are emerging. But remember, even this shall pass. Your new skill is only as new as the next big

SHINING BHARAT, DARKENING INDIA

IKSIT Bharat rings loudly in our public discourse today. Yet, step a little away from the slogans and one encounters another India—old, quieter and fraying at the edges. Nowhere is this contradiction more arresting than in the shadow of some of our greatest monuments, where civilisational brilliance coexists with everyday decay.

The glory of Chalukyan temples, for one, stands in stark juxtaposition to the decline of the towns and villages around them. And yet, amid the ruin, hope persists—kept alive by those working patiently to restore our art, traditions and cultural memory.

Many Indias coexist in a baffling time warp—the glorious and the gross, the beautiful and the ugly, the sublime and the lowly; the sacred and the profane, the opulent and the poor. This contrast revealed itself in a startlingly clear, chilling recent visit to the awe-inspiring Badami rock-cut cave temples in North Karnataka.

The occasion was an evening of folk songs dedicated to Yellamma Devi, also known as Renuka Yellamma—a powerful folk goddess worshipped across Karnataka and parts of Telangana and Maharashtra. Intertwoven with Hindu mythology and regional folklore, Yellamma is revered as a protector of the marginalised, a fertility goddess and a fierce-yet-compassionate force associated with healing. Her story is one of injustice and endurance: wronged and humiliated by her husband Jamadagni, a revered sage, she suffers indignity and gendered cruelty, yet rises in divine anger—wounded but never broken.

Across regions, multiple versions of her legend exist, many associated with transgender communities who worship her. Unlike the distant, temple-enshrined deities of classical Hinduism, Yellamma is raw, intimate and alive in the imagination of rural communities. Many rightly regard her a feminist goddess. She lives on through oral ballads, dance dramas, jathas and rituals passed down through centuries.

That evening's ballads were performed by Shilpa Mudbi, who along with her husband gave up corporate careers to relocate to Kalaburgi and devote themselves to preserving folk arts. She performed with a small troupe of local artists at the restored Sudi stepwell in Gadag district—an 11th-century Kalyani Chalukya monument and a masterpiece of subterranean architecture with sophisticated water management systems, restored by the Deccan Heritage Foundation.

The lyrics tracing Yellamma's life were

sung in the chaste folk Kannada of the Gadag-Kalaburgi region. Shilpa's voice—metallic, earthy and lilting—pierced the soul. As the ballad unfolded—birth, suffering, endurance—our emotions oscillated between turbulent delight and deep pathos. These folk narratives diverge from the *Mahabharata*, yet feel closer to a lived truth.

The Chalukya empire, which ruled 6th-8th centuries CE, reached its zenith under King Pulakeshin II. Its dominion stretched from the Cauvery delta to the Narmada and into present-day Gujarat. The Badami cave temples, carved at the dawn of this era, are regarded as the mother of Deccan temple architecture, followed by Pattadakal—a UNESCO World Heritage Site—and the free-standing temples of Aihole. Badami and Pattadakal served alternately as imperial capitals.

rubble of demolished mud houses replaced by tiny cement boxes. Stray cattle forage through the debris. Cutting through this decay is another sound: the steady hum of hair blowers.

We were led into the homes of weavers who have, for generations, woven the famed Ikkal saris using complex techniques, natural dyes and distinctive patterns. This knowledge, almost a form of inherited neural mapping, has passed from parent to child.

A woman sat at her loom in a small Kadapa-stoned hall of her mud house, skylights flooding the space with light. Her hands moved ceaselessly as she answered our questions. One cotton sari, she said, takes seven days to weave. In a nearby shop, it sells for about ₹3,000. She herself wore a polyester sari costing ₹100-150. Power-driven machines churning out synthetic yarn are steadily replacing looms. The tragedy feels inevitable.

Her poverty stung sharply. Yet her immersion in craft, her dignity and devotion exposed the futility of our own Sisyphean urban lives, cocooned in digital abundance. Thomas Gray's line came to mind: "Let not ambition mock their useful toil."

Outside, women washed clothes on stone slabs by the roadside. Water, they said, arrived once every five days for two hours—in a region fed by the Malaprabha, Ghataprabha and Krishna rivers, near whose confluence stands the Almatti dam. Water, water everywhere, but not a drop to drink or wash with.

As sunset set the red cliffs ablaze and cattle trundled home with jingling bells, a deep melancholy settled in. I recalled Jnanpith laureate Masti Venkatesha Iyengar's words on visiting the Hoyasala temple at Belur amid a crumbling village: "O god, this temple embodies the apotheosis of art and prosperity. Why have you condemned us now to utter destitution?"

Yet, the Badami temples kindled hope. The villages depress, but the men and women working with quiet optimism to revive heritage and livelihoods restore faith. Hope, after all, is the invisible fuel of life. As Dostoevsky wrote, "To live without hope is to cease to live."

(Views are personal)
Full article on newindianexpress.com

move in the work space.

As AI stops being a discipline on its own and an important component in every piece of work—suave and rustic included—your job is forever at the risk of redefinition. Therefore, constant redefinition of your skills and upgrading yourself from being a back-end being to a front-ended one may be a necessity.

Being a mind alone is not enough anymore. Work is getting cleaved. At the bottom end of the work pyramid, it is important to be a mind and a pair of legs and hands for sure. At the top end, it is still prudent to be that superior mind planning all this and the demise of a whole host of jobs as AI promises better efficiency and profits. In many ways, the top manager is actually planning the demise of the organisation as we know it today: people-dependent, people-heavy and people-expensive.

And what is solution two? I do believe every youngster at work needs to have a second gig to support him in tough times. Many youngsters of the peak work age are going to lose their jobs in the near future. They need to have a second and maybe a third gig. Time to plan your finances and investments too. Time to get a passive income stream going. Something that works for you without you working on it even.

Time to make your assets earn. Time to do a lot of financial planning. Time to shed the attitude to buy things without having the immediate money to pay for it. Time to make way for "simple living and high thinking", as my father would say all the time.

A maverick positive I see in the future is the possibility of a lot of people from urban areas wanting to return to the rural and deep-rural spaces of our country. A lot of folk will want to return to that peace and quiet. A less-expensive, pollution-free geography to live in.

I really do hope this happens. Our urban agglomerations need to de-magnetise. But then, even as you do that, you will find AI in the midst of your cows and buffaloes too, thanks to efforts such as Amul's just-launched Sarbajen AI app. It connects the over-300-million bovine population of the country to a network that manages health, artificial insemination, pregnancy, nutrition, lactation, productivity and more as the next white revolution gains traction.

But watch out here as well. The next permacrisis in this realm could be a future habit that has more people not wanting to drink milk. Milk is for the cow's calves, not greedy humans like you and I. *Touche*.

(Views are personal)
(harishbijoore@hotmail.com)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Panicky Trump

Ref: Trump's permanent trade doctrine (Feb 23). The panicky doubling down on tariff-nomics can be attributed to Donald Trump's MAGA efforts turning futile. Considering how major blocs like the European Union and China are diversifying, Don will completely transform the canvas of the world order by the time he vacates the White House.

Mayank Maleta, Bengaluru

Chinese delights

Ref: The Chindian tale (Feb 23). The lovely columnists' back pleasant memories. At Decades ago, as a schoolchild in Coimbatore, we had just one Chinese joint called China Restaurant. The taste of their sweet & sour prawns—a favourite—is etched in my mind. In neighbouring Ooty, there still exists Shinkows, run by Pawks and family, and legendary to tens of thousands of students who studied in the hill schools. The habit that has more parents visit more almost an impossibility. As students in Chennai in 1974, we were fortunate to have a Chinese restaurant within walking distance to our IIT hostel, called Waldorf. Waldys to us. Not surprisingly, when abroad and tired of bland food, Indians look for a Chinese restaurant. Long may they thrive in India and give us the benefit of their culture.

Philip R Fowler, email

Reality check

Ref: India battered & bruised (Feb 23). India were offered a reality check at Ahmedabad as the Proteas hand-delivered the Men in Blue one of their biggest defeats. India's poor net run rate could prove crucial if the Super Eight games end nip and tuck. R Sivakumar, Chennai

Many aboard

Ref: Seat-sharing (Feb 23). The DMK's election bus is now packed. Long-time allies, new entrants and AIADMK defectors are all seeking seats. Who sits comfortably and who travels as standees remains uncertain. The conductor, M K Stalin, cannot even try a symbolic whistle. Steering this overloaded vehicle without imbalance will be his toughest political drive. Gopalaswamy J, email

Phone dependence

Ref: K'Taka mooms mobile ban (Feb 23). Before rollout, the government must consider an alternative homework model considering students have inevitably resorted to devices for studying since Covid. Although overuse has become a menace, learning must not be disrupted. Jiji Panicker K, Alappuzha



Trump's absurdist show

The inaugural meeting of the Donald Trump-led 'Board of Peace', held in Washington last week, was a cruel joke. Despite the boastful declarations by the United States President, the gathering, comprising a motley group of authoritarian leaders and some desperate to be in Trump's good books, ended up putting up a farcical show that neither had peace on its agenda nor the legitimacy in its structure. The absurdity of the exercise was best illustrated by the absence of any Palestinian representative on the board, which was ironically created to ensure a lasting peace and development in the war-torn region. One party to the conflict has been denied a role in shaping Gaza's future, exposing the lack of a semblance of even-handedness. While the meeting was supposed to address post-war reconstruction in Gaza, there was nothing to suggest that the leaders were even aware of the ground realities. The reconstruction 'master plan', prepared by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, reads like an absurdist fantasy, drawing fake inspiration from development models in places like Dubai and Singapore. Neither Israel nor Hamas appear inclined to cooperate in preparing for any meaningful reconstruction project. Known for his utter disregard for rule-based international laws, Trump has floated this idea as an attempt to side-step the United Nations and replace it with a fee-paying members' club that runs on his personal whims. It makes a mockery of the time-tested instruments of multilateralism and reflects Trump's propensity for deal-making outside the traditional multilateral frameworks.

The Board of Peace meeting to rebuild Gaza, held in the absence of any Palestinian representative, is a farce

Projected as a pragmatic, business-like mechanism to stabilise Gaza, the concept implicitly challenges the relevance of international institutions in managing one of the world's most intractable conflicts. The first meeting of the Board did not yield any tangible steps in the stalled second phase of Trump's Gaza plan, nor was there any clarity on the proposed International Stabilisation Force's (ISF) mandate, Gaza's demilitarisation and a timetable for withdrawal of Israeli forces and end to occupation. Just ahead of the meeting, Israel had unveiled a plan to convert large areas of the occupied West Bank into "state property" that amounts to de facto annexation. The alarming situation in the West Bank and continuing Israeli attacks on Gaza were ignored by the Board. The entire Gaza Strip is in rubble now. There is an urgent need for Palestinians to be provided with basic housing, food, water, health and education. Unless there is a dramatic change in fundamental realities in Gaza, reconstruction will remain a cruel fantasy and even a diplomatic hoax. It is highly improbable that the Board will be inclined to deliver the legitimate and accountable governance that most Palestinians seek. The Board's current membership hardly instils confidence in its ability or willingness to help Gaza develop modern and efficient governance that serves the people of Gaza, let alone bring about elections and even a modicum of democratic self-rule.



MOHAMMED SHAHABUDDIN Bangladesh President

“Many attempts were made to create a constitution void (during Yunus' regime). I was targeted for removal in so many ways. But I did not break down under any circumstances



SUNIL GAVASKAR Batting legend

Indian batters came out with overconfidence, threw their bat at everything, lost wickets. You've to learn from oppn. If they've scored well on a tricky surface, you've to get rid of your ego, observe & adjust



VIJAY TVK founder

I ask present day's big politicians a serious question. What were your assets before you came to politics? What are your assets after you joined politics? Can it be declared openly

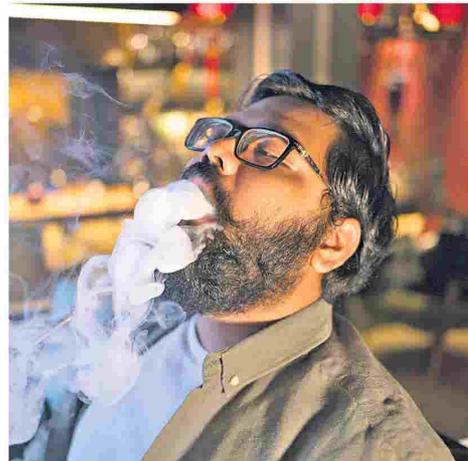
Tobacco control must go beyond taxation and reflect a moral commitment to prioritising public health over revenue



The Indian Tobacco and Pan Masala Tax Regime, 2026, recently announced, brings to the fore an old controversy: is the tax levied on an observational basis or on a generative basis? Is it intended to promote health or to generate revenue? While the government has indicated that the reform serves as a policy nudge to reduce tobacco use and its associated health effects, the question remains whether it has freed itself from the grip of pragmatism and idealism. India currently has over 267 million tobacco users, according to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS 2). Tobacco kills around 1.35 million people each year, and is one of the leading preventable causes of mortality in the country. Smokeless forms of tobacco such as gutka, khaini, pan masala, and zarda lead to oral cancers, cardiovascular diseases, and respiratory problems. The financial toll is enormous. The Ministry of Health reports estimate that over Rs 1.8 lakh crore is spent annually on tobacco-related illnesses, exceeding the total revenue collected through tobacco duties.

Effective Tool
The 2026 tax regime, which raises excise duties and introduces uniform taxation slabs across tobacco and pan masala products, aims to make these products less affordable, particularly for young people and low-income groups. International evidence supports this approach. The World Health Organisation (WHO) identifies price and tax measures as the single most effective tool to reduce tobacco consumption.

Tobacco Tax: Public health or revenue?



Countries like Australia, Thailand, and the United Kingdom, with high taxation, show that the move leads to a sustained decline in smoking rates. In theory, the new Indian policy framework aligns with international guidelines and standards. However, a larger fiscal concern persists: the country's dependence on tobacco revenue. Tobacco taxation generates between Rs 70,000 crore and Rs 75,000 crore annually. In many States with large-scale tobacco production and processing units, this revenue is a significant component of their annual fiscal planning. This creates a dilemma: whether to discourage consumption or sustain revenue. This balancing act is reflected in the 2026 tax structure. Although rates have increased, they remain below the WHO-recommended threshold of at least 75% of the retail price. In India, the tax burden stands at 55-60%. This raises an uncomfortable question: are we protecting public health or safeguarding revenue in the name of reform?

are taxed at lower rates than cigarette products. Manufacturers exploit a loophole by selling tobacco and pan masala separately in sachets, bypassing the gutka ban in several States. The 2026 tax regime aims to plug this loophole by aligning tax rates for composite and twin-pack products. However, taxation shocks may cause economic instability if livelihood transitions are not ensured, especially for women involved in home-based bidi work. The absence of large-scale rehabilitation measures undermines the moral case for steep tax increases. If health is the genuine concern, taxation must be accompanied by livelihood diversification, skill development, and employment generation in alternative areas. The tobacco industry argues that higher taxes fuel illicit trade, leading to revenue losses. While this risk cannot be ignored, evidence suggests that with proper enforcement mechanisms, the problem can be contained.

India's 2026 tobacco & pan masala tax regime must be strengthened with a comprehensive ban on ads, school-based prevention programmes & sustained digital awareness drives

Long-term Investment
Countries such as Brazil and Turkey have proved that the use of technology to monitor trade is effective even at high rates of taxation. Therefore, India's strategy should focus on enhancing, rather than undermining, the public health taxation agenda. Taxation has also proved effective in deterring youth initiation, as young people are particularly price-sensitive. With over 65% of India's population under 35, this becomes a critical policy issue. Every fiscal step that restricts youth access to tobacco is a long-term public health investment. However, flavoured smokeless products and attractively packaged pan masala, often targeted at young consumers, defeat the purpose. Taxes must, therefore, be accompanied by a ban on advertising, school-level interventions, and online campaigns.

One of the most significant weaknesses of India's tobacco taxation policy is the absence of earmarking for health spending. In Thailand, tobacco tax revenue is directly allocated to health initiatives, unlike in India, where the tax revenue goes into the consolidated fund. Earmarking a portion of the tax collected from tobacco users, say around 25%, for cancer treatment, health infrastructure, addiction treatment, and health education would strengthen the policy's legitimacy. The New Tobacco and Pan Masala Tax Regime (2026) represents an incremental reform, constrained by fiscal and political economy considerations while acknowledging public health imperatives. For a country like India to truly move beyond a budgetary regime that has traditionally been health-centric, taxation would have to be higher and more progressive, uniform across products, digitally enforced, linked to livelihood transition support systems, and earmarked for health spending. The choice is stark: continue to manage the issue of tobacco use or actively control it. We are living in a country facing a growing burden of non-communicable diseases, increasing threats from climate-related health challenges, and a rising strain of healthcare costs. The 2026 taxation and control of tobacco must signal not merely a shift in taxes, but a change in moral responsibility — prioritising public health above all other considerations. Only then can we honestly say that tobacco control lies at the core of Indian public health priorities, driven not by the need for revenue, but by the need to act humanely and socially.

(Fr Don Prem Lobo is Research Assistant and Dr Karamala Aresh Kumar is Head, Department of International Relations, Peace and Public Policy (IRP and PP), St Joseph's University, Bengaluru)

Letters to the Editor

Sterilisation
The increase in the number of stray dogs in India is also one of the major problems being faced by the Indians. As per the 2019 census of livestock, there are around 15 million stray dogs in India, while, as per rough estimates, the count varies from 30 to 60 million. The massive increase in population has led to a significant increase in the cases of dog bites each year, as around 4,700,000 such cases have been reported in 2025 alone. There is a dire need to control the population of dogs; it can be done by launching the sterilisation programmes, which have been

given the least importance by the successive governments so far.
DR NAVNEET SETH,
Tatwandi Sabo (Punjab)

TN politics
This is with reference to DMKD joining the DMK camp ahead of 2026 Assembly polls in Tamil Nadu. The DMKD has forged an alliance with DMK for the first time since its formation in 2005. The DMKD has requested one Rajya Sabha seat. This expectation is akin to what Kamal Hassan (MNM) asked for a Rajya Sabha seat ahead of the 2024 Lok Sabha polls. In both cases, the core of the deal is securing an RS seat. In addition to the RS seat, DMKD negotiated for 6-10 Assembly seats.
SSANKARANARAYANAN,
Chennai



India in the hotspot

- BBC
How photography helped British...
In the second half of 19th Century, photography became one of the British Empire's most persuasive instruments for knowing and classifying India. A new exhibition brings together nearly 200 rare photographs from that period.
- Bloomberg
Reprieve from tariffs may be short-lived
On paper, it may seem that India has emerged a winner after the US Supreme Court struck down President Donald Trump's reciprocal tariffs. But the gains may be ephemeral.
- Dhaka Tribune
The future of India-Bangladesh relations
There is no doubt that the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024 came as a major shock not only to Indian intelligence agencies but to India as a whole.

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Racial prejudice

Mistreatment of northeastern people a blot on India

IN May last year, Prime Minister Narendra Modi described the North-East as the "most diverse region of our diverse nation". Alas, India's much-cherished diversity is repeatedly being shamed as people from northeastern states are bearing the brunt of racial prejudice.

Less than two months after Tripura student Anjel Chakma was murdered in Dehradun, three women from Arunachal Pradesh were called "dhanthavali" (prostitutes) by their neighbours in New Delhi and told to "go sell momos". They were branded as outsiders in their own country — and that too in the national capital. This wasn't mere abuse hurled in a fit of rage. It was a targeted attack on identity and ethnicity.

A man and his wife have been booked for allegedly promoting enmity on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, etc., besides other charges. Their disgraceful conduct has laid bare a deeper malaise that belies the government's lofty slogan, "Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas". From the 2014 death of Nido Tania to the 2025 killing of Anjel Chakma, the pattern is unmistakable. Students or workers from the North-East are targeted over their physical features, their food, their languages. Women in particular are viewed with suspicion and baselessly accused of involvement in immoral activities.

The Supreme Court has warned of divisions caused by hardening regional identities. Racial hostility is an ugly manifestation of this phenomenon. What's quite chilling in the Delhi episode is the assertion of social superiority — the boast of being linked to a "big politician," the sneer about "aukaat" (status). It reveals a sense of entitlement and the mistaken belief that some Indians are more Indian than others. The Arunachali trio's lawyer, who hails from Sikkim, has affirmed, "We are as much Indian as anyone else." Indeed, every Indian has the right to live with dignity anywhere in the country. Ensuring that no citizen is deprived of this right is an acid test of pluralism in India.

Faith goes green

Hola Mohalla set for eco-friendly langar

PUNJAB'S push to make Hola Mohalla plastic-free marks an important moment where faith and environmental governance intersect. The recent initiative by the Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB), in collaboration with the Sikh clergy, to ensure plastic-free langar during Hola Mohalla reflects a recognition that mass religious gatherings must align with sustainability goals. Hola Mohalla, held annually at Anandpur Sahib, draws lakhs of devotees. The scale of the langar (community kitchen) operations inevitably generates enormous waste, particularly single-use plastic plates, cups and packaging. In recent years, concerns over littered riverbanks and clogged drainage systems have grown, especially given the town's proximity to ecologically sensitive zones.

The PPCB's move to promote eco-friendly containers and coordinate with religious authorities is significant for two reasons. First, environmental regulation often falters at large gatherings due to political sensitivities. Second, Sikh institutions have historically demonstrated environmental leadership — from tree plantation drives to earlier bans on plastic bags by the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee at the Golden Temple in 2018. There is also a behavioural dimension. Langar symbolises equality and collective responsibility. Extending this ethos to environmental stewardship can create a powerful model. Religious messaging from clergy can reinforce compliance far more effectively than regulatory warnings alone.

However, execution will determine impact. Announcements must translate into strict enforcement, adequate supply of biodegradable alternatives and proper waste segregation and composting. Without a robust collection and processing mechanism, even "eco-friendly" materials risk ending up in landfills. Punjab's plastic challenge is not limited to festivals. But if Hola Mohalla 2026 sets a precedent for green religious events — with monitoring, transparency and post-event waste audits — it could become a template for other mass gatherings across India. Faith-based environmentalism, when matched with administrative will, can transform public behaviour at scale.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

THE TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 1926

Isolated independence

BIPIN Chandra Pal was not far wrong when he began his interesting and eloquent address on "The Present Political Situation" in the Bradlaugh Hall on Sunday with a complaint about the widespread prevalence of a hopeless confusion of thought. His own speech, we fear, is not entirely free from this confusion. The particular illustration he gave, however, was scarcely apposite. Whatever may have been the case at one time, there is no confusion of thought at present, so far as at any rate as the overwhelming majority of politically self-conscious Indians are concerned, regarding the meaning of the word Swaraj. As Pal himself pointed out, all political parties in India which do matter this moment are agreed that Swaraj means self-government or dominion status within the Empire, and that self-government itself means the government of India by its whole people, and not by any particular community or class or individual belonging to the country. Undoubtedly, there are a number of persons who do want absolute isolated independence, just as there are those who would be content with any government provided it was not foreign. But in both cases, the existence of the view which Pal challenged is the outcome of impatience, of sickness of the heart caused by the indefinite prolongation of the present abnormal conditions; and in both cases, it is confined to an extremely small and almost negligible minority of the people.

The brat pack must be reined in

Mishaps involving luxury cars put the onus on affluent families to mend their ways



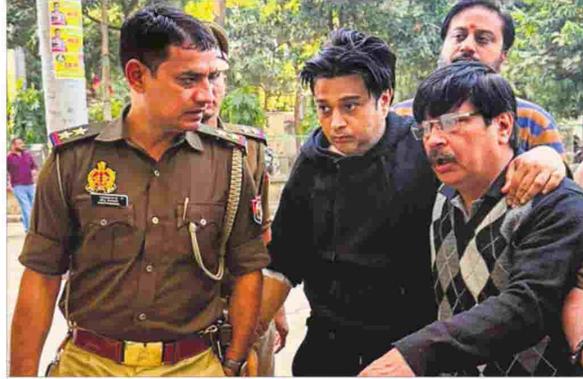
TRYS AND TURNS
JULIO RIBEIRO

SHIVAM Mishra, the son of a Kanpur tobacco tycoon, is in the news for the wrong reasons. He was allegedly involved in the Lamborghini crash that left several persons injured on February 8. Shivam was arrested almost a week later and granted bail within hours. In May 2024, a Porsche car allegedly driven by a 17-year-old boy under the influence of alcohol had fatally knocked down two IT professionals in Pune.

Instances of juveniles or young men from well-heeled families, pampered by their parents or grandparents and permitted to drive luxury cars — even if they don't have a driving licence — have been reported from cities across India. Another common factor in most such cases is that the brats and their friends spend money extravagantly in bars, pubs and night clubs, indulge in drunk driving and cause mayhem. They expect their parents to extricate them from the clutches of the police, and the cops are often ready to oblige.

The rich and the powerful are a privileged lot in our country. When they break laws, their parents, instead of taking the brats to task, go to any extent to get them off the hook. Political pressure, legal manoeuvres, money — everything is put to use. Their sense of entitlement engenders blatant disregard for the law.

In an effort to combat this



LAMBORGHINI CRASH: Shivam Mishra (centre), son of a Kanpur tobacco tycoon, is under public scrutiny. PTI

menace, senior officers should be tasked with visiting the spot promptly. As a newly recruited IPS officer in charge of a subdivision, I was expected to visit the scene of crimes like murder, dacoity and rape to ensure that the local police did not shield the guilty persons.

The ASP/DSP (assistant/deputy superintendent of police) would receive a telegram, which had to be acted upon instantly. The ASP would leave all other matters in hand and take off for the scene of the crime in his car. No delays were tolerated since the DIG (deputy inspector general of police) kept a hawk's eye on the young officer's movements. The ASP's record of his findings was submitted to his own SP and simultaneously to the DIG of the police range. This ensured that supervision was exercised in the interest of justice.

The Police Manual that mandated such visits by the ASP or the SDO (subdivisional police officer) should now be revised

richer since the Modi government came to power. Many families flaunt four or even more luxury cars. Their children never tire of mentioning the prices of these vehicles. This gives them more heft with their friends.

Since parents have little time to devote to their kids, the brats are left in the company of drivers. The latter teach them to drive, even if they have not legally reached the age for getting a licence.

Television channels showed the Kanpur tycoon's son being lifted from the driver's seat by two hefty men, who were obviously his private security guards. Some passersby were among the witnesses. Yet, the family's lawyer felt that the truth could easily be manipulated by greasing a few palms.

Inevitably, family drivers become scapegoats. Influential people look after them and their families in case they have to spend time in jail. The authorities need to prevent such a travesty of justice.

It's time the authorities realised that ordinary people are as much citizens of this country as the rich and the powerful.

to include car accidents in which young members of affluent families are suspected to be involved. By sending a senior officer to the scene early, the possibility of the local police being influenced by money power is considerably reduced. The rich have become even

One solution that comes to mind is to add a clause in the list of punishments, other than the usual terms of imprisonment or fines. This punishment, which the magistrate or the judge should be permitted to impose, would require parents to attend a workshop for a month or even longer at the traffic training institute. The importance of inculcating respect for the law of the land should be drilled into them. The young offender should also be made to attend this workshop.

If such punishment is introduced, the chances of dotting parents spoiling their young ones will be reduced. Tycoons usually value their time more than anything else. If they know that pampering their children will result in their going back to "school", it may prompt them to look within and do course correction.

Earlier this month, a 23-year-old man was killed in Dwaraka (Delhi) after a speeding SUV driven by a 17-year-old boy — who was filming a video to be posted on social media — collided with a motorcycle and a taxi. The car had been challaned several times in the immediate past for violation of traffic rules, mostly for speeding. This should have alerted his father, who obviously took no notice of the son's activities.

The father of the accused apologised to the victim's mother, saying that he was "ready to abide by the judiciary's decision", but she was not keen to forgive him. And the boy was granted interim bail to appear in the Class 10 board exams, even though he was responsible for the death of a fellow human.

It's time the authorities realised that ordinary people are as much citizens of this country as the rich and the powerful, who do not seem to value the lives of the poor.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Riches ennoble a man's circumstances, but not himself. — Immanuel Kant

The Labrador who left cops red-faced

ASHOK LAVASA

DOGS are in the news. A few weeks ago, the Supreme Court came down heavily on stray dogs, unfairly treating them as a threat to human safety and disregarding their reputation for loyalty. "Beware of Dogs" is a familiar way of scaring literate intruders. Amid an uproar over its perceived insensitivity, the Court reviewed its decision and ordered that the dogs' uncontrolled multiplication be checked.

That didn't prevent a Chinese "dog" from straying into the India AI Impact Summit clad in Galgotian attire, waking up sleeping dogs who attacked those who pompously showcased the impostor.

Dogs overcoming academic integrity reminded me of the one who got the better of the police. I was Additional Deputy Commissioner, Karnal, in 1983-85 when I attended a passing-out parade at Madhuban, the headquarters of the Haryana Armed Police. The Governor was the chief guest. The state police organised a dog show to showcase canine capabilities.

The enthusiastic announcer told the gathering that dogs had been trained to smell objects and identify the person to whom the items belonged. There was a stir when he said that we would soon witness "Haryana Police ke kutte" recover from the bushes the handkerchief that belonged to the newly appointed DGP who sat beside the Governor, proud of his elevation and elated at the prospect of being so well recognised.

His handkerchief had been concealed in the bushes across the parade ground. It reminded me of Othello, who gifted a hanky to Desdemona which was stolen by her maid and given to Iago, who planted it on Cassio, who was suspected by Othello of being in an illicit relationship with Desdemona. The discovery of that handkerchief with Cassio was the undoing of Desdemona, and of Othello himself. Did a similar catastrophe await the DGP?

The drama soon unfolded with a handsome black Labrador charging towards the bush. There was an uproar as it found the hanky. With equal alacrity, the dog darted towards the pavilion where the dignitaries waited with bated breath. It came to the front row with the handkerchief in its mouth.

It quickly went past the entire row looking for the owner. As the dog came near the DGP the police almost declared victory. The dog, however, went ahead without turning his "eyes right", as policemen are taught to do as they approach the saluting base. It ambled to the end of the row, turned back and sniffed the entire row once again without success.

The DGP was embarrassed when the Labrador repeated its march past twice without even looking at him. He probably felt like an officer who had been superseded.

The worst was yet to come. Seeing the non-performance of the trained Labrador, the announcer took it upon himself to save the police from further embarrassment. With unparalled presence of mind, he announced zealously, "Darasal hamare DGP sahab naye lage hain isliye Haryana Police ke kutte unhe abhi nahin pehchante". He stated that since the DGP had taken over recently, state police dogs had not yet started recognising him.

The writer is a former Election Commissioner

epaper.tribuneindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

When being a farmer mattered

Refer to 'Punjabi Suba: Language, politics and identity'; while the article explains our linguistic history, it misses a vital chapter: the era of the Unionist Party. Before 1947, leaders like Sir Chhotu Ram, Sikandar Hayat Khan and Ujjal Singh created a unique bond in Punjab. They didn't see people as just Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. Instead, they saw everyone as farmers and brothers of the soil. Their politics was about the rights of the cultivator, which kept the communal divide at bay for over a decade. The tragic division of Punjab occurred after these tall leaders passed away, leaving a vacuum, which got filled by religious politics. Had the Unionist spirit of peasant unity survived, our history, and the map of Punjab, might have looked different.

NAVEEN KUMAR MALIK, BY MAIL

Blindly following AI is risky

Apropos of 'India's AI ambition faces structural limits'; AI itself is not the real danger, its blind adoption and overdependence are. We have seen this before. Rapid industrial growth polluted the air and harmed public health, too many cars worsened traffic, unchecked emissions increased climate risks and excessive pesticides damaged soil and water. Technology promised progress, but weak regulation and short-term thinking made ordinary people pay the price. AI can improve healthcare, education, farming and public services, but relying on foreign chips, platforms and standards risks losing control over our data, jobs and decision-making. Lasting progress requires building domestic capabilities, going slow and focusing on self-sufficiency first.

K KUMAR, PANCHKULA

Adulthood no proof of maturity

Refer to editorial 'No parental veto'; parents, in their wisdom, can give advice but legally cannot force it on their children. The Supreme Court has upheld adults' right to choose their partners. However, a news report of a 19-year woman facing brutality at the hands of her 19-year-old live-in partner after an argument over marriage plans, should make the young generation think. This may be an isolated case, but goes to show that having attained adulthood is no proof that they are mature enough and can ignore the sane advice of their parents.

WG CDR CL SEHGAL (RETD), JALANDHAR

Cultivate values in adults

Apropos of 'No parental veto'; parents/elders have been fixing matches for marriageable boys and girls since ages. However, now times have changed. Now girls and boys are well qualified and insightful. The parents' role, however, has not diminished. They need to cultivate values and good habits in their children by first setting an example themselves, then will their children be able to discern right from wrong. Besides, the constitutional liberty to choose a life partner will have to be respected in letter and spirit by society.

YOGINDER SINGHAL, LADWA

Innovate in waste treatment

Apropos of 'Waste burden'; its disposal by incineration turns the surrounding air toxic, so innovative solutions should be explored, including those inspired by Nature. An ingenious idea which has been proposed but not adopted at pan-India level is treating landfills with bacteria that cause garbage to break down naturally into byproducts, which can be recycled or reused elsewhere. Local and state governments must involve the private sector to create a waste management ecosystem, which can be a profitable business for all stakeholders. An example is Japan, where 90% of waste collection and management is done by the private sector through a network of treatment and disposal facilities. Framing a national waste disposal policy is the only way we can aspire for clean cities.

CHANDER SHEKHAR DOGRA, JALANDHAR

Unethical practices in banks

Apropos of 'Haryana delists two private banks as staff at Chandigarh Branch swindle Rs 590 crore'; I served a bank for 39 years and so am aware of unethical practices employed by private banks to secure government deposits. Officials of government departments place substantial deposits with private banks after receiving extravagant gifts. They ask public sector banks to open accounts of aged pensioners, who maintain nominal balances in their accounts. Officials of government departments do not bother to monitor or reconcile their accounts at regular intervals, prompting employees of private banks to commit frauds. Audits by external agency can help in revealing connivances at different levels.

PENDRA SHARMA, BY MAIL

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit. These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribuneindia.com

India's AI vision lofty, capability limited



C UDAY BHASKAR
DIRECTOR, SOCIETY FOR
POLICY STUDIES

THE AI Impact Summit held in Delhi (Feb 16-20) is a commendable achievement for India (notwithstanding the organisational glitches on the first day and the Galgotias University fiasco) and burnishes the image of the Modi government in convening summit-level events that relate to global governance in critical domains. Investment commitments of over \$250 billion are welcome.

The first such mega AI event to be held in the Global South, it was structured around a unique governance architecture built on three guiding Sutras (principles)—People, Planet and Progress—and seven operational Chakras (pillars) that framed the contours of global cooperation in artificial intelligence.

The preamble to the Delhi Declaration noted that "the advent of AI marks an inflection point in the trajectory of technological evolution. The choices that we make today will shape the AI-enabled world that future generations will inherit."

Endorsed by 88 countries/ international organisations, the declaration called for further international cooperation and multi-stakeholder engagement along the seven Chakras—development of human capital; broadening access for social empowerment; trustworthiness of AI systems; energy efficiency of AI systems; use of AI in science; democratising AI resources; and use of AI for economic growth and social good.

The statement added: "In complementarity with existing international and other initiatives, we will work to foster shared understanding, while respecting national sovereignty, on how AI could be made to serve humanity, noting the initiatives across the seven Chakras (pillars) of the Summit."

AI is a distinctive capability and stands out among technologies, because it is the first general-purpose technology in history that can learn and improve at tasks that previously required human-like understanding, rather than merely executing fixed instructions created by humans. In short, AI has its own 'brain' that can learn on the job, even as it executes various tasks.

In essence, AI is the first technology that can routinely surprise its creators with new capabilities, rapidly absorb almost any cognitive skill when given enough examples and produce open-



INSTRUCTIVE: The US distanced itself from any form of global governance of AI at the Delhi summit. PH

ended creative output at superhuman volume. The ubiquitous use of ChatGPT and AI-generated text and images (often fake) across the world is but one example of the spread of AI and this is just the beginning.

Further, this AI output is generated while improving quickly, year after year through relatively predictable scaling. No previous technology wave combined those properties at the same time.

This combination makes AI qualitatively different and points to the immense potential for consequential outcomes—both positive and negative; and hence, the global focus on trying to evolve norms, principles, regulations and an ethical framework that would benefit all of mankind. This normative

AI is the first technology that can routinely surprise its creators with new capabilities.

inclusivity was at the heart of the Delhi summit objectives.

The AI domain is dominated by the US and its hi-tech ecosystem that comprises the private sector, academia and government agencies. Thus, it was instructive that despite the lofty aspirational rhetoric in the Delhi Declaration, the US distanced itself from any form of global governance.

The US representative at the summit, White House technology adviser Michael Kratsios reiterated this on February 20, asserting: "As the Trump administration has now said many times: We totally reject global governance of AI." He added that the technology cannot lead to a brighter future if it is controlled by bureaucracies and central authorities. Regulating new technolo-

gies has been central to the distribution of global power and the Cold War is illustrative, where nascent nuclear capability was strictly controlled by the major powers led by the US and the former USSR (now Russia).

The civilian strand of nuclear power was strictly regulated and monitored under UN aegis (the IAEA) and the military domain remained a closed club—of the five nuclear powers: the US, the USSR, the UK, France and China.

The NPT (nuclear non-proliferation treaty) was imposed on all other nations, who were forbidden to acquire nuclear weapon capability and this was an iniquitous treaty, but it maintained a certain degree of stability in the global strategic framework.

Paradoxically, India in the 1960s, despite its limited nuclear capability, with PM Nehru at the helm, was able to contribute to the deliberations on the management of the apocalyptic nuclear weapons. With US support, Delhi was finally accorded a special niche in the global nuclear framework in late 2008.

underlying principle. AI could become the critical determinant in shaping global power and prosperity in this century.

While India seeks to play a significant role in the global AI pursuit, it has a very modest capability and does not rank among the top five AI-capable nations. Yes, India is a major adopter of AI and the crowd surge at the Delhi summit reflects the enthusiasm of the younger Indian demography that comprises entrepreneurs, researchers and startups that are waiting to blossom.

Creating an ecosystem that is enabling and empathetic to nurturing AI in the long term will be the abiding Indian challenge. As Professor Argyvaswami J Paulraj of Stanford University and a global AI leader cautions: "India's heavy reliance on imported information technology—spanning communications, computing and artificial intelligence, from hardware platforms to intellectual property—poses a threat to both its economic health and national security."

Investing in data centres (which need vast amounts of water and electricity) is laudable but this remains at the lower end of the AI ladder. As in the case of acquiring design capability in critical military inventory, what matters in AI is 'compute matters' and here, the US is at the top of the pack, with China as a distant second. India is invisible. This gap must be bridged if India wants to be an effective AI shep for the Global South.

Reclaiming intellectual freedom on varsity campuses



SHELLEY WALIA
FORMER PROFESSOR,
PANJAB UNIVERSITY

THE global academic landscape of 2023, as laid out in the *Times Higher Education* 'Faces of the Year', presents a tableau of a sector in transition or perhaps under siege. For India, these global issues are immediate, visceral realities. As the nation marches towards *Viksit Bharat* by 2047, the university stands at a precipice, caught between the potential of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and a creeping institutional bureaucratisation that risks dismantling its intellectual core.

To navigate this, the university has to reclaim itself as a bastion of inter-disciplinary, trans-disciplinary and the liberal arts. This requires a synthesis of global academic standards with an assertive, Indian intellectual tradition that views education as an instrument of freedom and democratic renewal, not merely a marketplace for employability alone.

The global trend reflects a preference for crisis managers over intellectual stewards. We see leaders defined by their

ability to navigate budgetary consolidation and labour-market metrics rather than a vision for the humanities or pure sciences. In India, this has manifested as a moral degradation of regulatory bodies into bureaucratic functionaries. The University Grants Commission (UGC), once the guardian of academic autonomy, has pivoted towards a culture of compliance, embedding austerity and managerial expediency as governing norms.

When universities are reimagined as corporate entities, chasing vacuous 'world-class' rankings, the *raison d'être* of the institution stands threatened. In India, the rampant contractualisation of academic labour and the narrowing of permissible inquiry suggest a 'regime of risk', where dissent is viewed as a systemic glitch rather than a democratic necessity of the refusal to surrender the university's role as a site of unflinching critique.

Against this backdrop of technocratic expertise, Professor Martha Nussbaum's warnings in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* take on a local urgency. Nussbaum argues that the frantic pursuit of national profit leads to a 'silent crisis' where skills essential for critical thinking, for the ability to transcend local loyalties and the capacity for 'narrative imagination' are being depleted.

The NEP 2020's call for inter-disciplinary is a welcome



BOOKENDED: The university is caught between the potential of NEP 2020 and bureaucratisation. STOCK

shift, promising to dismantle the rigid disciplines that have long relegated the humanities to a 'soft' or 'ornamental' status. For decades, India's education system has been shackled by hierarchies where the sciences occupy the apex and the arts are viewed as a luxury. The consequences are visible in the impoverishment of both: the scientists trained without ethical awareness and artists remaining alienated from empirical thought.

True inter-disciplinary, however, is not a cosmetic mixing of subjects but a dialogue of epistemologies. It is the recognition that a student of computer science must also engage with the philosophy of mind and a student of economics must understand the histories of social struggle.

This vision recalls the 'Great Books' tradition in the West, where students of all disciplines engage with the ques-

When universities are reimagined as corporate entities, chasing vacuous 'world-class' rankings, the *raison d'être* of the institution stands threatened.

tions of civilisation from Homer to Freud as an exercise in human understanding.

If an *atmanirbhar* intellectual culture is to be achieved, Paulo Freire's critique of the 'banking model' of education, where students are passive containers for pre-packaged data, becomes relevant. Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is a reminder that education is either a practice of domination or a practice of freedom. In the Indian context, this means moving away from the 'clerk-making' colonial legacy to a pedagogy of inquiry.

The Indian Knowledge System offers an opportunity for epistemic decolonisation. It allows us to retrieve indigenous epistemologies— from ancient mathematics to pluralistic philosophies—and re-situate them within the global conversation. However, this must be an act of critical engagement, not ideological

assertion. What has to be adopted is Rabinranath Tagore's practice at Santiniketan of a 'wholeness' of learning, where the arts and sciences cohabit, and where education prepares the individual for life itself, not just for the global market.

The rise of AI as a governing logic in 2026 complicates this landscape. AI is often presented as a neutral tool for efficiency, but in the university, it risks intensifying the erosion of pedagogic relationships. When culture is 'simplified' or automated for the sake of accessibility, we surrender it to algorithmic rationality, overlooking the democratic need for enhancing the cognitive potential of students. Making culture 'easier' merely lets market forces call the shots. If all means are rendered equal and any opinion suffices, students lose the ability to tell the difference between information and wisdom. As the 'Faces of 2025' list suggests, we are increasingly producing 'adaptable' workers rather than 'critical' thinkers.

To catalyse a shift that aligns with the vision of *Viksit Bharat*, the higher education sector must adopt a model that integrates governance, academics and national aspiration into a single framework. This requires a shift from bureaucratic control to institutional autonomy, where the Higher Education Bill serves as a facilitator for intellectual innovation rather than a new vocabulary for old constraints.

Academically, we must move

towards a curriculum that treats the humanities as a core necessity for all, ensuring a scientist gains a moral imagination through literature, just as an artist understands the structural precision of biology. Administratively, vice-chancellors must be reimagined as intellectual stewards rather than mere compliance managers, supported by a funding model that views public investment as a democratic duty rather than a fiscal burden.

Only by fostering a research culture that values historical inquiry as much as econometric data, and by pursuing internationalisation from a position of intellectual sovereignty, can we ensure that universities become engines of renewal.

We stand at a juncture where policymakers and educators can no longer evade the crucial question: Is survival the highest ambition we can offer higher education? Or will we reclaim the university as a public institution committed to knowledge, dissent and democratic imagination? The NEP has provided the framework; however, the implementation must be a "renaissance of learning." The measure of our success will not be our rank in a metric, but our ability to produce thoughtful citizens capable of imagining a just, humane and intellectually vibrant future. A civilisation that separates its knowledge from its wisdom or its science from its art imperils both.

QUICK CROSSWORD

- ACROSS**
- 1 An impenetrable barrier (4,7)
 - 9 Under control (2,5)
 - 10 Edition (5)
 - 11 Actual (4)
 - 12 Inconvenient (8)
 - 14 Continue after interruption (6)
 - 16 Determined to do or have (4,2)
 - 18 Sanction (8)
 - 19 Engage in argument (4)
 - 22 To raise (5)
 - 23 Captivate (7)
 - 24 A generous nature (5,2,4)
- Yesterday's Solution**
- Across:** 1 Figaro, 4 As it were, 9 Rankle, 10 Activate, 12 Chew, 13 Think, 14 Seep, 17 Silver lining, 20 Raise the ante, 23 Ibox, 24 Heart, 25 Warp, 28 Original, 29 Rumour, 30 Fuse-lage, 31 Glossy.
- Down:** 1 Forecast, 2 Gingerly, 3 Rule, 5 Second nature, 6 Tail, 7 Elated, 8 Exempt, 11 Whole shebang, 15 Medal, 16 Inlet, 18 Infamous, 19 Jeopardy, 21 Rip-off, 22 Genius, 26 Dial, 27

SU DO KU

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

FEBRUARY 24, 2026, TUESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Phalgun Shaka 5
- Phalgun Parvatisht 13
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 8, up to 4:52 am
- Indra Yoga up to 7:24 am
- Vaidhriti Yoga up to 4:26 am
- Kritika Nakshatra up to 3:07 pm
- Moon in Taurus sign

FORECAST

SUNSET: 18:17 HRS
SUNRISE: 06:53 HRS

CITY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	27	13		
New Delhi	30	13		
Amritsar	25	10		
Bathinda	27	10		
Jalandhar	25	10		
Ludhiana	27	12		
Bhiwani	27	15		
Hisar	27	11		
Sirsa	27	11		
Dharamsala	23	10		
Manali	18	04		
Shimla	18	08		
Srinagar	21	01		
Jammu	25	13		
Kargil	09	-06		
Leh	08	-07		
Dehradun	30	11		
Mussoorie	20	09		

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Opinion

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 24, 2026

Remade or reduced

Bridging the 'deployment gap' may determine whether AI is diminishing or remaking India's IT companies

WHEN NANDAN NILEKANI speaks about technology cycles, it is worth listening. At the recent India AI Impact Summit, the Infosys chairman identified what he called a "deployment gap"—the widening distance between the extraordinary power of artificial intelligence (AI) and the far more modest capacity of businesses to absorb, integrate, and operationalise it. In effect, it was a defence of India's software services industry at a moment of existential anxiety. For three decades, India's information technology (IT) services firms have thrived on labour arbitrage, process expertise, and global delivery. They built and maintained enterprise systems, modernised legacy architecture, and managed digital transformation for the world's largest corporations. Predictability was their currency: billable hours, multi-year contracts, and steady margins. Generative AI unsettles that model. If software can write code, test applications, generate documentation, and automate support, what happens to the millions of engineers whose time underpins the services business? Investors are already questioning whether AI will compress headcount-driven revenues and erode the industry's foundational economics.

Nilekani's answer is that AI does not eliminate the need for services; it changes their nature. The opportunity lies less in building ever more powerful models—many are being developed by global technology giants—and more in embedding those models into the messy, compliance-heavy reality of enterprises. AI must be deployed before it can deliver value. There is logic here. Most large organisations struggle not with access to technology but with integration. Data remains siloed, workflows rigid, and incentives misaligned. Deploying AI requires cleaning data, redesigning processes, retraining staff, and ensuring regulatory compliance. It is as much organisational surgery as software implementation. This is terrain Indian IT firms understand. Decades of working with banks, retailers, and manufacturers have given them deep process knowledge. Embedding AI into those processes is less about inventing intelligence than about contextualising it—tailoring models to specific workflows and constraints.

Yet the deployment-gap thesis should not become a comfort blanket. AI is not simply another tool to be layered atop existing systems. It threatens to automate the very tasks that once justified large teams. The shift from effort-based billing to outcome-based pricing is inevitable. Clients will increasingly pay for productivity gains, not person-hours. That transition will be uncomfortable. Outcome-based contracts require vendors to share risk and build intellectual property. They demand reusable platforms and product thinking—capabilities Indian IT firms have historically approached with caution. A culture rooted in customisation must evolve toward scalable, AI-enabled solutions. Talent is another constraint. While India produces engineers at scale, advanced AI skills are globally contested. Bridging the deployment gap will require mass reskilling—turning traditional programmers into AI integrators, data curators, and governance specialists.

The broader point remains: technological power alone does not create economic value. Deployment does. History is filled with innovations that dazzled but failed to diffuse. The winners are often not those who invent breakthrough technologies but those who embed them seamlessly into everyday operations. For India's software services industry, this is both warning and opportunity. If AI merely reduces billing hours, the sector will contract. If, however, firms succeed in becoming the systems integrators of the AI age—stitching intelligence into core business processes across industries—they could extend their relevance for another generation. The AI wave is real and so is the automation threat. But so is the deployment gap. Bridging it may determine whether India's IT champions are diminished by AI—or remade by it.

White House tariff defeat has given Europe ammo

AT FIRST GLANCE, very little has changed for the European Union's terms of trade with the US following President Donald Trump's tariff defeat at the Supreme Court on Friday. Last year the bloc agreed to a 15% tariff to avoid an ugly transatlantic trade war. Today, 15% is the level Trump has vowed to impose using alternative tools not subject to the court ruling.

And yet, everything has changed. The mechanisms to make a new 15% levy stick may make the tariffs less sweeping and more temporary, with bureaucratic hoops to jump through in the form of approval from Congress or lengthy investigations to demonstrate unfair competition. For all the tough Trumpian language, looming mid-term elections and legal setbacks are real constraints. There's a "whole lot more uncertainty" than before, says trade expert Dmitry Gvozdenko.

This is why two things should happen. First, the EU should slow to crawl the adoption of last year's 15% deal agreed with Trump at his Turnberry golf course in Scotland. We've already seen India delay its own talks with the US, pending more clarity. There's no reason why the European Parliament should rush to rubber-stamp a deal whose justification rested on tariff powers that have been defanged. Lawmaker Bernd Lange, head of the parliament's trade committee, derided the US "tariff chaos" and called for a pause.

Second, Europeans should seize the moment to make sure the White House stops the shameless bullying over the \$1 trillion transatlantic trade relationship. What ever hope EU officials had last year that Trump could be appeased with deals should be gone by now. Despite making extraordinary promises such as buying \$750 billion of US energy, the Old Continent has come under sustained attack since Turnberry on everything from how it regulates the likes of Meta Platforms or Elon Musk's X to the sovereignty of Greenland.

Nicolas Kohler-Suzuki, an advisor at think tank the Jacques Delors Institute, tells me the Supreme Court ruling "should encourage the EU to draw a line in the sand: no further threats, no more demands on digital regulation." France has been first out of the gates with a warning that the bloc has its own tools of retaliation, including against services, if the Americans press their luck too far. Of course, this is the EU, with its deliberative, consensual approach—the one mocked by US Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent. It won't want to be overly aggressive when poking the White House bear.

European leaders still want to avoid a full-blown trade war that would harm their poll numbers and struggling industries—and boost the tepid economy of Trump's far-right allies in EU. Nor is there evidence yet of a Canada-led trade alliance of middle powers that's ready for prime time. Tensions between Germany and France over the state of European defence—with Berlin forced to deny report it was in talks to buy more US F-35 fighter jets—show unity even within is fragile. If the US's tariff waltz is the hubris on display for much of the last year, Europe's is a tendency to fragment.

Yet, doing nothing is no longer feasible. The EU is slowly putting the elements of self-reliance into place. It has almost offset the withdrawal of US financial support for Ukraine, and it's spending more on its own defense and has set its sights on prioritizing European manufacturers. And even if Trump and his support for tariffs are here to stay, there are flashes of US resistance beyond the Supreme Court, including within the Republican camp.

This is a moment that calls for a geopolitical spine. Europe has shown backbone in the past—something made possible by its combined financial might—not least during the sovereign debt crisis at the beginning of the last decade and the pandemic that started this one. It can do so again.



LIONEL LAURENT
Bloomberg

OVER THE PAST decade, a striking policy trend has gathered momentum across continents: governments moving to restrict or even ban children and teenagers from social media platforms. What was once a conversation confined to anxious parents and school counselors has become a legislative priority in capitals around the world. Lawmakers are responding to mounting concerns about screen addiction, online harms, and deteriorating adolescent mental health. The impulse to intervene reflects a deeper unease about how rapidly evolving digital ecosystems are shaping young minds, often in ways that families and institutions struggle to supervise.

Some of the most assertive measures have emerged in China, where authorities have imposed strict time limits on minors' online gaming and required real name verification for digital services. While these rules do not constitute a blanket social media ban, they signal a willingness to engineer behavioural outcomes through centralised control. The European Union, through its Digital Services Act, obliges major platforms to evaluate systemic risks to children. France has passed legislation requiring parental consent for users under a certain age and has debated technical systems to verify compliance. The UK has strengthened online safety obligations for platforms, compelling them to assess and mitigate risks to minors. Across the Atlantic, the US has seen a surge of state-level proposals that would raise minimum age requirements or mandate parental approval, though federal legislation remains fragmented. Australia has conducted age assurance trials, while Norway and South Korea have examined tighter youth protections. In India, regulators have floated stronger age verification norms.

Outright prohibitions that categorically exclude teenagers from social media remain rare. Most jurisdictions instead rely on age thresholds, consent mechanisms, or enhanced safety standards.

SIDDHARTH PAI

Technology consultant & venture capitalist
By invitation



Nonetheless, more than 20 countries have enacted or formally proposed youth-specific restrictions in the past five years, and at least a dozen more are studying the issue through parliamentary committees or regulatory consultations. The phenomenon is no longer marginal. It is a coordinated global response to a shared anxiety.

That anxiety is fuelled in part by the architecture of social media itself. Platforms are designed to maximise engagement, and engagement frequently depends on emotional stimulation. Algorithms continuously refine content feeds to prolong attention, often surfacing material that provokes outrage, envy, or excitement. For adolescents whose prefrontal cortices are still developing, the capacity for impulse control and long-term planning is not yet fully formed. Intermittent rewards such as unpredictable likes or comments activate neural pathways associated with habit formation. The experience resembles a behavioural casino more than a neutral communication tool.

Empirical research complicates the narrative but does not dispel it. Numerous longitudinal studies have identified associations between heavy social media use and increased rates of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep disruption among teenagers. Image-driven platforms intensify social comparison, especially among girls who may internalise unrealistic beauty standards. Boys can be drawn into competitive or antagonistic online subcultures that valorise aggression. Cyber-

bullying extends the reach of peer conflict beyond school hours, eroding what was once a psychological refuge at home. While causation is difficult to establish definitively, the convergence of data points has convinced many policymakers that precautionary action is warranted.

Proponents of bans argue that delaying exposure constitutes a public health intervention analogous to age limits on alcohol or tobacco. By restricting access dur-

ing formative years, societies may allow emotional regulation and critical thinking skills to mature before adolescents confront algorithmically curated environments. Collective restrictions can also alleviate the social pressure that individual families face. When every classmate is online, opting out becomes socially costly. A universal rule can reduce the fear of exclusion that often undermines parental boundaries.

Critics counter that bans may overpromise and under-deliver. Teenagers are technologically resourceful and frequently circumvent age gates by misrepresenting their birth dates or using older siblings' credentials. More stringent verification methods may require biometric scans or identity documents, raising significant privacy concerns. There is also the question of benefits foregone. Social media can provide creative outlets, educational resources, and supportive communities, particularly for marginalised youth who may lack acceptance offline. A blanket prohibition risks isolating those who derive

If circumvention proves pervasive and mental health trends remain unchanged, enthusiasm may diminish

Will capping credit card interest rates help?

JEFFREY FRANKEL

Professor, Capital Formation and Growth, Harvard University, & Research Associate, US National Bureau of Economic Research

FOR ONCE, US President Donald Trump put forward a proposal that appears actually to be aimed at protecting the "little guy" from predatory institutions. His call for one-year, 10% cap on credit-card interest rates echoes those made by many Democrats, including progressives like Senator Bernie Sanders. But given how little Trump has so far done to help workers, including his MAGA constituents, it is worth thinking through the issue afresh.

So-called usury laws, aimed at protecting borrowers from unreasonably high interest rates, have long history, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—the world's three leading monotheistic religions—all condemn usury, and laws against it came to America before the United States was founded. In 1641, the Massachusetts Bay Colony set the maximum legal interest rate that could be charged on a loan at 8%.

Today, most US states have usury laws. But there's no federal law capping credit-card interest rates, and national banks can charge the maximum rate allowed in their home state. As of August 2025, Americans were paying interest of 22.83% on their credit-card balances, on average, even though the going interest rate in the economy is only about 5%.

Meanwhile, populist politicians regularly attack heartless banks, and Democrats fight for protections for consumers of financial services. Former President Joe Biden argued that Americans shouldn't have to pay "junk fees" of which they were

not informed in advance. Senator Elizabeth Warren insists financial contracts must be readily understandable. Just as consumers can't be expected to figure out that a toaster is faulty based on a technical diagram of its wiring, she argues, they cannot be expected to identify risks buried in complex financial-services contracts.

In 2010, the Dodd-Frank Act established the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau to safeguard consumers from "unfair, deceptive, or abusive practices" by financial-service providers. Republicans, however, have repeatedly tried to reverse this step, arguing that consumer-protection rules "smother the US economic system".

Few have promised de-regulation more vigorously than Trump. And yet, he is advocating a federal cap on credit-card interest rates that would, in theory, prevent issuers from exploiting or gouging customers, especially those most desperate for credit.

For the counter-argument, ask bankers and libertarians. They point out that capping the price of credit, like capping gas prices, would reduce the supply and increase the demand. That's Economics 101. To handle this excess demand, banks would have to ration credit, basing their decisions on factors like anticipated ability to repay or personal connections.

The federal cap that Trump has proposed would, in theory, prevent issuers from gouging customers. But not everyone agrees it would be good for Americans

While it is natural for debtors to desire lower interest rates, no one should expect the same quantity of credit to be available at an artificially low cost. So, the logic goes, desperate borrowers should be permitted to pay more to get the credit they need. Better to charge what the market will bear and deliver credit to all who need it than to prevent some households from borrowing at all.

But would a reduction in the supply of credit be such a bad thing? Scandalous as it is to suggest, perhaps regulators would be doing households a favour by preventing them from taking on debts that they will have difficulty repaying. If the rationing excludes high-risk households from loans, all the better.

As of September 30, 25, *Forbes* notes, the average credit-card debt per American stood at \$6,523, with more than half carrying a balance from month to month. Many will take years to pay off this debt, during which time they will accumulate much larger obligations, including interest bills and penalty dues. If you make a \$150 payment on that balance each month over 95 months, at an annual interest rate of 22.83%, you will end up paying an extra \$7,688 in interest alone.

Of course, taking on credit-card debt at a high interest rate is reasonable in

Perhaps regulators would be doing households a favour by preventing them from taking on debts they will have difficulty repaying

genuine value from digital connection.

Effectiveness therefore depends on enforcement capacity and cultural context. In highly centralised systems, compliance can be relatively robust, though evasion persists through virtual private networks and informal sharing of accounts. In pluralistic democracies, enforcement relies heavily on platform cooperation and parental engagement. Early evidence from regions implementing stricter rules suggests modest reductions in reported usage among younger cohorts, yet not a wholesale transformation. Some adolescents migrate to messaging applications or niche platforms beyond the regulatory spotlight, suggesting displacement rather than elimination of risk.

The debate ultimately exposes a broader structural tension. Social media firms operate within an economic model that monetises attention. Adolescents represent a lucrative demographic whose habits can endure for decades. Expecting corporations to voluntarily curtail engagement conflicts with shareholder incentives. Governments, meanwhile, are often reactive, legislating in response to harms that technology has already normalised. Bans are an attempt to recalibrate this imbalance, but they cannot substitute for comprehensive digital literacy education, parental involvement, and platform design reform.

Whether the current wave of restrictions will expand or recede remains uncertain. If empirical evaluations demonstrate meaningful improvements in sleep quality, academic focus, and psychological resilience, additional countries are likely to follow. If circumvention proves pervasive and mental health trends remain unchanged, enthusiasm may diminish. For now, the movement reflects a collective experiment in governing the attention economy. It forces societies to confront a difficult question: how much autonomy should young people have in environments engineered to capture their time and shape their identities? The answer will define not only digital childhood, but the ethical contours of the internet itself.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trade policy demands clarity on tariffs

"Trump's tariff tyranny" (*FE*, February 23) underscores how unilateral tariff actions distort global trade and leave partners scrambling for stability. India's hesitation in finalising an interim trade pact with the US risks compounding uncertainty, especially when US tariff revenues ballooned to \$142 billion and legal challenges involve 12 states. The Supreme Court's 6-3 ruling

limiting emergency powers should have been a turning point, yet alternative legislative routes have kept tariffs alive, eroding predictability. Pragmatism demands India secure a framework that cushions exporters from abrupt shocks and reduces duties to competitive levels. Trade policy cannot hinge on episodic executive manoeuvres; it must rest on negotiated clarity that safeguards both economic resilience and political trust. —K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Renegotiate trade deal with the US

The tariff war launched by Trump has neither benefited his country nor enjoyed legal sanction within the US. American consumers find imports from India to be comparatively cheaper than their domestic products. However, the tariff troubles have forced the Indian government to face multiple issues. If penal tariffs are not withdrawn a number of industries

like textile, diamond jewellery, auto spares, and agriculture will face a crisis. If the trade deal is let go of, it will result in a more severe crisis. Moreover, Trump does not deserve any long-term arrangement or settlement given his frequent change of stance. India should be mindful of these factors and take an appropriate decision in the interest of its people. —AG Rajmohan, Anantapur

✉ Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



A thought for today Even the venomous Kaliya could not have defiled the Yamuna as thoroughly and deliberately as human beings have done over the past century or more STEPHEN ALTER, The Cobra's Gaze

Tradition Kills

Most women who die by suicide are below 25 because young are targets of the worst kind of control

The two sisters, aged 25 and 23, in a Rajasthan village who died of poisoning hours before their twin weddings, allegedly by suicide, per police, were teachers in a primary school. Early Feb, three sisters - aged 16, 14 and 10 - jumped to their death in UP. Among their diary notings: "Mention of marriage caused tension in our hearts." Last Sept, a Delhi man killed his wife, angered over her social media posts. Uttarakhand HC, meanwhile, acquitted a man of abetment to suicide of his wife, adding that "being suspicious is common" - example of a constitutional authority normalising male toxic behaviour that is ruinous, even if not mens rea. Yes, it is a tightrope, but "being suspicious" is code for cruelty, and controlling behaviour is domestic violence.

In India, young women take their own lives over reasons NCRB calls "family matters" - suitably vague. Yet we know exactly what it means: the vortex that is "Indian family tradition" that sucks the agency out of couples, and dumps a burden of expectations on women.



Two-thirds of women who die by suicide in India are below 25 years old. The age group 15-29 years, from post puberty through marriage and childbirth, is the most vulnerable to family pressures - arranged marriages, forced to stay married in abusive relationships, and an erasure of the individual replaced by her relation to male relatives and family. It is no surprise either that more educated women and more women in rural India attempt and complete suicides, both married and in 'marriageable' age. NCRB's "family matters" is the trap that denies women the right to exercise choice of career, or lifestyle, or partner, or wherewithal to walk out of a bad marriage. It denies men freedoms too, but as studies and data show, men take their own lives mostly over economic reasons.

So, when Bhagwat frowns at live-in relationships, or Uttarakhand wants live-ins registered, or Gujarat proposes de facto parental approval for "love marriages", they must recognise it's a losing battle they're fighting. Live-ins are a statement by men and women of rejecting "family matters". They are constitutionally protected. Inter-caste, inter-faith, inter-community, same-sex, across middle-classes, rural and urban, urban - it's happening, slowly but incrementally. Despite pushback of killing daughters, asking parents to "control" adult kids, scaring youngsters into marrying their family's will. There is never a single cause behind any suicide - but always a last straw. Maybe focus on why women are taking their own lives, not how to control them.

Poor King Cobra

From humans, all it wants is to be left alone. But we are incapable of listening

Most snakes hiss, king cobra grows. Its hood anatomy is dramatic, all the more imposing for it being able to lift one-third of its body (running up to 18 feet) into the air. And yet, as far as humans are concerned, it's a shy creature. From the growl to the stand-up, all it's trying to communicate to them is: Leave me alone. We are not their food, we are scary, they have no interest in us. Of course, we haven't listened, we haven't left the king cobra alone. All its physical characteristics reflect a deep history of adaptation to a specific ecological niche - South and Southeast Asia's wetlands and forests, where it can spend a quarter of its time up a tree. But humans, when they are not encroaching its habitat, are displacing it by other means.



A study of Goa's snake rescue records from 2002-24 establishes that every time a Western Ghats king cobra ends up in a completely unsuitable location, it is in proximity of railway tracks or stations. We like throwing food here, which attracts the rats, which attracts the rat snakes, which are king cobras' staple diet. The study authors place their results firmly within the literature of human-mediated wildlife dispersal. The film Snakes on a Plane got everything hatefully wrong about its subject, except for the fact that modern transport has indeed increased the incidence of various animal species being transported, against their wishes, far from their homes. Often by smugglers.

In a few months, India will celebrate Naag Panchami, when we worship snakes, offer them milk and seek their blessings. This feeling runs through Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions in many other ways too. The iconography of Shiv and Buddha is intimately intertwined with king cobras. In all these senses, it is considered sacred. But worshipping king cobras doesn't stop us from making them miserable.

Punchatantra

A Macaque, a robot dog and a movie

Anil Abraham



I gently wiped a tear as I looked at my phone with grief and concern. Kamala paused mid-stride, worried that I had got some bad news about an ailing relative or that Trump had raised the tariffs again. But this was worse. It was disaster on a global scale. Punch, the baby monkey in Japan who had been abandoned by his mother, had adopted a furry toy as his surrogate mother. I was totally invested in this - but Kamala was livid.

"There are domestic problems to deal with," she said. "Instead, you are so easily distracted by a monkey - can you get up and deal with the gas cylinder that needs to be changed and go fill fuel in the car, if we can still afford that. Even if I'm not working in an office, my boss at home makes me punch in on time every day for my domestic chores. I tried pulling a sad face like the macaque monkey, hoping to get sympathy, but Kamala beat me to the punch, by sighing sadly as she folded the washed clothes."

I quickly finished my tasks and got back to scrolling - I had not yet recovered from last month's penguin that broke away from its tribe and wandered up a snow-covered mountain path. I had watched that lonely arduous journey on a loop, sitting comfortably on my couch, chomping on chakli. And last week it was the robotic dog Orion that had held me in rapt attention - as it shook hands at the Summit. Even if it had been bought online, it garnered enough attention from middle-aged Uncles who couldn't spell artificial intelligence.

Meanwhile, the cows and buffaloes in Kerala are beefing up their security after the controversial Kerala Story 2 trailer: Cows are being force-fed grass with as much enthusiasm as movie-goers are being force-fed propaganda. But God's own country has no beef with anyone. The memes are keeping them amused as they consume content as indians as meat and parotta. George Orwell had no concept of the Animal Farm that Avdya would have to deal with, a few decades after 1984. And now the Tate brothers have offered to buy Punch the macaque - to distract from their toxic masculinity and prevailing patriarchy. There can be no better Punchline.

LESSONS IN GEOCHEMISTRY

Critical minerals like lithium and neodymium are key to modern industry, so Chinese stranglehold on supply of refined minerals concerns every major economy. India's recent pact with Brazil, and engagement with US-led FORGE can help it secure supplies



Syed Akbaruddin

Critical minerals are the new reality of power. They sit behind the clean energy transition, electric mobility advanced electronics, AI and modern defence systems. They also enable something less visible: the ability to slow another country's industrial momentum without ever declaring a sanction. This can be bargained down. Mineral constraints cannot.

That is why India's critical minerals quest is a strategic conversation. New Delhi is playing on two fronts. At home, it is pulling exploration, refining, recycling and recovery into a coherent mission push. Abroad, it is widening partnerships to expand options and dilute concentration risk.

The India-Brazil MoU on rare earths and critical minerals signed on Feb 21 belongs to this latter track. It expands India's supplier and investment map. Brazil brings resource depth and, just as importantly, political space. It offers a partnership not automatically read as an extension of anyone's camp. In a world where supply chains are increasingly politicised, that matters.

Yet it is worth being candid about where the contest will be decided. While the world fixates on mines, the real choke point sits in the middle of the chain: processing and refining. That is where raw material becomes usable industrial input. This layer is not just about reserves. It is about chemistry separation technology specialised equipment, skilled labour and logistics. Control over refining capacity often translates into strategic leverage.

A concrete example makes the point. India can assemble an electric vehicle, but the line can still stall for lack of high purity rare earth oxides and metals needed for permanent magnets. Neodymium and praseodymium are not useful in the ground. They become useful only after complex separation. The constraint is not raw minerals. It is turning them reliably into magnet-grade material at scale, and at a price that does not undermine competitiveness. This is what "middle of the chain" means in practice. It is not merely a slogan. It is a processing dependency.

China understands this better than anyone else, and

operates on two tracks at once. Diplomatically, Beijing advances a green minerals initiative that emphasises openness, market access and cooperation with producers in the developing world. Practically, China holds an advantage in processing and refining. That advantage becomes leverage through licensing, end-use checks and calibrated export controls.

Washington's answer is FORGE, the Forum on Resource Geosteering Engagement. It builds on the older Minerals Security Partnership but with sharper intent. It aims to de-risk projects, coordinate finance, secure early offtake and set standards that define what counts as secure and sustainable supply.

FORGE aligns with Washington's broader technology



supply chain posture, including Pax Silica, which India signed on to last week. Together, they form a single stack. Pax Silica is about securing the high end semiconductor, advanced manufacturing and AI infra. FORGE is about securing the inputs those factories depend on. Minerals and technology are the same strategic story at different layers.

India's interest is straightforward. Clean energy expansion, grid storage, advanced electronics and defence readiness all require inputs that India does not yet control in sufficient quantity or in the right form. This is why the domestic mission focus on exploration and refining is necessary. It is also why external diversification through partnerships with countries such as Brazil is unavoidable. India should widen this approach across Latin America, Africa and Australia,

while also pursuing partners with separation and processing capabilities, because resilience will ultimately be built in the middle of the chain.

FORGE could be used in this quest. It is through a light, non-binding arrangement and partners are expected to identify priority projects within six months. It is a forum to move projects and standards rather than issue political declarations.

A coordination platform can widen India's supplier network, reduce supply chain shocks, and bring financing and risk sharing to overseas mineral assets that otherwise struggle to reach final investment decisions. It can support refining and recovery capability within India. It also gives India leverage in standards discussions so that "green" does not become a disguised trade barrier.

Yet, light structure does not mean consequence-free. These arrangements create expectations about priority access, preferred suppliers, and default standards. Participation can also be read as choosing sides in the US-China rivalry; China may respond by targeting India's vulnerabilities. If new price or border measures raise input costs, Indian manufacturing can be hit before alternatives are ready. And once companies align with a network, opting out becomes costly.

Three tests should guide how deep India goes. First, the outcome test. Does FORGE deliver tangible projects and capacity linked to India within a clear timeline, especially in refining, separation, recycling and recovery, not just mining announcements? Second, the cost test. Does India retain flexibility on trade and industrial policy or does participation require narrow policy space before substitutes exist? Third, the autonomy test. Does India keep room to manage China without being pulled into someone else's escalation ladder?

India should not engage with minerals forums only to be seen. It should engage with them to secure options. FORGE is not a loyalty badge. It is a bargaining table. India should enter early, shape the rules, extract practical value and remain willing to step back if the terms begin to harden into constraints. In the minerals era, strategic autonomy is not a slogan. It is the ability to keep bargaining when someone else tightens the tap.

The writer is India's former permanent representative to UN

'Our kids growing up without heat & stable schooling, displaced from their homes.. will never forget'

On war's 4th anniversary, Ukrainian envoy says Russia's actions have embittered hearts for generations



Oleksandr Polishchuk

History has seen wars that lasted centuries. They differed in scale and character, but their cause was the same: irreconcilable positions, and one side choosing force to impose its political aims. For more than a thousand years, Ukraine endured repeated invasions - in the 16th and 17th centuries - from its northern neighbour Russia. The objective: subjugation and erasure of Ukrainians as a nation.

Although Russia recognised Ukraine's independence in 1991 and reaffirmed its borders in the "Big Treaty" of 1994, Russian politicians, including former Leningrad mayor Anatoly Sobchak, who helped bring Putin to power, and another Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov, publicly questioned Ukraine's sovereignty and called for revising borders or imposing a protectorate.

Under Putin, Soviet habits and symbols returned. A neo-imperial agenda followed: "energy superpower" doctrine (2003), rising isolationism and spy mania (2005-2007), open confrontation with US in Putin's 2007 Munich speech, and the 2008 claim that the post-Soviet region was Russia's zone of "privileged interests". At the same time, Kremlin escalated a hybrid propaganda campaign, branding Ukraine's elites as "pro-Western traitors", and trying to divide Ukrainian society.

As most Russians grew poorer and a small circle around Putin richer, Kremlin turned to imperial chauvinism and militaristic hysteria. The West was blamed for Russia's problems. Russia was portrayed as a fortress besieged by enemies.

When revolutionary events erupted in Ukraine in late 2013 after the violent dispersal of peaceful students, Kremlin framed them as a Western orchestrated operation to reduce pro-Russian and pro-Moscow sentiment. This pretext to occupy Crimea in 2014 and launch aggression in eastern Ukraine.

In Feb 2015, Ukraine, Russia, Germany and France signed the Minsk agreements, calling for a ceasefire

and OSCE monitoring. Public OSCE reports show Kremlin never intended to honour them like the broken 1994 Budapest Memorandum. The ceasefire failed. Ukrainian soldiers and civilians continued to die under shelling by Russian forces and their proxies. Meanwhile, Russia built up offensive formations near Ukraine's borders.

Putin expected a short, victorious war that would eliminate Ukraine and cement his rule. On Feb 24, 2022, Russia launched full-scale invasion.

Russian troops entered Ukraine to kill and plunder, stealing household items like washing machines, toilets, televisions and laptops. They even looted homes



in Russia's Kursk region after fighting reached it. Over the war years, Russian forces raped 23 children, 679 children were killed, 2,350 injured, 2,286 went missing and over 20,000 were deported for "Russification" and "re-education".

In March 2023, a UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that Russia committed war crimes, including deliberate killings, torture and child deportations. On March 17, 2023, International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Putin and Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, for their alleged roles in these deportations.

These crimes persist with the silent consent of

many Russians. Some remain quiet for money and "war trophies". Even deaths of relatives who enlisted for pay become secondary to compensation and a new Lada. Others stay silent out of fear. By Feb 2025, over 20,000 people in Russia had been detained for opposing the war; 1,185 faced criminal prosecution. Many others were targeted under laws branding them "foreign agents", "extremists", or members of "undesirable" groups.

Russia's war, begun in 2014, reflects a corrupt, KGB-era elite reacting to the growth of its own making and the suffocation of democracy in Russian society. Today's Russia resembles Orwell's 1984: a system that seeks to control both minds and history.

From Feb 2022 to Feb 2026, more than 1.2m Russian servicemen were killed severely wounded. Daily losses in "meat assaults" range from 800 to 1,200 troops for gains of roughly 15m. From 2022 to 2025, Russia spent about \$540bn on the war. In 2026, another \$163bn - over 7% of GDP - is planned. The war consumes nearly 40% of the federal budget. At the same time, payments to "war heroes" were cut from 78bn rubles in 2025 to 58bn in 2026, while funding for state television increased by about 50%, from 69.1bn to 106.4bn rubles.

After two years of roughly 4% GDP growth driven by military spending, Russia's economy entered a downturn in early 2026, with growth projected at just 1%. Of 28 industrial sectors, 20 are contracting. To sustain itself, Russia sold 57% of its gold reserves - over 233 tonnes - largely to China, discounted oil by up to 8%, and sought support from rogue states.

This trajectory echoes late Soviet decline. That system collapsed. So will this one.

The "Rashist" regime - a modern form of totalitarianism - will fall. Ukrainians have already prevailed in the most important way: through unity, resilience, and readiness to sacrifice for one another.

Children growing up without heat, without stable schooling, displaced from their homes, will never forget.

As Ukrainian poet Anastasiya Dmytruk wrote in 2014: "We will never be brothers."

Calvin & Hobbes



Calvin & Hobbes

What happened in Iran is ironic when you look at rich history of the country and its liberalists. In the mid-1970s, it sheltered great Sufis and mystics and let them thrive. Once Iran was mutant, fragrant, with the universal love poetry of Rumi, Hafiz, Fariduddin Attar, Sanai, Khaqani, Nizami, Jami, Anvari, among others. When Rumi says love asks us to enjoy our life, one wonders - how people of Iran and wherever wars and battles are on are enjoying life - as mere survival is becoming an existential issue for us. Look at the sublimity of Rumi's love poem: "Love asks us to enjoy our life. For nothing good can come from death. Who is alive? I ask."

Those who are born of love. Seek us in love itself. Seek love in us ourselves. Sometimes I venerate love. Sometimes it venerate me." Elsewhere Rumi writes, "Should your friend dismiss you, Do not be disheartened: Today he rejects you, Tomorrow he'll relent." "Do not kill even an ant! Life is sacred, you tyrant!" Rumi further says, "You hurt someone thousands of miles away, I feel his pain in my own way."

Hafiz Shirazi says the something, in his own inimitable manner, "This sky/Where we live/Is no place to lose your wings/Sove, love, Love." Hafiz told the tormentors and tormented: "Light will someday split you open;

even if your life is now a cage." Centuries ago, Hafiz wrote to the tyrant ruler of Persia: "Do not judge us, you who boast your purity/No one will indict you for the faults of others." What is it to you when I am virtuous or a sinner? Busy yourself with yourself!" Love will finally triumph over hatred and violence, was Hafiz and in today's context and circumstances, this proverbial and prophetic statement is not just confined to Iran but wherever humanity is in danger and

Sacredspace



No human relation gives one possession in another - every two souls are absolutely different. In friendship or in love, the two side by side raise hands together to find what one cannot reach alone. Kahlil Gibran

Rumi And Hafiz Are For All Eras

For the suppressed and oppressed and celestial vine, metaphorically, for beleaguered humans. Rumi wrote in Pahlavi, "Taz qeen min ishah az insanbar" - my love is for mankind! To read Hafiz, Rumi, Khaqani, Nizami or Anvari's mystic love poetry is to create an antidote to all that's violent and ruthless. More than ever does the world need their message of cosmic love to bring about a skerrick of sanity to the war-savaged world. To read Hafiz and Rumi is a humanising process, and we all must go through it to empathise with each soul. There'll be no bloodshed, if we imbibe the spirit of mystic love of Rumi and Hafiz. It's time to bid farewell to violence and welcome love everywhere. Rejoice in the power of love and celebrate its myriad moods. Remember, in the end, it's love that will come to our rescue.

India Enters LLM Race, With All It Has

Sarvam's sovereign AI push is commendable Sarvam, an Indian AI startup, has joined the race for LLMs without fanfare. The company's accomplishment is remarkable for not being dependent on external inputs for data, algorithms or engineering. Equally remarkable is the frugality with which it has arrived at its product milestone, which is a pointer to what India brings to the table in terms of AI development. The country is key for dispersal of GenAI irrespective of where it originates, and indigenous efforts can be expected to be extra sensitive to the local market contours. Dispersal rates will climb as the pipeline of sovereign AI offerings broadens. Early successes should not fly under the radar on account of limited resources or ambition.

Sarvam has announced partnerships with Nokia and Bosch for AI applications. The startup's focus remains on enterprise initiatives, but it has launched a chat app for web and mobile users, entering territory carved out by global giants Google, OpenAI and Anthropic. The big boys take the Indian market seriously for its size and savvy. Finding an Indian name in this crowd, however circumvent its vision, is an encouraging development. It also speaks to public-funded initiatives that are seeding the domestic AI ecosystem despite tall hurdles in energy and compute. Unlike the US or China, where big tech is stumping up the cash for AI investments, India is proceeding on the tested template of public infrastructure mated with private innovation. The model has succeeded beyond expectations and is key to expanding India's sovereign AI footprint.

Last week's global AI summit in New Delhi may have made the headlines for the wrong reasons, yet it does not take away from India's desire to assert its intent. Those efforts are in right earnest beyond the media glare, as Sarvam has demonstrated. An ecosystem for Indian AI innovation is likely to creep up on us through the entrepreneurial zeal of the country's formidable talent base. Local solutions for global problems are the way to go.

For NGT, There are No No-Go Areas

Great Nicobar Island (GNI) is not an abstraction on a map. It is a living island — dense rainforests, mangroves, and the long sweep of ancient Galathea Bay, first surveyed in 1845-47. Its ecological wealth is foundational, reflected in its notified biosphere reserve and two national parks. That inheritance is precisely why decisions about its future demand the highest institutional vigilance and public scrutiny.

National Green Tribunal (NGT) was created to provide that vigilance. But in upholding clearance for the Great Nicobar project earlier this month, it has fallen short. It relied on studies by Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) and National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management (NCSCM) — both under environmental ministry that granted the clearance. It accepted conditions such as staggered tree-felling or protecting nesting trees 'as far as possible' — phrases elastic enough to mean everything and nothing. NGT also kept NCSM's finding that no part of the project lies within Coastal Regulation Zone Category IA — the most stringently protected coastal classification — despite the site including Galathea Bay, a critical habitat for leatherback turtles, corals, mangroves and Nicobar megapodes. It further declined to place in the public domain the findings of High-Powered Committee constituted in 2023, whose report was submitted in 2025, instead accepting a plea of strategic confidentiality without further explanation.

Strategic development cannot be ignored, but urgency does not override environmental law. Institutions matter most when the stakes are highest. If morning shows the day, the safeguards NGT has sought may well be diluted at the first opportunity, as seen repeatedly across India. What truly matters is enforcement, not mere endorsement.



JUST IN JEST

More than simian abandonment, there's the Indian ma ki loving grip

Monkey Business & Smothering Mothers

The world has decided that 'Punch', a 7-mth-old Japanese macaque at Chikuzawa Zoo, is the new dalai lama of emotional resilience. Abandoned by his mother, Punch has found solace in a stuffed toy and suddenly every human with Wi-Fi has anthropomorphised him into a furry parable of loneliness, healing, and poster-ban-dar of victims of maternal abandonment. Instagram captions weep. Think pieces sprout. Somewhere, a bad poet writes a poem titled, 'Ma, monkey baat bolo.' But the real story we should be talking about is the 'opposite' — Indian mothers of the myocoddling kind. The ones who treat their sons not as independent organisms but as fragile Fabergé eggs wrapped in bubble-wrap, swaddled in guilt, and spoon-fed until their late-40s and beyond. These mothers don't hand their sons plush toys but entire emotional ecosystems. They get their shirts ironed, pre-choose their food (metaphorically, but who knows now), and ensure that no decision — from career and sex life to sock colour and tomorrow's lunchbox — is made without maternal oversight. The result? A nation of men who can code in Python, but can't boil an egg. So, yes, Punch is cute. Punch is tragic. Punch is plus-sized dependent. But true tragedy lies in the Indian son, who 45 still says, 'Mere paas Ma hai.' As if a smothering mother is an asset class that predates any AI agent.

STATE OF PLAY | India must be grounded and nimble, and keep multiple channels alive

Dealing With the Unsaleable



Pranab Dhal Samanta

Until last weekend, the US was unpredictable because its president meant it that way. But after Friday's Supreme Court order on tariffs, Washington has transitioned from unpredictable to becoming genuinely unstable, a change that may reset the board for India, but not necessarily the play. At least for now.

Legal details aside, there's the global political impact, both in terms of image and substance. Trump 2.0's unpredictability was, in fact, a planned one. It was deployed by White House to further its interests, extract what it wanted, and disrupt where required. But this worked on the premise that Trump's call was the final word from the US. By judging the invocation of IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act) as illegal, the court has put a serious credibility question on whatever action White House takes from now on. This is complicated by the fact that Trump won't back off either.

Tariffs served three broad political objectives for Trump, all of which are now severely impacted: **Assured revenue stream** Estimated earnings from tariffs are about \$200 bn. This stream, crucial for funding the MAGA agenda, is now under a legal cloud. **Reindustrialising America** Tariffs were used to strike deals through which commitments to invest in the US were locked in from the EU, Britain, Japan, South Korea, etc. This, too, is now compromised. **Global political tool** This was perhaps the most important fact. Sliding tariffs back and forth was an option liberally used for non-economic



More plans being hatched in the air

reasons like the Greenland deal that is now unavailable. The broad consensus is that Trump won't back off easily. But what's the plan? Measures announced so far, including imposition of 15% tariff under Section 122 of 1974 Trade Act, are interim. They lack the political sting IEEPA gave Trump. Even sectoral tariffs through Section 232 of 1962 Trade Expansion Act, and Section 301, unfair trade practices clause in the Trade Act, are cumbersome litigation-led processes that won't serve Trump's political style or purpose.

As for Section 338 of the 1930 Tariff Act, which has never been used, the jury is out regarding

its effect. There's a body of legal opinion on the conditions in which this can be applied. The crux is that the interim measures are essentially survival tactics that can, at best, ensure the revenue stream from tariffs doesn't immediately plummet. But whatever they are will be open to legal challenge.

Meanwhile, faced with rising consumer harm and increasing regulatory scrutiny, many telecom operators have moved well beyond box-ticking compliance and are working overtime to show their commitment to conquering fraud. AI-driven spam detection, real-time behavioural analysis, malicious link blocking, proactive identification of fraudulent domains and coordinated takedowns deployed at national scale are being employed. But these efforts have also exposed a structural truth: even the most sophisticated safeguards on regulated telecom channels cannot fully protect consumers when fraud is free to flourish on unregulated digital platforms. After all, one cannot firewall a small part of the digital ecosystem and call it security.

This is also reflected in Global Anti-Scam Alliance's (GASA) latest findings: 86% of fraud attempts in India over the past 12 months have shifted to popular OTT communication platforms offering messaging and calling features. This asymmetry has produced predictable outcomes. Criminals migrate to the least governed channels, telecom operators shoulder a dis-



regime to work out more permanent measures. These 150 days may provide that space.

But here's the rub: whatever White House decides, it will be open to legal challenge. For instance, understanding from Section 122 is that it must be uniformly applied and can't be increased and decreased based on political requirements. If, say, Trump were to try and keep it politically flexible, a legal challenge is almost certain. In fact, the Supreme Court order could generally embolden critics to serve up more legal challenges. Next, his interim measures can't be treated as predictable and permanent. Which means Trump will have to look for a more permanent solution. But can anything without legal sanction or Congressional approval be treated as predictable and permanent? Truth is, the institutional tussle set off, first, by invocation of IEEPA, and now its revocation by the Supreme Court, genuine instability in Washington due to a potential lack of clarity on what will hold as policy and what won't.

For India, it's good that it has made no legally bound commitments except for a joint statement with an agreement in the future that's yet to gain sanctity. It will, like others, ask Washington to clarify its position following the court order and the legal basis to continue

the negotiations.

To walk away from any further engagement, as some political quarters suggest, would be foolhardy. That would just agitate the White House. There are other countries and blocs in more advanced stages of their trade deals with the US. And it's best not to stand out, or become a political target, when concerns of others in the queue are more immediate and bigger.

But the situation demands to be grounded and nimble. Dealing with an unstable US is challenging, one that will require New Delhi to keep multiple channels alive with White House, the groups, US Congress and various lobby groups.

Further, there is no reason for uncertainty to cloud the overall climate of the relationship that has improved fol-

lowing the withdrawal of the 25% additional penalties on account of Russian oil trade. Progress on other aspects of the relationship, based on opportunities they bring, can move ahead. The stability in the US. That said, strategy of trade diversification and search for more stability anchors for economic engagement by way of pursuing FTAs with other partners and ensuring these arrangements reach their logical conclusion are now a matter of political urgency, especially in the light of growing instability in the US.

Meanwhile, as politics works on building alternatives for economic stability, relevant businesses will have short windows of opportunity. Like that, the US tariffs will eventually be down to 15% from 25% for Indian goods. This is the best India will get since Trump tariffs started rolling. So the time now is for both politics and business to capitalise and cooperate, knowing well that choppy waters can suddenly change course for the worse.

pranab.dhal.samanta@timesofindia.com

THE SPEAKING TREE

Emotional Hygiene

NARAYANI GANESH

Modern education plays a lot of attention to physical fitness and neglects the study of academic subjects, but does not give importance to emotional hygiene and the practice of ahimsa, non-violence, and forgiveness. This has been the call to action of the XIV Dalai Lama, who has spoken extensively on these aspects, pleading for 'education of the heart.' It is not difficult to do this because, he says, basic human nature is to be compassionate and warm-hearted. During times when tempers are high and emotions get unleashed, we get frustrated, angry and even violent. If only one knew how to face challenges posed by these emotions, one could cope better and arrest negative emotions before they turn uncontrollable and as we wash our physical body nature that is to be warm, friendly and caring.

To achieve calmness and control, practice of meditation and deep breathing are immensely useful. Gurus recommend letting go of all baggage that tend to drag us down — mainly regret as we wash our physical body about the future. In the meantime, we tend to neglect the present moment, which is what will compose our past and pave the future. Living mindfully in the present and taking each day as a divine gift to be cherished, will infuse a sense of purpose and gratitude into the way they build a positive attitude.

In such a state of equanimity, negative emotions have no place. They get washed away just as we wash our physical body to clean it up. To live well, emotional hygiene is as important as physical hygiene.

Secure Networks, Porous Platforms



Gopal Vittal

India's telecom sector operates under a stringent regulatory regime with rigorous, legally binding standards, oversight and enforcement mechanisms. As per Govt. in December 2025, about 40 lakh mobile connections were disconnected, and 1.3 lakh SMS templates used by spammers were blocked by Distributed Ledger Technology (DLT) system.

But this is only the telecom sector. Digital communication platforms remained largely untouched by such scrutiny. In other words, messaging apps, email services and social media (SM) platforms, carrying much larger volumes of person-to-person and business-to-consumer traffic, face none of the corresponding accountability for what flows through them.

The result? Cybercrime has flourished. This is because fraudsters have exploited this schism, and as guard rails have tightened on calls and SMSes, they have seamlessly moved across calls, text, apps, emails and

SM, following one simple rule: go where regulation is weakest and friction is lowest.

Meanwhile, faced with rising consumer harm and increasing regulatory scrutiny, many telecom operators have moved well beyond box-ticking compliance and are working overtime to show their commitment to conquering fraud. AI-driven spam detection, real-time behavioural analysis, malicious link blocking, proactive identification of fraudulent domains and coordinated takedowns deployed at national scale are being employed. But these efforts have also exposed a structural truth: even the most sophisticated safeguards on regulated telecom channels cannot fully protect consumers when fraud is free to flourish on unregulated digital platforms.

After all, one cannot firewall a small part of the digital ecosystem and call it security. This is also reflected in Global Anti-Scam Alliance's (GASA) latest findings: 86% of fraud attempts in India over the past 12 months have shifted to popular OTT communication platforms offering messaging and calling features. This asymmetry has produced predictable outcomes. Criminals migrate to the least governed channels, telecom operators shoulder a dis-



Who ate my cheese?

proportionate portion of the responsibility for their misuse. If a platform functions as a communications utility offering the same service, it must carry its share of obligations.

What we need are basic, tech-agnostic responsibilities across all major communication channels, traditional and digital alike, including proactive detection of scams, cooperation with network-level threat intelligence, rapid takedown of fraudulent links and accounts, and meaningful accountability for repeat abuse.

Collaboration is also important. Telecom networks sit at a unique vantage

point, able to detect patterns across channels and at scale. Digital platforms bring user-level visibility and interface controls. These capabilities should be combined, not siloed. That's how we will successfully prevent fraud.

What is needed isn't incremental changes but a specific firefighting, but a reset in how we think about consumer protection in communications. For India, this is an opportunity to build a platform-neutral communication framework and ensure legislation that imposes baseline, outcome-oriented obligations on scam prevention, intelligence sharing and timely response to abuse. Such a framework must shift the focus from what a platform is to what it does.

This is not a radical proposition but a necessary one. A platform-neutral communications framework would not burden innovation — it would protect it. More importantly, it would ensure that consumers experience communication today, not as 'telecom v digital' but as a single, continuous system. Without responsibility becoming as seamless as the service it underpins, the system will continue to fail the very people it is meant to protect.

The writer is executive vice chairman, ISharti, AI&T

New Coordinates, Better View



Saurabh Garg

GDP is a way to measure the size and health of a country's economy. It needs regular calibration to capture the economy's accurate picture, which is achieved through updating the base year of GDP at regular intervals. As the economy reshapes itself, new industries emerge, consumption patterns change and new data sources evolve, revisions help official data catch up with realities and make estimates more accurate and robust.

Availability of new data sources since the last base revision has helped us view sectoral and regional contributions to GDP clearly and adopt better methods. For instance, to estimate the value added by the unincorporated sector, broadly covering the informal sector as well.

Since the last base revision, some new sets like management and administration related data (MGT-7/7A) for companies have become available that provide information on business activities change and the enterprise, a description of business activity (as per National Indus-

trial Classification 2008), and percentage turnover from each business activity (industry) for each year. So, while rebasing, for multi-activity enterprises, value added is now allocated across activities based on newly available MGT-7 data rather than entirely to the major activity as was done earlier. This change allows us to capture sectoral contributions more accurately, providing a clearer view of how each business activity drives the economy.

Just as new company-level data helps us measure sectoral contributions more accurately, enhanced use of GST data in the new series allows for a finer, more precise view of regional contributions of GDP by inter-

alia, improving regional allocation about the private corporate sector and through better compilation of expenditure-side estimates at the state level. Availability of annual data from Annual Survey of Unincorporated Sector Enterprises (ASUSE) and Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), which wasn't available earlier, has also allowed us to adopt a better methodology for estimating value added by the unincorporated sector annually. Instead of inferring its contribution to GDP indirectly from other indicators, as was done before, this matters because this sector, comprising millions of household businesses, small shops and self-employed workers, forms a huge part of the economy and plays a vital role in jobs and livelihoods.

The base revision is more than just the use of new data sources. It is also about improvements in methodology. Double deflation Earlier, double deflation, a detailed method to adjust GDP for changes in price levels, was used only to the agriculture sector. In the new 2022-23 series, double deflation is expanded to the manufacturing sector, where sufficient data is available, and single extrapolation on volume extrapolation is used in all other sectors.

This approach makes the best use of data available, keeping estimates as accurate and reliable as possible. Double deflation is data-

intensive, as it requires detailed information on prices for both outputs and inputs. As more of this data becomes available over time, we will be able to expand its use to more sectors.

Closing the gap Alignment of estimates of the economy based on what is produced (production side) and what people spend (expenditure side). The two often don't match perfectly, a common occurrence, especially in quarterly GDP. To address this issue, in the new series, the framework of 'supply & use tables' is being used to ensure that discrepancies are limited in the early estimates and finally eliminated when the full set of data becomes available at the time of final estimates.

Updated GDP is like looking at the economy through a sharper lens. Every economic activity, big or small, comes under clear focus, accurately revealing its contribution to the nation's growth. By using better data, refining methods and aligning with the world's best practices, Govt has brought the economy into sharper view.

For citizens, this means that policies and public services are guided by an accurate understanding of how the economy works, making growth something that is felt in everyday life, not just on paper.

The writer is secretary, ministry of statistics and programme implementation, Govt

PARANORMAL ACTIVITY

Paragraphs From Fiction

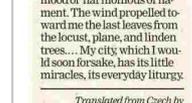
Living Parallel

Alexandr Kliment

I stood exposing my face to the breeze and to the light sprinkle of the rain, and I believe I was smiling blissfully. Several people looked at me. It's possible that among the turning heads were statues on the bridge. I wouldn't be surprised. After all, we have said a thing or two about statues; my aged saints. Even stone can feel someone walking by with resolute steps, someone carrying within him a great burden. Such a man walks well, lightly, festively.

It was plain and simple. I go to the end of the bridge and then I walk along the Kampa, and in the Vrtbosky Gardens I greet the dampened profiles of the Braun statues and then see to Olga. 'Olga, here I am. I will go away with you.' I ran down the steps to the Kampa. The curves of the bare tree trunks shag in a mood of harmonious ornament. The wind propelled toward me the last leaves from the locust, plane, and Linden trees... My city which I would soon forsake, has its little miracles, its everyday liturgy.

Translated from Czech by Robert Weisker



Chat Room

My Cat Ate Our Trade Deal

'The Edit, India Should Keep at it with the FT Deal' (Punch) has a reasonable case for continued engagement. Trade negotiations are rarely comfortable, but walking away rarely helps either side. What matters now is clear red lines and realistic expectations. The Supreme Court ruling has constrained Washington somewhat, which gives New Delhi a slightly stronger hand. The focus should be on securing tangible gains in areas like rural healthcare, textiles and IT services before moving to harder disputes. Patience and pragmatism, not posturing, will serve India best at this table. *A. Vishwanath* Coimbatore

Wider lens helps

The Statesman Incorporating and directly descended from the Friends of India -founded 1818

Voter Roll Trust

In any democracy, the most fragile infrastructure is not a bridge or a power line, but the voter roll. It is the ledger that decides who exists politically and who does not.

When that ledger becomes contested, the dispute is never merely administrative; it becomes a test of trust between institutions that are supposed to check and balance one another.

West Bengal is now living through such a test. The state is in the middle of a Special Intensive Revision of its electoral rolls, a process meant to weed out errors, duplications, and outdated entries.

On paper, that sounds routine. In practice, it has turned into a collision between the state government and the Election Commission of India, with millions of citizens caught in between, unsure whether their names will survive the audit of paperwork and procedure.

What makes this episode different is not just the scale - several million claims and objections is not a small backlog - but the decision to bring judicial officers directly into the process.

District judges and additional district judges are being asked to step out of courtrooms and into the machinery of election administration. That is an extraordinary measure, and it should worry anyone who believes that institutions should normally stay in their lanes.

Yet extraordinary measures do not emerge from thin air. They arrive when routine cooperation breaks down. The Constitution gives the Election Commission wide authority over elections, but it also assumes a working relationship with state administrations that must supply staff, data, and logistical support.

When that relationship turns into open suspicion, the system begins to seize up. Files stop moving. Deadlines become threats instead of milestones. And the citizen, whose right to vote depends on all this quiet coordination, becomes an anxious spectator.

Chief Justice Surya Kant's intervention signals more than impatience; it signals a judgment that the usual levers of compliance are no longer enough. By asking the Calcutta High Court to deploy serving and retired judges, the Supreme Court has effectively inserted a neutral referee into a process that both sides now view as politically loaded.

The hope is that a judicial stamp will make decisions about inclusion or exclusion look less like partisan manoeuvres and more like reasoned determinations based on documents and law.

Still, with an election on the horizon and a mountain of pending cases, delay is the one luxury West Bengal does not have. The immediate task is to ensure that eligible voters are not lost in a bureaucratic fog, and ineligible names are not preserved out of inertia or fear of controversy. If judicial officers can restore momentum and credibility, their presence will have served a democratic purpose.

The deeper lesson, however, is sobering: the credibility of elections rests as much on institutional trust as on ink and paper. Once that trust erodes, even the simplest civic exercise begins to require the heaviest constitutional tools.

Tariffs on Trial

For a year, the argument over American trade policy sounded like a quarrel over numbers: 10 per cent, 15 per cent, 25 per cent. Then the Supreme Court stepped in and changed the subject. By ruling that President Donald Trump could not use the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 to impose sweeping import taxes, the court made it clear this was not a dispute about arithmetic.

It was a reminder that tariffs must be law before they are leverage. The American Constitution places the power to tax in Congress. Over decades, lawmakers have delegated pieces of that authority through narrow statutes. Some of those tools are old and familiar.

Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 allows tariffs on national-security grounds after investigations; that is how the United States ended up with 25 per cent duties on steel and 10 per cent on aluminium, and why automobiles and other "strategic" sectors periodically find themselves under review. Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 authorises penalties after findings of unfair trade practices, a slower, more procedural route.

What the court rejected was something broader: the use of an emergency law designed for crises to run a near-permanent, across-the-board tariff regime. That distinction matters, because it forces the White House to step scale for legal footing. Mr Trump's response was immediate.

He turned to Section 122 of the 1974 Trade Act, a rarely used provision that allows a temporary global tariff of up to 15 per cent for 150 days unless Congress steps in. In other words, the new levy is wide but shallow - and on a clock.

Set beside the older tools, the contrast is stark. The 15 per cent global tariff under Section 122 is time-limited and legally fragile. The 25 per cent steel and 10 per cent aluminium duties under Section 232 are narrow but durable, anchored in investigations that make them harder to unwind.

The administration has signalled it will combine these authorities to keep overall tariff pressure high. In courtroom terms, that may be defensible. In business terms, it is a recipe for uncertainty.

Manufacturers do not build plants or rewire supply chains on 150-day horizons. A carmaker deciding where to assemble vehicles, or a chip firm choosing where to place new capacity, needs to know not just today's rate but tomorrow's rulebook. A trade regime that depends on rotating statutes - temporary global levies here, sectoral penalties there - turns planning into guesswork. That uncertainty is a hidden tariff of its own.

None of this is an argument against industrial policy or supply-chain security. It is an argument for honesty about the instrument. If Washington believes a permanent tariff wall is necessary, it should legislate one, debate it, and accept the consequences.

The Supreme Court has closed one shortcut. The rush to find another only highlights the real problem: a trade strategy built on workarounds is not a strategy - it is a holding pattern with a stopwatch.

Indo-French ties

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Indo-French partnership, both countries have agreed to a road map to set the calendar for the bilateral relationship up to 2047, which will celebrate the centenary of India's independence, the century of diplomatic relations between the two countries and 50 years of strategic partnership



At a time when India is recalibrating its diplomatic outreach, the strengthening of the Indo-French strategic partnership assumes strategic significance. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has just hosted French President Emmanuel Macron. Macron participated along with 20 world leaders in the A10 summit in New Delhi.

Ahead of the visit the Defence Acquisition Council cleared the deal for purchase of Rafale fighter aircraft for India's Air Force. The aircraft proved its capability during 'Operation Sindoor' in May last year.

The Indian Air Force operates 36 Rafales and the Indian Navy is in the process of inducting 26 Rafale M aircraft for carrier operations. The acquisition of Rafale fighter jets from France reflects India's adherence to self-reliance or Atmanirbhar Bharat and diversification of defence needs.

The strategic partnership between India and France has acquired heft in recent years. Earlier in 2023 India hosted President Macron as the Chief Guest of the Republic Day parade on 26 January. New Delhi reciprocated the gesture extended to Prime Minister Modi in July 2022 when he was the guest at the Bastille Day parade.

There are many facets to Indo-French relations. The clarion call of the French Revolution for freedom and equality echoed in India's yearning for independence in India's freedom struggle.

India and France established diplomatic relations in 1947 immediately after India's independence. It augurs well that in spite of the shifts in geo-politics, the ties between the two countries have not only endured, but have also acquired strategic heft.

The relationship between the two countries was elevated to a strategic level in 1998. The bilateral strategic partnership between India and France touches various areas including defence and security cooperation, space cooperation and civil nuclear cooperation.

The two countries also have a convergence of views on a broad range of issues including UN reforms, regional and international issues including climate change, terrorism, and maritime security including freedom of navigation.

India and France also share a robust cultural and linguistic interface through people-to-people contacts and institutions. The Alliance Francaise in India is a testament of French culture and language in India. Auroville in Pondicherry is yet another icon of Indo-France spiritual convergence. Started by the Mother, a devotee of Sri Aurobindo, Auroville continues to be a hermitage for people seeking spiritual pursuits.

All these years, there have been regular exchanges of visits between the two countries at various levels. President Macron participated in the G-20 summit hosted by India in New Delhi in September 2023 and held bilateral discussions with Prime Minister Modi on various issues. Earlier Prime Minister Modi met President Macron on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Bali in 2022. The two leaders share a chemistry of warmth and bonhomie.

In addition to personal meetings, Prime Minister Modi and President Macron have reached out to each other through tele-conversations to share their thoughts on issues of concern to both countries.

In a letter, President Macron thanked Prime Minister Modi for India's decision to lift export bans on life saving drugs such as paracetamol, which was exported to France when it was in the midst of the first wave of the pandemic.

President Macron expressed solidarity with India in the fight against Covid-19 by providing medical equipment and technical expertise. Prime Minister Modi virtually addressed the Paris Peace Forum on the theme "Bouncing Back to Better Future" in November 2020.

The two countries also have an annual Strategic Dialogue mechanism. The last meeting was held in January. The dialogue was co-chaired by India's National Security Adviser Ajit Doval, and his French counterpart Emmanuel Bonne, the French President's diplomatic adviser, who also met Prime Minister Modi and External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar.

The two countries have also initiated a trilateral cooperation mechanism with like-minded partners in the region. The first such trilateral meeting was with Australia in September 2020 and the second was with the United Arab Emirates in February 2023. Also, through a unique model of Triangular Development Cooperation, India and France aim to work on setting up the Indo-Pacific Triangular Cooperation (IPTDC) Fund with the objective to support climate and SDG focussed innovations and start-ups from three countries of the Indo-Pacific.

France is also supplying 26 maritime versions of the Rafale-M. India and France hail the success of the first Scorpene submarine construction programme. France is also a member of the International Solar Alliance, an initiative of developmental partnership by India for clean energy.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Indo-French partnership, both countries have agreed to a road map to set the calendar for the bilateral relationship up to 2047, which will celebrate the centenary of India's independence, the century of diplomatic relations between the two countries and 50 years of strategic partnership.

France is poised to play a very significant role in realising Prime Minister Modi's dream of making India a developed nation or Viksit Bharat by 2047.

The writer is a former senior fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research and the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses. Currently he is the Consulting Editor of the Journal Parliamentary Information. Views are personal

INQUIRER

The clamor for anti-dynasty law

Analyzing data from 1988 to 2019, the paper found that family dynasts have tightened their grip on all local positions from 19 per cent in 1988 to 29 per cent in 2017, or some 170 positions per election period.

From 1,303 political clans with two family members, 257 political clans with three family members, and 99 political clans with four or more family members in 2001, the number rose to 1,548; 339; and 217, respectively in 2019.

The Advocates of Science and Technology for the People, or Agham, a group of scientists, meanwhile, cited how dynasties have taken over top posts in both local and national governments, 99 per cent in the Senate, 67 per cent in the House, 80 per cent among provincial governors, and 63 per cent of mayors.

It's no surprise then that Congress has moved sluggishly to effect into law Article 2, Section 26 of the Constitution, which explicitly mandates the state to guarantee equal access to public service and prohibit political dynasties. After all, why expect

lawmakers to pass a law that would dissolve their privileged perch in politics by virtue of blood and family ties?

But with an investigation into corrupted flood control projects revealing how checks and balances have been eroded by officials sharing the same lineage, the clamor to finally pass an anti-dynasty bill resurfaced, with several versions filed in the Senate and in the House.

Among them is House Bill No. 5905 sponsored by Akbayan representatives, which prohibits any person related within the fourth degree of consanguinity or affinity to an incumbent elective official from running for or holding office, unless the incumbent is ending their term within the same election year.

This covers immediate and distant relatives - from parents, children, siblings and in-laws, down to first cousins, great-uncles and aunts, and great-grandparents. Still, not quite as extensive, says analysts, describing the

Philippines as being family-centric with even household help seen as extended family.

With the issue provoking divergent views, the series of public consultations may be a good way to gauge public sentiment on dynasties, while being part of voter education toward more mature political choices.

For sure, it would be a thorny road ahead, with the Filipino's strong sense of utang na loob or debt of gratitude creating resistance among constituents who see public works projects as personal favors from politicians, instead of being part of their mandate carried out with public funds.

The consultations also revealed a generational rift, with older generations clinging to familiar names - the devil they know - while the youth decry the illusion of choice in traditional politics and the exclusion of more qualified candidates outside the ruling family's circle. "Competencies are not inherited, and neither should positions be," they

noted. As it is, political dynasties not only concentrate power in a few complicit hands; they carry economic costs as well, and not just with elected officials passing laws or influencing policies that favor their family's businesses.

A 2015 study by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies found that dynasties are most prevalent in the poorest provinces, where weak governance and corruption conspire to limit upward mobility.

With business interests at stake and the perks that political power brings, it's no wonder that officials would cling to their posts, using kith and kin as placeholders while they wait out the prohibition period. They have the resources to run after all, unlimited funds that shut out less endowed but more worthy candidates.

In a real democracy where everyone is allowed to run and have the opportunity to serve the public, an anti-dynasty law levels the playing field, muting the name recall that gives political dynasts an unfair edge.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Credible template

Sir, The report "PM Modi, Prez Macron ink key pacts in Mumbai" (February 18) perceptively captures the strategic depth of the Mumbai summit and the elevation of bilateral ties to a Special Global Strategic Partnership. This is not a ceremonial upgrade but a structural shift in how India and France engage with a turbulent global order.

The personal synergy between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Emmanuel Macron has decisively moved the relationship beyond buyer-seller defence transactions into co-design and co-production. Among the 21 agreements signed, the joint venture between Bharat Electronics Limited and Safran to manufacture HAMMER missile engines is emblematic of the emerging defence-industrial ecosystem under the Make in India and Atmanirbhar Bharat frameworks.

Equally historic is the inauguration of the H125 Helicopter Final Assembly Line in Vengaluru, Karnataka - the first private-sector facility in India to undertake full rotary-wing aircraft assembly, signalling India's entry into global aerospace supply chains as a producer, not merely a market.

As the India-France Year of Innovation 2025 is launched, the emphasis on "transparent algorithms" and "AI in Health" adds a normative layer to the partnership. Recent announcements on joint research funding, student mobility expansion, and cooperation on small modular reactors and green hydrogen further indicate that the Horizon 2047



workers during the election process. Of these, elections were completed in eight municipalities, while voting in three was deferred again because of pending court cases and related issues.

The State Election Commission said the Model Code of Conduct, which was in force during the municipal elections, has been lifted with immediate effect.

Elections were held for 116 municipalities and seven municipal corporations, with 81 municipalities, extending its dominance in the civic polls. With this, the BJP has been rejected by the people.

Yours, etc., Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai, 18 February.

industrial and scientific outcomes.

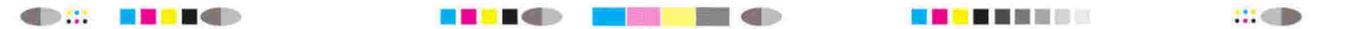
In an era of fractured alliances, the India-France partnership offers a credible template of multipolar cooperation - rooted in strategic autonomy, technological collaboration, and shared democratic values rather than dependency or dominance.

Yours, etc., Vidyaagar Reddy Kethiri, Hanamkonda, 18 February.

Rejected

Sir, The ruling Congress Party on 17 February dominated the elections and won chairperson posts in seven of the eight Telangana municipalities where elections were held, while the opposition Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) secured one post.

Elections to 105 of the 116 municipalities were conducted on 11 February, while polling in 11 municipalities was deferred to Tuesday due to various reasons, including pushing and shoving between Congress and BRS



Removing tax breaks on disability pension

HARSHAKAKAR

The Finance bill 2026 aims to terminate income-tax exemptions accruing from pensions of those who superannuated with disabilities in the armed forces.

Courts have also insisted that individuals in allied or other superannuating receive equal disability benefits. Faced with a slew of court cases on disability pensions, which it continues losing, the government chose the easy way out, to regain some of its lost tax.

India is a nation which has always been in conflict, either within or with adversaries. The armed forces have been battling insurgencies for decades, commencing with the Naga National Council uprising, led by AZ Phizo, in the early 1950s.

These insurgencies were contained at high cost to the armed forces who operated with one hand tied behind their backs, thereby suffering high casualties. It was this which created conditions for the government

to regain control and in some cases link ceasefire agreements. Figures of soldiers killed or wounded in containing insurgencies are unavailable but would be far more than casualties in wars.

Every time a soldier steps out of his post in an insurgency environment, even for a routine patrol, he needs to be prepared for an ambush or an encounter. This mentally affects some operating in such an environment and could manifest later in life in some form. This would never be understood by politicians taking decisions on disability pensions today.

The Indian Army has also fought multiple wars since independence, commencing from 1947-48 and the last in Kargil. Every conflict has casualties, soldiers wounded and killed. In 1971, India suffered around 3,500 dead and 10,000-12,000 wounded. Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka left over 1,700 dead and 3,500 wounded, while Operation Vijay in Kargil resulted in 527 dead and 1,300 injured.

India also possesses the most varied terrain in which troops serve, stretching from the Siachen Glacier to super high altitudes and extending to the deserts of Rajasthan and jungles of the North East. Each has its own peculiarities, impacting the health of some who have operated there. This prevents them from leading a normal life.

Some of those wounded or impacted by service conditions, though having some form of disability, including loss of limbs, remain in service, albeit with restrictions on employment. The armed forces, respecting those who suffered injuries in active insurgency and wars, do not deny them promotions, though they restrict their employment.

Those who have decided to serve despite having an option of being boarded out have done so because for them the armed forces is a way of life, not just a career. Such passion amongst those in uniform can never be understood by a finance minister whose job is juggling numbers, enhancing revenue, and playing politics, despite having once been a defence minister.

There is no doubt that disabilities have been exploited by a few to gain undue advantage post-retirement. However, those who have done so discovered their illnesses towards the fag end of their service, after having attained the highest positions they could garner. Punishing the masses, including genuine ones, because of a few who misused the system based on their appointment, goes against the very ethos of justice.

The finance ministry, in coordination with service HQs, needs to evolve a methodology where genuine cases are separated from those who exploited the system. This is feasible and a better option than punishing everyone across the board.

Majority of our troops are from small cities and villages. For them wearing the uniform is a sign of pride. They believe that the government would care for its soldiers during and post-service. This illogical finance bill would break this trust. Unless politicians understand the dedication and passion of a soldier, they will continue playing games with his life.

The global reputation of our armed forces flows from the determination and valour of our soldiers, not just quality of weapons. The soldier acts without concern for his own safety because he believes the government will care for him and his family in case he becomes



a casualty. The PM and defence minister visiting troops on Diwali for a couple of hours and praising their efforts does not alone display their respect for soldiers. It is only by ensuring soldiers are looked after post-retirement, despite having disabilities which impede their daily life, that would convince troops that the government and nation cares.

What the finance minister has done in this budget is highlight that the sacrifice of a soldier is expendable. It has also sent the message that love for the nation, professionalism, and willingness to serve, despite having disabilities, is a flawed approach. What the finance bill conveys is that if you are ever injured or have an opportunity, take disability and leave. This government has no respect for your dedication and sacrifice.

Taxing pensions with disability may not add much to the national

exchequer, but conveys the mindset of a government whose leadership regularly mentions that we stand with soldiers. Institutions like the Board of Control for Cricket in India are untaxed on flimsy pretexts but a disabled soldier, who lost a limb in service of a nation is, what an irony.

The soldier will pay the tax, after all the finance minister demands it, but would always have the belief that the nation has backed down from its promise, solely because the state coffers need a few extra rupees. The bill also conveys that soldiers who possess genuine disabilities are considered at par with those who misused the system. The finance minister needs to find realistic solutions to at least to protect the standing of the government, rather than terming disabled soldiers who serve as exploiters of the system.

(The writer is a retired Major-General of the Indian Army)

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 24 February 1926

OCCASIONAL NOTE

OUR special representative in Delhi endeavours to reach the inner meaning of the resignation from the Independent party of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya and Mr. Ranga Charar. Ostensibly these gentlemen wish to assist in the formation of a single Nationalist party. In actual fact they will presently be coming under the leadership of Pandit Motilal Nehru. Their resignations are, in appearance, a further development of the split along communal lines which seems destined to produce distinct Hindu and Mohammedan parties in all the legislatures.

News Items

INDIAN CHURCH MEASURE

FUTURE CONSTITUTION

FOR over an hour the Bishop of Calcutta was "heckled" at a meeting of the Calcutta Branch of the European Association last night, when he gave an address on the objects and scope of the Indian Church Measure.

After outlining the measure, the Metropolitan invited questions, and Mr. H. Hobbs was the first to respond. He inquired who was responsible for the origin of the Measure, observing, in reply to a comment by the Bishop, that it was incredible that "our Indian friends" could separate politics from religion entirely.

Replying, the Bishop incidentally discounted any idea that the Church of Rome was being followed in this matter, pointing out that that Church did not believe in "regional churches." As regards the origin of the idea, they had to go back to 1877, when a resolution was passed by the Episcopal Synod to the effect that the Church in India should have Synodical government.

PEACE IN THE COAL INDUSTRY?

HOPE OF AN EARLY SOLUTION

THE report of the Commission upon the British coal industry is likely to be completed next week. It will be of an extremely exhaustive character, and since the beginning of the present month the Commissioners have been meeting for fourteen hours daily in order to complete their effort at the earliest possible moment.

The general view is that their recommendations, about which the close secrecy is being maintained, will have enhanced the chance of acceptance as the result of a desire for peace in the industry expressed recently by prominent men associated with all branches of it.

The Daily Mail states "Expressions of opinion gleaned from both sides in the industry have led to the firm conviction, both in Governmental and unofficial circles, that with the assistance of the Royal Commission a path can be found which will lead to the continuation of work in the coalfields without interruption, and the prospect of restoring the industry to an economic footing. No attempt is made to suggest that it will be a path entirely easy to find, but at least the atmosphere in which the prospects are being discussed unofficially appears to hold out hope for a solution."

The Daily Telegraph also declares that "the chances of an amicable settlement of the industry's difficulties have considerably improved" and the same view is expressed in other newspapers.

Can America's institutions survive Trump?

EMMA SHORTIS

THE stunning arrest of Andrew Mounbatten-Windsor by UK police on suspicion of misconduct in public office must have chilled many powerful American men to the bone. They may now wonder: could something like this now happen in the US?

The former prince's arrest is related to his association with dead sex offender Jeffrey Epstein and allegations he shared confidential material. Andrew has consistently denied wrongdoing and has been released under investigation.

To see UK police making arrests over allegations relating to Epstein contrasts strongly with the US where, so far, little has happened to further investigate those linked to the disgraced financier.

So, will we now see stronger Epstein-related investigative efforts and possibly even arrests in the US? And why haven't we seen anything like that, so far?

Will this actually prompt stronger action in the US now? It's possible. The whole situation is fairly unpredictable, and there has been mounting pressure on people named in the Epstein files to resign or step aside, particularly in higher education.

In Congress, US lawmakers are pushing hard for accountability. It's important to remember the collapse of the rule of law in the US is far from inevitable.

The Epstein story still has a long way to play out yet, if only because of the weight of the documentary evidence that needs to be sorted through. It's also possible the arrest and potential prosecution of Mounbatten-Windsor (and others outside the UK) may end up revealing more from the Epstein story than has come out of the Department of Justice (DOJ) releases, which have been selective.

If the Mounbatten-Windsor case goes to trial - which is still far from certain - and as the scandal reverberates across Europe, that may end up circumventing efforts to slow-weak the release of Epstein-related documents and information. Why have big arrests like this happened in the US so far? The most obvious reason is the stranglehold the Trump administration has on the DOJ.

The performance of the attorney-general, Pam Bondi, in the recent judiciary committee hearing is a fair indication of that.

To have the attorney-general - instead of being accountable and answering legitimate questions about the Epstein files - waxing lyrical about US President Donald Trump being the greatest president in American history tells you a lot about the political capture of that department. Another extremely

subtle sign of that capture is the large banner featuring Trump's face that has just been slung across the Justice Department building.

All this tells you the DOJ is not an independent government department anymore. It has been captured and weaponised by the Trump administration.

It's the same story at the FBI; instead of taking strong action over revelations appearing the Epstein files, the agency appears to be focused on investigating Trump's claims about 2020 election "fraud" in Georgia.

That shouldn't exactly be a surprise, given FBI Director Kash Patel wrote a series of children's books depicting Trump as an unjustly wronged "king". The unfortunate truth is there's no satisfactory answer as to why no significant arrests have been made in the US in relation to the Epstein files. It is partly the Trump administration's capture of these agencies and departments.

But it is also that the Epstein scandal implicates so many of the richest people in the world. And, of course, they're very good at protecting themselves.

It's also a marker of Trump's capture of his political base. Viewed from the outside, it defies logic. You'd think a movement that coalesced around conspiracy theories there was a powerful cabal of paedophiles at work in the US would be loudly



calling for arrests after the Epstein revelations. The fact they're not shows how ingrained their loyalty is, and the depth of the personality cult that has developed around Trump. This base is far from a majority of the American people, but it is one that has - for now at least - largely captured the major levers of power in the US.

So following Andrew's arrest, will anything happen in the US? It's possible, but don't hold your breath.

The other major news is it now looks increasingly likely Trump is about to start a war in Iran.

It's common for people to say he does things like that to distract from the Epstein story. But I see his efforts in Iran (and Venezuela, and elsewhere) as part of a concerted effort to radically reshape American society and the United States' role in the world. It's about the reassertion of American

power - which Trump understands to mean his own power.

The president unilaterally declaring a war on Iran without the ascent of Congress would defy the law. This is all part of a broader pattern of the Trump administration's attacks on rule of law and the institutions charged with implementing it.

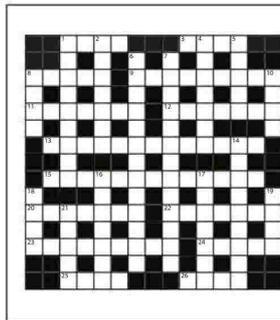
Overall, Mounbatten-Windsor's arrest throws into stark relief the state of the US compared to other democracies like the UK.

What's happened in the UK shows the collapse of the rule of law is not inevitable. Institutions can hold, even if they are slow and deeply flawed.

Perhaps we will one day see institutions in the US working as they are supposed to, too.

(The writer is Adjunct Senior Fellow, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University. This article was published on www.thecoalition.com)

Crossword | No. 293385



Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Dictator's time in power reportedly drops form of control (4), 3 Opening screen secures name (4), 8 Common feature of publicity, explicitly solicited within the law (5), 9 Writing material put back in cupboard and bound together (5-4), 11 Anger reflected by very wearing bad mood (7), 12 Cost of transport spoils date (7), 13 New flare-up involving clubs in offensive incident on playing field (13), 15 Women's boat crew taking up another sport (15), 20 Spectacular gesture's most generous (13), 22 Travel company in outskirts of Barnet for Londoners (7), 23 British novel that's about English rock (4,5), 24 Benefit from Virginia getting into trouble (5), 25 Heard substantial chunk of Time is owned by US? (4), 26 Missing pair of sale items finally returned (4), DOWN: 1 Meet again about general's prisoner in flat (5), 2 Football team stopped by for one or two? (7), 4 Discharge from canal found in river and mouth of estuary (7), 5 Billion Atrial tests gained notoriety after initially going wrong (5), 6 Accountant helping to check correct authorisation (13), 7 High-tech concession disliked by retaining prisoner's time in charge (13), 8 Passion seen in counter-revolution (4), 10 Article with literary strength and moral quality (4), 14 Intimate papers stolen by Tory supporter close to government (9), 16 Young member in musical based on Romeo (7), 17 Rent trouble's spiralling problem for housing? (7), 18 Flag up string of characters in global search (4), 19 Divorced legend's despicable character (4), 21 Speech ignoring case for proportionate measure (5)

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

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

Editor's TAKE

Cross-border strikes and a fragile region

In a region already burdened by instability, Pakistan's airstrikes on Afghanistan threaten not only bilateral peace but broader regional security

Pakistan is once again messing up its relations with its western neighbour, Afghanistan. Though the relations between the two countries have never been cordial and border skirmishes are common, the recent airstrikes violating Afghanistan's sovereignty take the conflict to the next level.

The seeds of conflict go back to the time when the Durand Line was drawn way back in 1893 by the British, which Afghanistan refused to recognise. After 9/11, Pakistan sided with the US in its operations against Afghanistan; the later Taliban phase also led to much consternation.

In recent times, following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, militant attacks inside Pakistan increased. Islamabad has since carried out cross-border strikes, claiming self-defence.

At the heart of the dispute lies the unresolved question of the Durand Line. This territorial disagreement is compounded by accusations of militant safe havens and cross-border insurgency, with each side blaming the other for harbouring armed groups that carry out attacks across the frontier. Decades of conflict have also generated massive refugee flows, placing social and economic pressure on Pakistan.

The bigger issue, however, is that escalation in the region is a threat to its peace and stability. The region remains volatile, and any escalation could invite the involvement of bigger powers to exploit the situation. In this context, India's sharp condemnation of Pakistan's recent airstrikes on Afghanistan is rightly placed as it underscores the gravity of a situation that threatens to destabilise an already volatile region.

The strikes, which reportedly targeted militant hideouts but resulted in civilian casualties, including women and children during the holy month of Ramadan, have drawn criticism. India has described the action as yet another attempt by Pakistan to "externalise its internal failures" and has reiterated its support for the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Afghanistan. Islamabad claims that the strikes were conducted in retaliation for recent militant attacks within its territory and that dozens of terrorists were eliminated, but this tells only a partial truth. However, the deeper context suggests a more complex motive. Pakistan has been grappling with rising internal instability, particularly in its border regions, where militant groups have intensified attacks against security forces.

By striking across the border, Islamabad appears intent on sending a message of resolve to domestic audiences. The airstrikes thus shift the focus from internal governance and intelligence lapses to an external adversary. Second, they pressure the Afghan authorities to take stronger action against groups allegedly operating from their soil.

Yet, such unilateral military actions risk violating Afghan sovereignty and undermining fragile diplomatic channels. The airstrikes are an outright act of violation of the sovereignty of a nation, with a broader humanitarian dimension as they take place in the holy month of Ramadan. Interestingly, Pakistan's denunciation of cross-border terrorism underscores a striking irony: the very strategy it once employed now appears to be rebounding upon it. Karma!

India at the forefront of AI governance

At a time when artificial intelligence offers transformative possibilities alongside serious ethical, economic, and security risks, the summit highlighted the urgent need for balanced regulation that promotes innovation while safeguarding public interest



KALYANI SHANKAR

India's recent AI summit concluded with the New Delhi Declaration, engaging 88 nations and marking a major milestone in global AI regulatory efforts, highlighting India's growing influence on the international stage.

The declaration presents a global vision for "collaborative, trusted, resilient, and efficient" artificial intelligence, highlighting that its benefits must be shared by all of humanity to realise its full potential.

AI has become very popular in the last decade, especially in the past five years. It has many benefits but also poses risks, making the topic complicated. People around the world are worried about these risks.

The recent summit was the first of its kind in the region and focused on these growing concerns about AI.

India has signed an agreement to join Pax Silica, a US-led group focused on building a strong supply chain for critical minerals and artificial intelligence (AI).

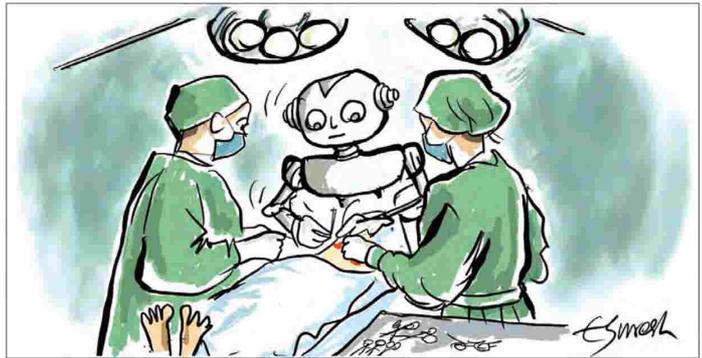
Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw highlighted the alliance's significance for the semiconductor industry and stated, "The U.S. delegation lead at the AI summit added, "AI adoption cannot lead to a brighter future if hindered by bureaucracies and centralised control."

The summit attracted major investments for India, with the Adani Group and Ambani each committing \$1 billion and Microsoft investing \$50 billion. This summit highlights India's commitment to aligning its AI standards with global frameworks, with a focus on inclusion, responsibility, and international leadership in AI regulation.

The summit brought together participants from over 88 countries, including leaders such as Emmanuel Macron and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. A strong US delegation and executives from companies such as Microsoft and IBM highlighted the importance of international collaboration.

According to the official report, around 250,000 attendees, mainly under 30, participated in the exhibition. Technology Minister Vaishnaw believed that India's AI investments could increase to \$140 billion.

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more integrated into daily life from healthcare to entertainment — the need for regulatory oversight is growing. AI is a double-edged weapon. While it can help increase efficiency, there are also possible risks.



THE SUMMIT SHOWCASED INDIA'S EXPANDING DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND THE GOVERNMENT'S PROACTIVE STEPS, INCLUDING A COMPREHENSIVE AI ROADMAP, TO ESTABLISH THE COUNTRY AS A GLOBAL LEADER IN TECHNOLOGY AND AI DEVELOPMENT

The writer is a popular columnist
@daily_pioneer
@kalyanishankar
The Pioneer

What is AI technology, and why is the world concerned? There is cause for concern, as it is a double-edged weapon. There is fear that AI will take over the world.

AI can help improve patient care and resource management in organisations, but it raises ethical, privacy, and security concerns. There's also anxiety about job displacement and bias in credit systems and the criminal justice system, with predictions that AI could eliminate 85 million jobs globally by 2025.

Additionally, people are increasingly worried about how data is handled and its consequences. Establishing common standards benefits everyone.

AI regulations vary worldwide: the European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act imposes strict rules on high-risk systems, while the US adopts a fragmented approach, underscoring the need for a unified global regulatory framework.

These differences highlight the need for a more unified approach, as international collaboration is essential for establishing universally adopted standards and best practices in AI.

The summit showcased India's expanding digital infrastructure and the government's proactive steps, including a comprehensive AI roadmap, to establish the country as a global leader in technology and AI development.

The India AI Mission has allocated ₹10,372 crore to enhance the artificial intelligence ecosystem. Additionally, more than 38,000 GPUs have been integrated into a centralised computing facility, and 12 indigenous foundation models are currently under development. Consequently, India is positioning itself as both a developer and a facilitator in the

emerging era of AI.

AI is now a vital part of India's defence sector, according to Dr Chandrika Kaushik, Director General of DRDO.

Policymakers are worried that the lack of transparency in private markets, such as private credit and private equity, could hinder the identification of early warning signs of trouble.

India's challenges include striking a balance between innovation and government overregulation of AI. It could stifle creativity and hinder the development of groundbreaking technologies. At the same time, a lack of regulation could lead to dangerous results.

The Pioneer Regulatory bodies need to engage with stakeholders across the AI ecosystem, including technologists, ethicists, and civil society organisations. This collaborative approach ensures that regulations are grounded in practical realities and adaptable to the fast-evolving nature of AI technology.

There is growing recognition of the importance of fostering ethical AI practices, including transparency, fair access, and user privacy, to reassure users that responsible development is a priority.

As we acknowledge the potential of artificial intelligence, a balanced regulatory framework can help us maximise the benefits of AI while minimising its risks.

The way we regulate artificial intelligence (AI) in the future will greatly affect society. We must ensure that AI is used to help everyone. Many countries are worried that AI might take control of our world. The conference was a chance to promote transparency, which is important for reassuring people around the globe.



A woman views tulips at the Tulip Festival 2026 in New Delhi. PHOTO: PFI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

www.daily-pioneer.com

facebook.com/daily-pioneer @TheDailyPioneer
instagram.com/daily-pioneer linkedin.com/in/ThePioneer

Can India shape the machine age's moral compass?



RACHNA LAKHPATRI

2ND OPINION

In every civilisational turning point, nations are tested not merely by their technological prowess but by the values they embed within that technology. Artificial intelligence is one such moment. As algorithms increasingly influence governance, healthcare, finance, education and warfare, the world is not just asking who builds AI — it is asking who guides it.

India's articulation of "AI for People, Planet & Progress" is a slogan. It is a philosophical positioning. In a global landscape where AI leadership has largely been framed as a contest between superpowers, India is attempting to redefine the narrative: from dominance to democratisation, from profit to purpose.

But can this vision genuinely shape global AI governance? India's strength lies in its paradox. It is both a techno-

logical powerhouse and a developing nation grappling with scale. With one of the world's largest digital public infrastructures — Aadhaar, UPI, and a thriving start-up ecosystem — India has already demonstrated how technology can leapfrog legacy barriers. Its model of digital public goods has attracted attention across the Global South. If AI is layered onto this foundation with intent and inclusion, India's voice could carry moral authority in global forums.

However, aspiration must confront reality.

India's regulatory framework for AI is still evolving. The emphasis so far has leaned towards enabling innovation — encouraging start-ups, fostering research, and attracting investment. This is essential. Overregulation at an early stage could stifle growth. Yet the absence of clear accountability frameworks raises questions about bias, surveillance, data privacy and algorithmic transparency.

The Digital Personal Data Protection Act is a start, but AI governance demands sector-specific safeguards and enforceable ethical standards.

Infrastructure, too, presents a dual narrative. Urban innovation hubs are world-class; rural digital access remains uneven. Compute capacity, semiconductor dependency, and high-quality datasets are areas where India must invest aggressively if it seeks to move from consumer to creator of foundational AI models. Without sovereign AI infrastruc-

ture, rule-making risks becoming rhetorical rather than structural.

So is India transitioning from AI follower to AI rule-maker?

The shift has begun — diplomatically and ideologically. By convening global dialogues and foregrounding inclusivity, India is positioning itself as a bridge between advanced economies and the developing world. It understands both the anxieties of job displacement and the promise of productivity gains. This dual lens gives it credibility.

But rule-making requires more than convening power. It demands domestic coherence. Policies must balance innovation with accountability — protecting citizens without paralysing entrepreneurs. Ethical AI frameworks must be enforceable, not advisory. Public trust must be cultivated deliberately.

If India succeeds, it could offer the world a third path: neither laissez-faire acceleration nor restrictive technocracy, but responsible innovation rooted in human dignity.

The real question is not whether India can shape global AI governance. It is whether it can align its regulatory courage with its technological ambition.

History rarely waits. The machine age is writing itself. The pen, this time, may well be coded.

The writer is a freelance journalist who writes on development and socio-economic issues

AI SUMMIT CONTROVERSY HIGHLIGHTS DEEPER EDUCATION SECTOR ISSUES

India's 1991 economic liberalisation ignited a surge of ambition, encouraging families to invest their life savings in their children's education as a pathway to success. However, an unholy alliance between bureaucracy, political influence, and profiteering interests has often exploited this aspiration, turning educational institutions into arenas where student dreams and parental sacrifices are compromised.

To understand this pattern, one must revisit the IPM saga. Founded in 1973 by Arindam Chaudhuri, it presented itself as an elite business school for decades while operating without credible academic recognition.

Such cases follow a familiar blueprint. Institutions project themselves as premier academies, attracting students with glossy promises of career success. They

charge exorbitant fees but frequently deliver substandard education and questionable credentials. Many aspirants, driven by post-liberalisation hopes, overlook warning signs such as lack of accreditation and opaque functioning.

This is not an isolated problem but part of a wider systemic challenge. Weak oversight and delayed accountability allow such entities to flourish, often shielded by bureaucratic inertia and political patronage.

While economic reforms transformed India's growth trajectory, safeguarding educational integrity now requires stronger accreditation,

transparency, and accountability. Institutions project themselves as premier academies, attracting students with glossy promises of career success. They

ANANT KUMAR | RANCHI

Spin challenge exposes team weakness

Dominating the world of cricket and performing at the highest level is an entirely different proposition. Even home conditions were tested this time, and spin played a crucial role as we suffered a significant defeat. It was a heavy loss by 76 runs. This will adversely impact our run quotient and may soon turn the situation into a must-win scenario.

Apart from Bumrah, nothing much stood out in the bowling department, which lacked penetration and consistency when it mattered most.

The team appeared unprepared to counter the turning conditions, allowing the opposition to dictate terms throughout the game. This defeat must serve as a wake-up call. While past successes have built confidence, adapting to challenging match situations remains vital.

The inability to deliver under pressure, particularly in familiar conditions, raises concerns about strategic planning and execution.

If corrective measures are not taken swiftly, this setback could have long-term consequences in the tournament. The team must regroup, reassess its approach, and respond with renewed determination in the upcoming fixtures.

CU SUBRAMANIAM | CHENNAI

Reality behind national image

A mere "shirtless" protest by a few Congress workers on ideological issues at the venue of an international summit has reportedly "shattered" India's image in the global sphere.

Such, it seems, is the supposed "might" of this "nationalist" party that through the non-violent action of a few of its members, the very foundation of the zealously projected mammoth "Vishwaguru" narrative appears shaken.

However, I wonder why the nation's image does not seem tarnished before the international community when common citizens are abused or killed in the name of religion, caste, or ethnicity. Incidents involving allegations of storing beef, smuggling cattle, so-called "love jihad", cross-border infiltration, inter-caste marriages, or attempts at proselytisation — including the burning alive of Graham Staines and his two children — rarely trigger similar outrage.

Likewise, communal riots, caste atrocities, targeted killings of rationalists, and crimes against women — including horrific incidents of gang rape and public humiliation — raise serious moral questions.

Can a truly civilised society ignore such realities while focusing only on symbolic protests?

KAJAL CHATTERJEE | KOLKATA

India-Brazil strategic momentum

Since 2006, India and Brazil have shared a strategic partnership. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's recent visit to India has further strengthened Indo-Brazil ties through shared democratic values and a mutual commitment to reform global governance.

This partnership represents a significant step towards equitable growth. Both nations continue to collaborate across major multilateral platforms such as BRICS, IBSA, and the G20, reinforcing their shared vision for improved global governance.

The recent visit culminated in several key agreements, particularly in the mining and processing of critical minerals, with Brazil offering access to its enriched reserves to support India's development needs.

Bilateral cooperation has also expanded into pharmaceuticals, aviation, and defence — marking a meaningful advancement in economic and strategic relations.

Furthermore, the digital partnership between the two nations promises collaboration in artificial intelligence and cyber security, both crucial for future progress. With a target of achieving 30 billion dollars in trade by 2030, and a reported growth of 25.5 per cent over the past year, this partnership injects fresh energy into India-Brazil relations.

SUNIL OKHADE | NODRE



Bangladesh's political reset and the regional ripple effect

As Bangladesh enters a new political chapter, the challenges before the Rahman government-economic fragility, trade recalibration, minority protection, and climate vulnerability – will have profound implications not only for Dhaka but also for New Delhi and the wider South Asian region

FIRST Column



BK SINGH

Gen Z uprising in Bangladesh in July 2024 led to the collapse of Sheikh Hasina's government. The Mohd Yunus-led government took interim charge of the administration. It banned Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party and held national elections on 12th February. The young students and activists, who spearheaded the protest against Hasina, led a political party named National Citizens Party (NCP) and contested the election along with Jamaat-e-Islami and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Jamaat, the main force behind the uprising, had an electoral alliance with NCP. Tarique Rahman, son of ex-PM Khaleda Zia, who last ruled Bangladesh between 2001 and 2006, returned to the country after 17 years of self-exile. He was appointed as leader of BNP only a month and a half prior to voting, and went on to win the election with a two-thirds majority and has taken over as PM of the country.

Jamaat won 68 seats and its electoral partner NCP six out of the 30 it contested. It will be the main opposition party in the Parliament. While NCP could not turn street momentum into votes, Jamaat has put up the best electoral performance in the history of Bangladesh. Jamaat is a radical outfit which believes in hardline ideology and has never been acceptable to democratic parties like the Awami League. During the one-and-a-half-year tenure of the interim administration of Mohd Yunus, Jamaat has spread its organisational set-up in several areas of Bangladesh. Earlier, the best performance of Jamaat was when it won 17 seats in the 2001 general election. Though the recent election has given a stable government to Bangladesh, a major point of concern in the west of the country is worrying for India. Massive presence of Jamaat in western areas of Bangladesh bordering Indian states of West Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya is a security challenge for India.

In the 2021 West Bengal Assembly election, India's BJP had won more than 16 seats in constituencies bordering Bangladesh. Now Jamaat has made inroads in the constituencies of the border. It clearly shows that there has been strong radicalisation on both sides of



BANGLADESH IS ONE OF THE MOST CLIMATE-VULNERABLE NATIONS. IT FACES SEVERE RISKS FROM CYCLONES, FLOODS AND SEA SURGES AND ALSO SEVERE AIR AND WATER POLLUTION

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

daily@pioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
The Pioneer

the border. South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Nadia, and Murshidabad are among the districts in West Bengal that border Bangladesh. India may have to step up its security in these districts and both central and state governments may have to work in tandem for this. Similarly, the districts in Assam and Meghalaya bordering Bangladesh will also have to remain alert to deal with security challenges.

NCP failed to establish its support base along the length and breadth of the country for votes and had to contest the election in coalition with Jamaat. After the 2024 uprising, people had hopes and dreams from the NCP cadre, but soon these faded once the coalition was announced.

The youth vote was divided, which strengthened the support for BNP, giving them a landslide victory. It now plans to rebuild itself and contest local elections coming up in the next one year. After facing a series of attacks, the minority communities tilted towards BNP, as the Awami League was banned.

The task before PM Tarique Rahman is daunting. He has to bring the already shattered economy on track in a country with 170 million people. He has committed to providing financial aid to poor families, and promoting industries to manufacture toys and leather goods to cut down excessive reliance on garment exports. He has pledged to recalibrate the country's international partnerships to attract investments. Hasina was too closely aligned to India. In contrast to this, Rahman would not have close ties with any single power. As seen in his election manifesto, he is set to focus on issues relating to border killings, water sharing from trans-

boundary rivers like Brahmaputra, Teesta etc., and even Hasina's extradition from India.

India, too, will deal with Rahman's government by focusing on the security of Indian territories in West Bengal and northeastern states. Other areas in focus would be to manage and curb the increasing radicalisation and also deal with the threat to minority communities within the geography of Bangladesh. The democratic reforms that have been passed along with the general election with 60% votes,

like the introduction of an upper house in the Bangladesh Parliament, a limit of two terms for PM, and emphasis on Bangladeshi and not Bengali, will also be closely watched by India.

A few days prior to the voting, the interim administration of Bangladesh signed a free trade deal with the US. Let me explain how this deal is not going to protect the interests of Bangladesh and its farming communities.

Last year, Bangladesh became the eighth-largest market for the US. Under a reciprocal trade agreement signed on February 9, American dairy, meat and poultry producers will get sweeping access to the Bangladesh market. Dhaka has opened its market for US agricultural and industrial goods, chemicals, medical devices, machinery, motor parts, dairy products, poultry, fruits and tree nuts. As a part of the deal, Bangladesh will purchase annually around \$3.5 billion worth of agricultural products, namely wheat, soy, cotton and corn. The deal also calls for Bangladesh to import aircraft, cars and

a reciprocal trade agreement signed on February 9, American dairy, meat and poultry producers will get sweeping access to the Bangladesh market. Dhaka has opened its market for US agricultural and industrial goods, chemicals, medical devices, machinery, motor parts, dairy products, poultry, fruits and tree nuts. As a part of the deal, Bangladesh will purchase annually around \$3.5 billion worth of agricultural products, namely wheat, soy, cotton and corn. The deal also calls for Bangladesh to import aircraft, cars and

motorcycles and their spare parts.

The United States has committed to reducing the reciprocal tariff rates to 19% on goods originating from Bangladesh. The agreement further indicates that select Bangladeshi textiles and apparel goods made with US-produced cotton and man-made fibres can enter the US market at 0 reciprocal tariff. India's Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has added recently that a similar concession is available to India too. If we buy cotton or yarn from the US and process and use it for making garments for export to the US, the tariff is zero. In other words, India and Bangladesh both can export textiles, aprons and garments on zero tariff if manufactured using US cotton/yarn.

In my opinion, it is counterproductive to import raw materials like cotton from the US and then manufacture in India or Bangladesh to qualify for zero tariff. It is going to increase the cost of production substantially, making it difficult for exporters to survive in the market. It is better to use indigenously grown cotton to manufacture and export with 18% tariff from India and 19% from Bangladesh. The local farmers will also be benefited.

One of the biggest challenges Bangladesh PM Rahman would face is that US dairy and agricultural products are going to flood the market, leaving the farmers in distress. The sectors which have not been opened by India have been opened by Bangladesh for US exports. The interim administration has signed a deal with the US detrimental to the interests of the farming communities in Bangladesh. It is going to be a big headache for Bangladesh.

Besides double-digit inflation and a weakening banking sector, Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable nations. It faces severe risks from cyclones, floods and sea surges and also severe air and water pollution. If the average rise in global temperature exceeds 2 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial era, half the world's agricultural land will go under water. Salinisation and spells of drought intensify the risk of food insecurity. Nearly 15% of the population is below the poverty line, which is projected to rise to 20% by 2030.

The new government has to walk a tight rope to cope with the challenges. Jamaat will not miss an opportunity to gain an upper hand in the next election. The country faces, which will not be in the interests of the people of Bangladesh.

Over-regulated compliance triggered corruption perceptions index



AS MITTAL

India's modest rise in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), released by Transparency International on February 10, offers cautious encouragement but also highlights deeper structural realities. India has moved up five places to rank 91st out of 182 countries, with its score improving marginally to 39 out of 100. Yet this remains below the global average of 42 and far from the standards of clean, transparent governance. The improvement is welcome, but a sub-40 score underpins a persistent truth: corruption in India is not merely episodic misconduct; it is embedded within institutional design, particularly in the architecture of over-regulation and compliance overload.

The CPI measures perceived corruption in the public sector, and perceptions are shaped by institutional experience rather than official intent. In India, excessive regulatory layering has quietly become one of the most powerful enablers of corruption. When compliance frameworks are dense, fragmented and discretion-heavy, they multiply the points of interface between citizens, businesses and authorities. Each interface creates opportunities for delay, interpretation and selective enforcement, conditions under which corruption thrives.

Compliance raj
India's economic liberalisation in 1991 dismantled much of the overt licensing regime associated with the Inspector Raj. Yet fragments of that control-oriented mindset persist in modern regulatory systems. The form has evolved, but the burden remains. Corruption flourishes not only when rules multiply, but when those rules are complex, overlapping and enforced through administrative discretion rather than objective, transparent standards. When discretion expands without accountability, corruption ceases to be an aberration and instead becomes a rational response to uncertainty. The scale of India's compliance burden shows the depth of this structural challenge. A typical firm must navigate as many as 1,536 Acts and submit over 6,000 filings annually across central and state jurisdictions, spanning environmental clearances, taxation, industry regulations, and financial oversight by agencies such as the RBI,

SEBI, and CBIC. Even small enterprises face overwhelming regulatory demands. A small pharmaceutical firm, for instance, spends ₹12-20 lakh annually to comply with nearly 1,000 regulatory requirements, of which 486 carry imprisonment provisions for procedural lapses. An ordinary eater or tuckshop may require more than 30 licences to operate legally, but these numbers reflect not regulatory strength, but regulatory congestion. Each compliance requirement creates another checkpoint and more uncertainty, which often turns governance into negotiation. Instead of focusing on productivity, innovation, and competitiveness, entrepreneurs are forced to navigate regulatory risk.

Criminalisation of compliance

The persistence of criminal penalties for procedural and technical non-compliance intensifies this pressure. Under Section 132 of the Goods and Services Tax Act, even procedural errors in claiming input tax credit beyond specified thresholds can trigger imprisonment of up to three years. Such provisions, while intended to deter fraud, often blur the distinction between deliberate evasion and technical error, expanding discretionary power at the enforcement level. Recognising this challenge, the Jan Vishwas Act of 2023 marked an important shift in reform philosophy. Out of 26,134 criminal provisions across 1,536 acts, approximately 3,400 were decriminalised and replaced with monetary penalties. This reform acknowledged a fundamental reality: criminal penalties for procedural lapses discourage enterprise, increase compliance anxiety and create conditions conducive to harassment. By shifting the focus from punishment to proportional accountability, the Act reduced some of the systemic pressure that fuels corruption.

Punish, for example, eliminated 1,428 mandatory compliances to ease regulatory burdens. Yet even after these reductions, over 1,400 compliance requirements and more than 1,200 imprisonment clauses remain in force. These figures demonstrate that while reform has begun, the underlying regulatory overhang persists at a scale that sustains structural corruption risks.

Deregulation commission: A preventive anti-corruption framework

The government's move to create a Deregulation Commission represents a potentially transformative institutional intervention. If designed with independence, statutory authority and clear time-bound mandates, such a Commission could fundamentally shift India's anti-corruption strategy from reactive enforcement to preventive institutional design. Instead of focusing solely on punishing corruption after it occurs, governance reform must aim to reduce the structural conditions that make

corruption possible in the first place.

A Deregulation Commission could institutionalise Regulatory Impact Assessments (RIA) as a mandatory requirement for all new regulations. These assessments would evaluate the economic, administrative and compliance costs of proposed rules before implementation. Policymakers would be compelled to answer a simple but critical question: Does a proposed regulation address a genuine market failure, or does it merely add another layer of control? Embedding such discipline would prevent the accumulation of redundant and overlapping regulations over time. Harmonising central and state compliance frameworks would further reduce duplication, inconsistency and administrative conflict.

Reforming compliance

India's ambition to become a \$10-trillion economy depends not only on capital investment and technological innovation, but also on institutional credibility. Investors assess regulatory predictability as carefully as market opportunity. Entrepreneurs need clarity to operate in competitive and time-sensitive environments. Citizens expect fairness, transparency and consistency from government systems.

Improving India's CPI ranking sustainably will not come from sporadic crackdowns or rhetorical commitments. It will require deep structural reform that reduces the number of corruption entry points within governance systems. Rationalising compliance requirements, reducing excessive criminalisation, embedding impact assessments and institutionalising periodic regulatory review are not merely ease-of-doing-business reforms; they are foundational anti-corruption measures.

The way forward

India's rise in the Corruption Perceptions Index should be seen as a signal and a call to accelerate structural reform. By cutting red tape, institutionalising regulatory discipline and redesigning compliance frameworks, India can convert incremental progress into lasting governance credibility. Corruption feeds on complexity and weakens in clarity.

By replacing excessive control with intelligent, transparent and proportionate regulation, India can strengthen institutional trust, unlock economic dynamism and reinforce democratic accountability. The path to a truly Viksit Bharat lies not in enforcement alone, but in systemic reform.

The author is Vice-Chairman of the Punjab Economic Policy and Planning Board, Chairman of ASSOCAM Northern Region Development Council

daily@pioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
The Pioneer

Towards climate resilience



HIMANSHU VERMA

The increasing frequency and intensity of climate-induced disasters have made disaster risk reduction and climate action two of the most urgent priorities of the twenty-first century. Climate change is no longer a distant possibility but a lived reality, affecting ecosystems, economies, and human lives across the globe. Events such as floods, cyclones, droughts, wildfires, landslides, and heat waves have become more unpredictable and severe, threatening developmental progress and human security. In this context, integrating disaster risk reduction (DRR) with climate action has emerged as a powerful approach to building safer communities and ensuring sustainable development for future generations.

Disaster risk is shaped by the interaction of hazards, exposure, and vulnerability. Climate change is intensifying natural hazards by altering weather patterns, escalating extreme events, and increasing uncertainties. As populations expand into hazard-prone regions, exposure grows, and inadequate infrastructure, poverty, and limited resources further heighten vulnerability. Rising sea levels, shifting rainfall patterns, melting glaciers, prolonged dry spells, and frequent storms illustrate how climate systems are evolving. These changes highlight the need for climate-responsive strategies that consider both scientific complexities and socio-economic factors that shape disaster susceptibility. Disaster risk reduction focuses on minimizing the adverse impacts of natural hazards through preparedness, improved planning, and strategic interventions. It represents a shift from reactive approaches that rely on emergency relief towards proactive efforts that strengthen the ability of communities to withstand disasters. Effective DRR involves risk assessment, early warning systems, community preparedness, education, resilient infrastructure, ecosystem restoration, and strong governance. By encouraging safety measures before disasters occur, DRR helps reduce loss of life, safeguard livelihoods, and protect socio-economic development.

Climate action includes both mitigation and adaptation. Mitigation seeks to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by promoting renewable energy sources, improving energy efficiency, adopting sustainable practices, and preserving natural carbon sinks such as forests and wetlands. Adaptation focuses on adjusting human and environmental systems to climate impacts through climate-resilient agriculture, water conservation, disaster-resistant infrastructure, public health protection, and community preparedness for extreme weather events. Together, mitigation and adaptation support long-term environmental and societal resilience. Disaster risk reduction and

climate action share common objectives centred on reducing vulnerabilities and enhancing resilience. Integrating these two domains allows for a comprehensive approach that addresses both present risks and future uncertainties. Climate-resilient infrastructure, nature-based solutions such as mangrove conservation and watershed restoration, and inclusive planning frameworks contribute most effectively to reducing disaster risks and addressing climate challenges.

Agriculture is one of the most climate-sensitive sectors, particularly in developing regions where rural livelihoods depend heavily on natural resources. Climate extremes such as erratic rainfall, droughts, and floods threaten crop yields, food security, and rural income. Integrating DRR into agricultural planning is vital for protecting farming communities from climatic uncertainties. Climate-smart practices, crop diversification, soil conservation, improved water management, and climate-informed advisories have become essential tools for strengthening resilience.

Advancements in technology are playing a transformative role in both disaster risk reduction and climate action. Tools such as remote sensing, GIS mapping, artificial intelligence, and climate modelling enable more accurate prediction, monitoring, and planning. Modern communication technologies, including digital early warning systems, ensure timely dissemination of critical information. Drones are increasingly used for post-disaster assessment, while IoT-based sensors support flood forecasting, soil monitoring, and smart agricultural planning. International frameworks such as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, and the Sustainable

Development Goals emphasize integrated approaches. These frameworks encourage countries to embed disaster resilience and climate considerations into policies and development planning. Governments, academic institutions, NGOs, and international organizations must work together to develop climate-resilient infrastructure and prepare societies for climate-induced risks.

Despite progress, challenges remain. Limited financial resources, inadequate technological capacity, weak institutional coordination, insufficient community participation, and lack of localized climate data hinder effective integration of DRR and climate action. Vulnerable populations often have limited access to information and resources needed for resilience-building. Disaster risk reduction and climate action are essential for a resilient and sustainable future. As climate-related hazards intensify, the need for proactive and integrated approaches becomes urgent. By uniting DRR and climate action, societies can better withstand shocks, safeguard development gains, and ensure a safer future for generations to come.

The Pioneer SINCE 1868

The writer is an Assistant Professor of Agronomy, Surajmal University

daily@pioneer
@TheDailyPioneer
dr-himanshu-verma-phd-2466833

Please Support me by Joining my Private channel

YOU WILL RECIEVE NEWSPAPERS EARLIER THAN ANYONE OUT THERE. 🙏

📰 Indian Newspapers:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <u>1) Times of India</u> | <u>6) The Hindu</u> |
| <u>2) Hindustan Times</u> | <u>7) Live Mint</u> |
| <u>3) Business line</u> | <u>8) Financial Express</u> |
| <u>4) The Indian Express</u> | <u>9) Business standard</u> |
| <u>5) Economic Times</u> | <u>+All Editorial PDFs</u> |

Uploding
starts from
5AM

📍 Access to all this
In Just 19 Rupees
[lifetime Validity].

Click below to

Join



📰 International Newspapers Channel

📰 Magazine Channel (National & International).

Strategic alignment

India joining PaxSilica could secure supply chains

India has joined PaxSilica, the United States-led technology and supply-chain coalition. This formally brings India into a grouping launched in December 2025 to secure supply chains in semiconductors, artificial-intelligence (AI) infrastructure, and critical minerals, and reduce reliance on China, particularly in rare-earth processing and semiconductor manufacturing. PaxSilica seeks to coordinate investment from mineral extraction and processing to chip fabrication, data infrastructure, and advanced computing among members, which include the United States (US), Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, Singapore, Israel, the Netherlands, Australia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Greece, with Canada, the European Union, and Taiwan participating as observers.

For India, the strategic rationale is evident. China accounts for over 90 per cent of global rare-earth processing capacity. India imports 80-90 per cent of its rare-earth magnets and related materials from Chinese suppliers. Recent export controls and licensing conditions have disrupted domestic automobile and electronics production, underscoring the risks of concentrated dependence. Participation in PaxSilica opens up the possibility of diversified sourcing, processing partnerships, and coordinated stockpiling. The move also aligns with India's domestic industrial push. The government has approved semiconductor projects worth about 1.6 trillion, backed by incentives of around ₹76,000 crore. Fabrication units, compound semiconductor plants, and design initiatives are under way, with global firms such as Micron and domestic players, including the Tata group, committing investment. In the Union Budget 2026-27, the government announced "Rare Earth Corridors" in Odisha, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, alongside a ₹7,280 crore "Rare Earth Permanent Magnet" scheme aimed at building 6,000 tonnes per annum of integrated magnet capacity. These measures build on the existing capabilities and seek to integrate mining, processing, research, and manufacturing. PaxSilica also extends beyond minerals and chips. It encompasses AI infrastructure, data centres, fibre networks, and foundational models. India's large digital public infrastructure, an expanding AI market, and a substantial engineering-talent pool strengthen its value proposition within such a framework.

Yet entry into the grouping carries tradeoffs. As supply chains bifurcate between China-led and PaxSilica-led systems, expectations on export controls, technology standards, and investment-security practices may intensify. There is also the risk of substituting one dependency with another. Advanced lithography equipment, high-end AI chips, and computing hardware remain concentrated within US-aligned ecosystems. The US has withdrawn from a record number of global agreements, including the India-led International Solar Alliance, raising questions about the durability of Washington's multilateral commitment. PaxSilica, too, must be viewed in that light. While it offers opportunities of cooperation in AI and critical minerals, it is ultimately a US-led initiative designed to advance American economic-security objectives. Thus, India's participation should be guided by a realistic assessment of long-term reliability, policy flexibility, and strategic autonomy. Membership in PaxSilica can provide access to capital, technology, and markets. Whether it translates into durable economic security will depend on infrastructure readiness, regulatory clarity, environmental safeguards, and sustained investment in research and manufacturing.

A battle of attrition

Peace remains elusive in Ukraine

Russia's full-scale assault on Ukraine, now into its fifth year, has descended into a war of attrition. Even ignoring the exaggerated estimates from both sides, the casualty rates are staggering. According to the independent think-tank Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Russia has suffered 1.2 million casualties (killed, wounded, and missing) with some 325,000 killed since February 2022. For Ukraine, the figures are 600,000 casualties and 140,000 deaths (the figures exclude civilian casualties). Despite this, Russia, a country with more than three times Ukraine's population and access to abundant natural resources, has made scant inroads beyond the territory it controlled in March 2022, the peak of its advance. Then, Russia held about 26 per cent of Ukrainian territory (including Crimea, which it annexed in 2014). Today, advancing at a pace slower than the trench warfare of World War I, Russia holds about 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory. In 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin presented his Ukrainian invasion as a bulwark against the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Nato) into historical Russian spheres of influence. Since then, Finland and Sweden, two countries that share borders with Russia, have shed their neutrality and signed on to Nato.

Yet the tenacity of either side remains unabated — a situation that will test the resolve of their allies, China and Europe. Despite an unprecedented level of economic sanctions, Russia's earnings from sales of natural resources to a broad swath of countries (including the United States and some in Europe) have defied Western predictions of economic collapse. In 2025, it became the world's ninth-largest economy, up from 11th before 2022. But spiralling inflation and shrinking consumer demand could take its toll sooner rather than later. Its staying power appears to be increasingly dependent on China, with which it had declared a "no limits partnership" a few weeks ahead of Russia's invasion. Since October last year, Western reports suggest that China has extended its support for Russia's war through expanded supplies of critical drone components, satellite intelligence, and closer military cooperation, even as it has upped oil and natural gas purchases.

Ukraine, meanwhile, has lost a quarter of its pre-war population of 42 million, with five million living under Russian occupation and another six million having fled to Europe. With the United States (US) under Donald Trump drastically cutting back support, Kiev's war machine today is substantially being underwritten by Europe. The bulk of Ukraine's vital coal and iron ore resources remains under Russian occupation in the east and critical infrastructure has been destroyed or damaged. Its economic growth is principally the result of significant expansion of the defence industry. Increasingly, Ukrainian startups are tying up with contractors from the US and European Union (EU). Europe is also inclined to relax the reforms for Ukraine to become a full-fledged EU member. Apart from Mr Putin's intransigence, the fact that the US under Mr Trump has chosen to eschew international law and principles in favour of its own territorial expansionism and deal-making has considerably diminished the world's most powerful country's ability to act as a credible interlocutor in the conflict. As a result, the prospects of peace breaking out in Eastern Europe anytime soon appear dim.



ILLUSTRATION: AJAYA KUMAR MOHANTY

RBI, money creation, and govt finances

RBI dividends and bond purchases have kept yields low in a low-inflation environment. When conditions change, non-bank debt financing will be essential

Alongside helping navigate monetary policy, liquidity, and currency and bond markets, record open market operation (OMO) bond purchases and dividend transfers of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) have helped the government's fiscal arithmetic, while keeping yields low. Moderate inflation has made all this possible, though with implications for the external balance. What happens when the cycle turns?

Money creation: There are four ways through which money supply (M3) is created, across currency in circulation, and banking demand and time deposits.

First, when a bank extends a commercial loan, it credits funds to the borrower's account, creating money. Contrary to what intuition might suggest, banking loans create deposits, not the other way around. When the banking system, including the RBI, funds the government by purchasing bonds, the resulting government spending injects fresh money into the economy.

Note that when households and non-bank investors extend finance, money only shifts from one holder to another without expanding aggregate money supply. Financing by the banking system and the RBI creates fresh money, financing by non-banks does not.

Third, when foreign currency flows into the country and is converted into rupees, fresh money is created.

Finally, when banks (including the RBI) pay dividends out of their reserves, this eventually results in money creation.

Money once created is then free to circulate and add to consumption, as well as to external demand, and consumer and asset price inflation.

Money is removed when each of the above reverses, i.e., when loans are repaid to banks, when the government cuts spending financed by banks and the RBI, when there are foreign currency outflows, or when banks raise capital from non-banks.

RBI dividends — scale and justification: The scale of recent dividend transfers from the RBI to the government is significant. For FY25, the RBI transferred ₹2,699 trillion to the Government of India (0.75 per cent of gross domestic product), following a ₹2.11 trillion transfer the prior year. These are amongst the largest central bank-to-government transfers globally.

While they serve as vital non-tax revenue, reducing both revenue and fiscal deficits, their composition deserves scrutiny.

Part of this income is structural to central banking. Interest earned by the RBI on foreign assets (around ₹1 trillion in FY24), effectively funded by non-interest-bearing liabilities such as currency in circulation and banking balances with the RBI, represents one source of this income.

Other components, however, require some interpretation.

Interest earned by the RBI from its large holding of government bonds, net of the costs borne in absorbing excess banking liquidity, reached ₹0.9 trillion in FY24. Repeated recycling of large government interest payments back to the government through RBI dividends can, at the margin, blur the boundary with indirect monetisation.

The trickiest aspect involves foreign exchange gains. When foreign currency originally purchased by the RBI at a low price is sold back to the market at a higher price, the difference represents realised profits for the RBI, and a reduction in money supply. Any transfer of this profit to the government, and its spending, reverses the monetary contraction. That offers



POLICY IN PRACTICE
ANANTH NARAYAN

Don't dampen MSME ambition

There has been wide coverage in the media and by professional bodies of some of the recommendations of the High-level Committee on Non-financial Regulatory Reforms relating to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). They are both welcome and welcome. Any effort to simplify processes, reduce time, cost, and human energy spent on regulation and compliance is welcome. However, anything that potentially inhibits a small business's desire or ability to scale is worrisome.

To become stronger and more resilient, they need to be encouraged and enabled to aggressively grow revenue and generate the surplus and borrowings needed for investment — to drive customer acquisition, acquire productivity and efficiency-enhancing tools, move up value chains, improve and widen market offerings and footprint, or hire skilled people. This is especially true for micro companies, the bulk of MSMEs, that are precarious because their small size and well-known difficulty in borrowing make them vulnerable to even small shocks.

We know from experience how incentives, financial or otherwise, have perversely encouraged companies to remain small, instead of enabling them to seize opportunities to grow and flourish, buoyed by India's steadily growing economy and increasing global cachet, as well as the benefits of the digital era of easily accessible and shared professional resources. Today's mindset, on all sides, should be one of wanting to benefit by growing quickly, not by staying small; of increasing long-term gain, not reducing short-term pain. Goods and Services Tax (GST) exclusion, for example, reduces the chances of becoming suppliers to large companies that want GST offsets and whose business increases stability and resilience.

The focus of the committee on reducing the pain of compliance and "streamlining" should hopefully be

embraced as a core objective henceforth by every government/regulatory agency, benefiting all, irrespective of size. Hopefully, it should spur the creation of a new digital public infrastructure, a "compliance stack", enabling easy filing of all forms and returns, with multiple ways to input data, so that compliance can be DIY (do it yourself).

Lowering the cost of compliance should be a regulator-centred endeavour and not a firm-centred one, achieving the goal without lowering the bar via exemptions and risking the collateral damage of weaker governance or less rigorous bookkeeping. Banks often cite the quality of financial information as a reason why they find it hard to lend to standardise small businesses that are not a part of the supply chain of large companies. Instead of relaxing auditing requirements and exacerbating the trust deficit between banks and small businesses, perhaps specifying a narrower audit scope could help, and hopefully artificial intelligence (AI) products will soon crash audit costs. The government already has expertise in building leading-edge digital ecosystems, which it could leverage to build shared accounting platforms and certified compliance intermediaries (compliance will keep prices low).

Board meetings four times a year are far better than once, especially for startups and entrepreneur-driven organisations. Improving the governance quotient of all small companies is important if they are to access public money even if from private markets. Board meetings and compliance reviews conducted at these meetings are useful forcing devices for businesses to regularly pay attention to housekeeping and finances, to hire financial help, and to resist temptations to cross lines with the intent of making good later. Incidentally, board meetings cost very little, now that they can be done online, and there are plenty of very competent good-hearted

some justification for the RBI paying out such realised gains as dividend.

In FY24, the RBI recognised ₹0.8 trillion in exchange gains. However, during FY24, the RBI was a net purchaser of \$4.1 billion in the spot market. The recognition of net foreign exchange gains in FY24, despite net foreign currency purchases, arises from the RBI's accounting methodology. Gains are recognised on gross spot market sales (\$153 billion) against historical weighted average costs, while gross market purchases (\$194 billion) increase the average holding cost of the reserves. This allows the RBI to harvest valuation gains, even when there is no concomitant reduction in money supply.

Even in FY25, when the RBI sold a net \$34 billion in spot markets and \$84 billion in forward markets, it harvested accounting gains on gross sales of \$399 billion in the spot market. Overall, every rupee of dividend paid by the RBI, however justified, has a monetary impact.

The current monetary snapshot: The RBI Broad Money report as of January 2026 shows that money supply (M3) is up 12 per cent year-on-year, at the upper end of the range of the past few years. This is driven by growth in commercial credit (up 14.1 per cent). However, the RBI plays a key role in the 12 per cent rise in bank credit to the government. The RBI's OMO purchases during FY26 reached a high of ₹6.4 trillion by January 2026, offsetting the money drain caused by net FX outflows.

Across record OMOs and dividend transfers, the RBI has materially eased monetary conditions and interest rates in FY26. At a time of low inflation, this has bridged the gap between the government's borrowing needs and the market appetite for bonds. However, this easing has also added to the pressure on the rupee, given the well-known impossible trinity.

Takeaways: In a less favourable environment, the RBI may not be able to deliver a similar magnitude of OMOs and dividends and keep yields low, without risking adverse macroeconomic and market impact.

The RBI is not any regular cash-rich public sector undertaking (PSU). As a central bank, every bond it purchases and every rupee of dividend it distributes, however strong or weak the justification, impacts money supply, interest rates, consumer asset inflation, and the external balance.

Two structural shifts are now essential.

First, India must deepen its fixed-income markets. Intensifying greater household and non-bank participation in fixed-income markets will allow financing of government and commercial debt without creating new money, enhancing policy flexibility. For policymakers, injecting money is an easier sell than withdrawing it.

Second, it is imperative that revenue deficits are further reduced. Large central bank transfers currently significantly compress the headline revenue deficit, masking underlying pressures.

Macroeconomic resilience will be enhanced when borrowers and the government reduce their reliance on banks and the RBI for financing. When the inflation cycle turns, the RBI's support may have to recede much faster than expected.

The writer is a former whole-time member, Sebi. The views are personal.



RAMA BIJAPURKAR

Light at the end of the startup tunnel



BOOK REVIEW

AMBI PARAMESWARAN

I remember sitting with my first Chennai client, the late Pradip Mahapatra, at Spencer's almost 30 years ago. I got his business without the usual song and dance that precedes the appointment of an ad agency by a client. A longer version of this story appears in my book *Sponge — Leadership Lessons I Learnt from My Clients*.

I was reminded of this anecdote while reading *Starting A Startup* by James Sinclair. The book targets startups in the B2B technology space. Mr

Sinclair is described as a "founder's founder". He is a serial entrepreneur who has had multiple successful exits. He loves the chaos of the early-stage startup. He is the guy founders call to transform their ideas into something customers actually want to buy.

This statement from the book resonated with me. "Despite what you think, your startup isn't about your or your brilliant idea. It's about solving a real problem for real people." And here is one more: "You don't have to look far to find the wreckage of companies built on 'problem solutions' that no one wanted."

The book's premise is that you can have a successful startup only if it satisfies a genuine customer need. You cannot succeed until you find the real problem you are solving and offer your solution, not the other way around. You cannot take a hammer and then look for the nail with which to hit it.

In the B2B space, the author says, the most critical breakthrough is getting that first paying customer. A founder should focus all his or her energy on achieving this. It is here that I realised my sales pitch to Pradip was not so much about what my agency would offer him, but how I, as a professional, could help him with his plans for Spencer's. And that clinched the deal and our Chennai office was up and running.

A section titled "Earn The Right Framework" outlines multiple issues that qualify you to earn the right to succeed. The first thing to do is identify the ideal customer (ICP — Ideal Customer Profile) and the problem they would want solved, not something that has caught the fancy of the startup founder. Quite rightly this issue occupies a large part of the book.

We then look at the section on "Earn

the Right to Enter the Market". What is the market? The blue ocean or the red ocean? (For those not fully versed with this terminology popularised by Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne of INSEAD: Red Oceans are all the industries in existence today — the known market space, where industry boundaries are defined and companies try to outperform their rivals to grab a greater share of the existing market; Blue Oceans denote all the industries not in existence today — the unknown market space, unexplored and untainted by competition.) What is the TAM? What is the SAM? What is the SOM? Respectively they stand for total addressable market; serviceable addressable market; serviceable obtainable market. The author proposes a 5-5-5



Starting A Startup: Build Something People Want
by James Sinclair
Published by Pan Macmillan
264 pages ₹499

formula: Make five cold outreaches a week; five conversations a week; and five follow-up calls a week. "Product market fit (PMF) is a big buzzword in the startup ecosystem. The author advises the startup founder not to obsess over it. Instead build, listen, measure and improve. If you build something customers want and they are happy to talk about, PMF will find you."

The book presents interesting insights around the right to build something, the right to delight, the right to ship, the right to grow, the right to (not) launch, the right to (not) pivot, the right to artificial intelligence (AI)

and the right to take a vacation. Each chapter ends with a set of observations or thoughts for startup founders. The book also offers some quotable quotes. Here are a few: "If

everything is your fault, then everything is within your power to fix, which should feel oddly liberating." "The best sales people are problem solvers for customers." "Data without insight is just noise"; "Learn to frame your startup's journey and your products' value in a way that connects with people."

This book is written almost as if James Sinclair has his hands on the shoulder of a startup founder, nudging her to get out of her tunnel vision. Not to get trapped by the common fallacies of the startup ecosystem. Not to get overcome by emotions. And not to get too depressed when things don't go the way they were supposed to. In short, Mr Sinclair is helping the reader find the light at the end of the startup tunnel. The book is a useful guide map for any startup founder who is pondering whether the business is on the right road.

The reviewer is an independent brand coach. His latest book *Marketing Mixology* examines four essential skills for marketing success



A roadmap for safe and accessible AI

The India AI Impact Summit, which concluded in New Delhi last week, was the first such conclave to be held in the Global South, which has so far had a marginal presence in conversations on AI and its governance structures. This was an opportunity for Global South nations, especially India, to be a part of high-level deliberations on the transformative technology which is changing the world. The Delhi Declaration, adopted at the summit, appropriately called for a democratisation of AI. It aligned with the priorities India had set, which included making AI capabilities available to as many people as possible and making the technology "safe and trusted". The Declaration was signed by the United States, China, France, and other major players in AI.

At the summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for an alternative vision of AI, based on open code and shared development. Ultimately, AI technologies must serve the global common good. This is critical to a domain which is witnessing intense competition between nations and companies. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman and Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei refused to hold hands in public at the summit. AI is still a technology in its infancy, and its directions are not yet known. But it is expected to leave a major impact across fields — industry, medicine, agriculture, law, social sciences, styles of governance, and even private and public life, in an unprecedented manner. Major economic powers such as the US and China are leading the race at the moment. Adhering to the motto proposed by Modi — MANAV (moral and ethical systems, accountable governance, national sovereignty, accessible and inclusive AI, and valid and legitimate systems) — will not be easy in a field where geopolitical interests are at stake. However, some fundamental guidelines and directions have to be emphasised for the common good.

According to the government, investment commitments of over \$250 billion and research commitments worth \$20 billion were made at the summit, where the world's top technology firms were represented. India is entering into partnerships with key global industry players, potentially transferring technology and capital. The country has to push research and innovation with timeliness and experimentation tailored for its requirements and context. There is heightened interest and activity related to AI at the level of government and outside it. Startups and innovators will have important takeaways from the AI summit. What the conclave proposed in terms of directions on the adoption of AI will now need to be translated into policies, with trust and equitable access at their centre.

India proposes an open, trustworthy global framework. Policies must now rise above narrow interests

Stopgap teachers and systemic neglect

When Governor Thaawarchand Gehlot red-flagged the acute shortage of faculty in Karnataka's state universities and sought additional funding from Chief Minister Siddaramaiah at the recent Vice-Chancellors' conference, he articulated a crisis that has long been normalised. What followed, however, was an attempt to reframe the problem rather than confront it. Siddaramaiah himself admitted that many universities were operating with nearly 60% teaching vacancies. But his defence that top global universities function with guest lecturers rests on a fundamentally flawed comparison. In Karnataka, "guest lecturers" are not visiting experts delivering niche courses. They are temporary, *ad hoc* or contractual teachers appointed against sanctioned vacant posts. They work full-time, receive lower remuneration than regular teachers, and enjoy zero job security. To equate this arrangement with the guest faculty model of reputed global universities is misleading.

At leading international institutions, guest faculty are distinguished academics, industry leaders or public figures and policymakers. They complement a strong permanent faculty; they do not replace it. Can the state government claim that its universities routinely invite such personalities? Even if the intent exists, where are the funds to support this model? Flawed expansion policies have exacerbated the problem. The 'one-district, one-university' approach has widened the system without creating matching infrastructure or faculty strength. Added to this are special varsities such as folk and music universities, established without a sustainable academic or financial blueprint, further stretching limited resources. Public universities cannot charge exorbitant fees like private institutions; so, the contention that they could generate their own funds is flawed. The suggestion to tap into Corporate Social Responsibility funds is easier said than done, given the lack of institutional support. A majority of Vice-Chancellors are academicians who come with little administrative experience to run large organisations or engage with major corporations.

Fortunately, the legal tolerance for this *ad hoc*ism is wearing thin. In January, the Supreme Court issued a stern directive against the mass reliance on temporary teachers. It reiterated that one temporary teacher cannot be replaced by another, described the practice of disguising permanent work as guest faculty as exploitation, and ordered all higher education institutions to fill chronic faculty vacancies within four months. Higher education in Karnataka needs reimagining, not rhetorical justification. State universities must be enabled to produce capable, industry-ready graduates, not mediocrities shaped by neglect. Starving them of funds while normalising contractual teaching is a policy failure. Universities are not budgetary inconveniences; they are temples of education, and they must be treated as such.

Karnataka's public universities normalise *ad hoc* hiring as real reform remains distant

Regulatory gaps and rising commercialisation necessitate a greater focus on adaptability and social purpose

JAGDISH RATTANANI

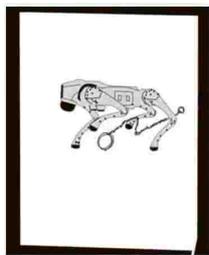
While the nation was attracted to the India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi and distracted by the horrendous claims of a university on developing a robotics that was, in fact, imported from China, a different kind of attention was focused on twins who passed out with flying colours in the entrance exams that serve as the admissions gateway to the much-vaunted Indian Institutes of Technology. One is the story of lies presented in plain sight. The other is the story of achievement that comes after much effort and sacrifice, most of it in what has come to be called the exam coaching factories of Kota, Rajasthan, which is troubling in its own way. One is seen as everything that is wrong with India; the other as a high-water mark of Indian technical excellence, claimed by and accorded to institutions like the IITs.

The twin candidates will hopefully go on to do well and make their parents and the nation proud. Yet the two stories — failure of one kind and achievement of another — are equally problematic for an India that has an ever-increasing number of STEM graduates but a very poor showing in terms of creativity, innovation or world-class solutions that can justify the investments the nation and the students make in passing through an Indian university.

We have pilloried the private university that claimed a Rs-350 crore investment in AI-related infrastructure, but some troubling issues ride alongside. How do our regulators allow a university to function with almost every leadership position, academic and administrative, occupied by a member of the promoter family? How does patent filing become a game, as in this case, or how does a paper authored under the university on banging vessels to kill the Coronavirus get written? The incident brought to sharp light how India has slipped into an education system run on high fees by private institutions with questionable creden-

tials. Apart from a few exemplars in the private sector or the public sector institutions that have held up despite immense strain on resources and academic freedom, much cannot be said about the rest of the higher education sector in India.

This is worrying because an increasing number of students study in private institutions. The skew plays out in complex ways by adding glamour and compromising rigour, while the falling investments in public education take opportunities away from those who cannot afford to pay the demanding private sector fees.



Official data from 2021-22, the latest available, shows that government universities are 58.6% of total universities, with 73.7% of total enrolment. Private universities (41.4%), autonomous, degree-granting, and typically with fees at far higher levels, account for 26.3% of total enrolment, and are growing. But this is not the complete picture. Private aided and unaided colleges are 78.5% of total colleges. This leads to the case that the majority of India's higher education is in some form of private sector institution.

What this incident with its shock-value highlights is simple: in the absence of strict norms and regulations, education will become (like hospitals already have) money-spinners for a few while the bulk of India will remain uneducated, and therefore, not equipped to support the nation's growth aspirations.

Watching the education sector is particularly significant as India prepares to implement the New Education Policy (NEP) with its expansive vision of education that is equitable, multi-discipli-

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

When life is staged for the feed

Experiences have started becoming evidence

SHAGORIKA HERYANI

I chose the restaurant because it was having a moment. My friend asked if I'd been before. I hadn't, but it had shown up in my social media feed at least three times the previous week. That, it turned out, was the point.

The space was all soft curves and terracotta. Every surface textured, every corner Instagrammable. The whole place is designed to look like someone's impossibly chic living room. I photographed my Martini, took a selfie with our drinks, shot a boomerang for good measure, then finally took a sip. My friend happily posed with me. Content done, we slipped back into conversation, as if the last few minutes had been entirely normal.

It wasn't. And we both knew it. Something shifted over the last decade. We all felt it, but nobody named it. Experiences stopped being private and started becoming evidence.

Once you notice it, you see it everywhere. The coffee shop, designed less

for comfort than for photography; the bookstore that feels more like a backdrop than a place to browse; and the park bench positioned perfectly for sunset selfies. Cities now quietly redesign themselves for documentation. Restaurants engineer lighting. Hotels have staff whose sole job is to help you create "shareable moments" worthy of your followers' attention. Even airports come with designated photo zones.

An entire infrastructure is built around the assumption that nothing quite counts unless it's seen.

The word "curated" has crept into every corner of our lives. Curated playlists. Curated feeds. But this isn't curation. Curation implies judgement, restraint, and intent. This is staging. Everyday life has become content, and we are the unpaid creative directors of a show no one explicitly agreed to produce.

Even private moments aren't spared. We rearrange bookshelves before video calls. We photograph coffee before drinking it. We choose holidays for how they'll look online, restaurants for their lighting, and outfits for how they'll read against a background. The performance isn't forced. It's internal-

nary, holistic, and rooted in the Indian ethos. These goals are less likely to be reached without public investment and some reorientation towards a balanced view that makes education thrive as a public good and is accessible to all.

Skilled without imagination?

Yet it is unmistakable that STEM education, particularly of the celebrated variety, has become an end in itself, as witnessed by the pressures, the cramming, and the hard labour young adults are put through in the training camps and IIT prep schools of Kota and elsewhere. In the celebrations after the twin brothers from Odisha came up with identical scores in the joint entrance exam (JEE) last week, we saw pictures of what was won but also what was lost — the children were put through a lot to fetch the scores that, it is believed, will change their lives (and bring more money to the prep centre the next cycle). But engineers in particular have to reorient in the age of AI.

As AI does all the tech work that was once the domain of engineers, it is only the vision of the NEP that can come to the rescue. We need to build holistically rounded students who can adapt and shine in the new world. Technical knowledge in the absence of context, values, and a community gearing, with the idea of serving the self and using the degree to rush for a job across the shores, is not aligned with the ideals of the NEP. In a fast-changing world, it will not serve the tech specialists either.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum explains it rather well: "The educational culture of India used to contain progressive voices, such as that of the Tagore, who emphasised that all the skills in the world were useless, even baneful, if not wielded by a cultivated imagination and refined critical faculties. Such voices have now been silenced by the sheer demand for profitability in the global market. Parents want their children to learn marketable skills, and their great pride is the admission of a child to the Indian Institutes of Technology or the Indian Institutes of Management... I fear for democracy down the road, when it is run, as is increasingly will be, by docile engineers... unable to criticise the propaganda of politicians and unable to imagine the path of a better human being."

(The writer is a journalist and faculty member at SPIJMR, Syndicate: The Billion Press)

ised. Automatic. The economics have followed the psychology. You can now outsource taste entirely. Subscription boxes for identity. Personal shoppers for personality. Someone else curating your clothes, your home, and even your sense of self. We've handed over authorship of who we are to people with better aesthetics and no stake in the outcome.

And we're tired. Because the performance never ends. Casual moments require planning. Weekend plans are chosen for narrative potential. Vacations are reverse-engineered from photos we want to take. The question has shifted from "Will I enjoy this?" to "Will this look like I enjoyed this?"

What's been lost isn't authenticity; it is the freedom of being unobserved, even by ourselves. The permission to do something because it pleased you, without translating it into meaning, signal, or proof.

The restaurant was genuinely extraordinary. The food deserved the hype. The Martini was perfectly balanced. The service invisible in the best way. But I'd already chosen the filter before I'd finished drinking it.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Conduct awareness campaigns on online safety

With reference to the article 'Help to friend turns into Rs 7 crore nightmare' (Feb 23), the rise in cybercrimes and subsequent online identity theft, fraud, phishing, and financial hacking affecting citizens of all age groups is deeply concerning. Lack of awareness and weak digital security practices have cost people crores of hard-

earned rupees. There is an urgent need for stronger cyber laws, stricter enforcement, and widespread digital literacy campaigns. Schools and colleges should educate students about online safety, and awareness campaigns must be raised in public areas to prevent such crimes.

Suhaini Thappa Mangar, Bengaluru

Educate public

The sharp rise in cybercrimes over the past few years is alarming. Many individuals fall victim to phishing scams and identity theft due to a lack of awareness about basic online safety practices. The authorities concerned must conduct widespread awareness campaigns to educate citizens about cybersecurity. Simple steps such as using strong passwords and verifying suspicious links can prevent serious losses. Cyber safety is essential, and educating the public is the first step towards building a safer digital society.

Ishika Pramod, Bengaluru

Rise above theatrics

Apropos 'AI summit protest: Modi blasts Cong's 'naked and dirty' policies' (Feb 23), the recent reports highlight how quickly serious platforms can turn into political battlegrounds. While protests are a democratic right, international forums should not be reduced to partisan spectacles. Political rhetoric on either side must remain measured. India's global image benefits more from constructive debate than sharp exchanges. Indians deserve politics that rises above theatrics, especially on global stages.

Kasak Jain, Bengaluru

For a fair share

The debate around the 16th Finance Commission underscores a persistent strain in India's fiscal federalism. While retaining the states' share at 41% offers continuity, the growing reliance on cesses and surcharges, which fall outside the divisible pool, effectively shrinks states' resources. True cooperative federalism demands greater transparency.

Nandini Malviya, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to editors@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed — not handwritten — will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

The phenomenon we are seeing at the Centre through the initiatives taken by Prime Minister Narendra Modi has not reached Kerala. The benefits that have reached Kerala are bare minimum, because the state doesn't have a very conducive government.



Kiren Rijiju, Union Minister

During a campaign the air is full of speeches — and vice versa.

Anonymous

TO BE PRECISE

Gujarat govt wants adults to get parents' consent to register marriages



IN PERSPECTIVE

The jurisprudence of arrest

Judicial safeguards for personal liberty have not prevented arbitrary arrests and prolonged detention of undertrials

ASHIT MOHAN PRASAD

Despite repeated judicial pronouncements, the criminal jurisprudence governing arrest procedures in India continues to reflect elements of arbitrariness and inconsistency. Courts have consistently emphasised that deprivation of liberty, freedom, and dignity must be undertaken with utmost care, caution, and conscious application of mind. The Fundamental Rights guaranteed under Articles 14, 19, and 21 of the Constitution cannot be sacrificed even in grave or exceptional circumstances. The recent Supreme Court decision denying bail to Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam in the 2020 Delhi riots conspiracy case has reignited debate on the application of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA). Without entering into the merits of the case, it must be noted that while rejecting bail, the Court observed that delay in trial cannot be treated as a "trump card" for automatic release. Charges are yet to be framed, and the accused have undergone more than five years of pre-trial incarceration, raising serious concerns regarding the constitutional mandate of a speedy trial.

In *Vernon Gonsalves v. State of Maharashtra*, the Supreme Court underscored that even within the constraints of the UAPA, courts must undertake a meaningful judicial exercise to determine whether the alleged acts fall within the scope of the statute. Similarly, in *Javed Gulam Nabi Sheikh v. State of Maharashtra*, the Court held that if the State or prosecuting agency lacks the wherewithal to ensure a speedy trial under Article 21, it cannot oppose bail solely on the ground of the gravity of the offence. In *Jalaluddin Khan v. Union of India*, the Court reaffirmed that "bail is the rule and jail is the exception".

The judiciary has also examined the issue of arrest, which confers wide discretionary powers upon the police. In the landmark judgment of *Armesh Kumar v. State of Bihar*, the Supreme Court held that arrest should be an exception and not the rule, particularly for offences punishable with imprisonment of less than seven years.

The Bombay High Court, in *Chandrasekhar Bhimsen Nanki v. State of Maharashtra*, ruled that when an accused complies with a notice under Section 35(5) of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), arrest is ordinarily unnecessary. Further, in *Saender Kumar Antil v. CBI*, the Supreme Court reiterated that the discretion to arrest must be exercised sparingly, guided by strict objectivity and necessity. Procedural safeguards have also been reinforced through *Armesh Kumar v. State of Bihar*, where the Court clarified that under the UAPA and Section 47 of the BNSS, it is mandatory to inform the accused of the specific "grounds" of the arrest, along with the right to seek bail.

More recently, on February 2, 2026, the Supreme Court upheld guidelines issued by the Telangana High Court, restraining the police from mechanically registering FIRs over harsh, offensive, or critical political speech on social media without conducting a preliminary inquiry. The Court clarified that criminal law may be invoked only when speech amounts to incitement to violence or poses a genuine threat to public order. This endorsement represents a vital safeguard against the misuse of arrest powers in cases involving political expression.

Overcrowded prisons The broader context is reflected in India's prison statistics. As of the end of 2023, India housed over 5.3 lakh prisoners across approximately 1,400 prisons, with an average occupancy rate of around 120%, down from 131.4% in 2022. This marginal improvement is largely attributable to efforts by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) and State Legal Services Authorities to identify undertrial prisoners eligible for release. The Supreme Court has urged subordinate courts to adopt a liberal approach in bail matters and directed district-level undertrial review committees to conduct quarterly prison visits to address issues of prolonged incarceration.

Disturbingly, nearly half of all undertrial prisoners are aged 18-30, and approximately 60% are either illiterate or educated below Class 10. The Supreme Court has expressed concern over the high number of applications annually, many of which ought to be resolved by the subordinate courts. The present prison scenario starkly undermines the fundamental principle of "innocent until proven guilty". As early as *Joginder Kumar v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, the Court observed that a significant percentage of arrests were unnecessary and unjustified.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to faithfully implement the safeguards laid down in judicial precedents and statutory provisions. A uniform, liberal, and conscientious approach to arrest and bail would not only alleviate prison overcrowding but also reaffirm the constitutional commitment to liberty and dignity. Mere accusation or suspicion must not become a justification for eroding the spirit of the Constitution, which places Fundamental Rights at its core.

(The writer is a former Director General of Police and former Chief Information Commissioner, Karnataka)

From care infrastructure to women's work: What the Budget signals

AKASH DEV

India has begun to acknowledge an inconvenient truth about its economy: growth cannot be sustained without bringing more women into paid work. The Union Budget 2026 reflects this realisation in part through investments in the care sector and allied health services. But it still stops short of confronting the central macroeconomic blind spot—unpaid care work that holds back female labour force participation (FLFPR).

The care burden GDP ignores

Time-use data makes the imbalance stark. According to the Economic Survey 2025-26, over 40% of women of working age are

engaged in caregiving activities, compared to just over 21% of men. Women spend nearly 140 minutes a day on caregiving and over six hours daily on unpaid work overall, almost three times as much as men. This unpaid labour does not show up in GDP, but its economic value is substantial. In effect, the economy is being subsidised by women's unpaid time, and this subsidy comes at the cost of their participation in paid work.

The result is a persistent gap in labour force participation. Despite recent improvements, women's participation remains well below its potential, especially in urban areas and in higher-productivity sectors.

To its credit, the Union budget does take steps towards recognising care as an economic concern. Paragraph 54 announces the creation of a strong care ecosystem, with 1.5 lakh caregivers to be trained in the coming year. Paragraph 53 commits to expanding training capacity for allied health professionals, with a target of adding 100,000 professionals over five years.

These measures matter. Care services and allied health are female-intensive sectors. Formal training and certification can convert informal, poorly paid work into stable employment while easing care pressures within households. But these initiatives operate at the margins of a much larger problem. What the Budget does not do is to recognise care itself as productive economic activity or to treat unequal distribution among women and men as a macroeconomic constraint. Care remains framed as a sectoral intervention, not as a structural foundation of labour markets.

What the evidence tells us

Recent macroeconomic research strengthens the case for a more fundamental shift. A paper for NCAER, co-authored by the writer and Prof Ratna Sahay and published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, models the impact of redistributing unpaid care work and formalising part-time employment. The findings are striking: equalising

the care burden between men and women, combined with legally protected part-time work, could raise India's female labour force participation rate by around six percentage points.

This is not a marginal gain. A six-point increase would bring millions of women into the workforce, boosting output, household incomes, and fiscal revenues. The mechanisms are straightforward. When care responsibilities are shared more evenly and flexibly, formal work options exist, and women are far more likely to enter and remain in paid employment. India's labour laws and macro policy framework still assume a worker unencumbered by care, an assumption that fits male employment patterns far more than female ones.

Including unpaid care work in national accounts would not merely improve measurement; it would change incentives. If care were recognised as economic output, investments in childcare, eldercare, and disability care would appear not as social

spending but as productivity-enhancing infrastructure.

This shift would also strengthen the case for public provision. International evidence shows that investment in care services generates high employment multipliers, particularly for women. It also frees up time for paid work, creating a virtuous cycle of participation, income growth, and tax revenues. At present, India relies heavily on households, and within them, women, to absorb the costs of care. This model depresses labour supply, reinforces gender inequality, and limits growth. Treating care as a public good rather than a private obligation would align social policy with macroeconomic objectives.

Raising female labour force participation is often framed as a social goal. But it is a growth imperative. As India's demographic dividend matures and labour shortages emerge in key sectors, excluding women from the workforce is no longer economically tenable. The Budget's care-related

initiatives are a start, but they need to be embedded within a broader strategy that includes publicly funded childcare and eldercare services at scale; legal recognition of formal, protected part-time work; incentives for employers to support care-compatible work arrangements; and systematic measurement of unpaid care in national accounts.

Without these, gains in FLFPR will remain contingent on individual households' ability to cooperate rather than durable institutional support.

India's growth story increasingly depends on women's work, paid and unpaid alike. But as long as unpaid care remains invisible in GDP and marginal in policy design, women's participation will stay constrained. Recognising care as economic infrastructure is not about symbolism; it is about unlocking labour supply, productivity, and long-term growth.

(The writer is Associate Fellow, NCAER. Views are personal.)

The government in Tehran sees capitulating to Washington's demands on uranium enrichment and ballistic missiles as riskier to its survival than going to war, analysts say

ERIKA SOLOMON

Facing high-stakes brinkmanship as American warships and fighter jets mass off its shores, Iran has refused to concede to President Trump's demands on its nuclear programme and US officials.

The authoritarian clerics who rule Iran see those concessions — which, in their view, could compromise their core ideology and sovereignty — as a greater threat to their survival than the risk of war.

A dangerous mismatch in perceptions between Iran and the United States is why efforts to negotiate a deal over Iran's nuclear and military capabilities look increasingly fragile, experts say, and a new regional conflict seems almost inevitable.

"Avoiding war is indeed a high priority, but not at any cost," said Sasan Karimi, a political scientist at the University of Tehran who served as the deputy vice president for strategy in Iran's previous government. "At times, a political state — especially an ideological one — may weigh its place in history as heavily as, or even more heavily than, its immediate survival."

US and Iranian negotiators are struggling to break an impasse over their respective red lines.

The Trump administration says it wants Iran to agree to zero nuclear enrichment to ensure it cannot build a nuclear weapon. US officials have also sometimes insisted on limiting the range of Iran's ballistic missiles and ending the country's support for allied militias across the region.

For Iran, which says its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes only, nuclear enrichment is a right that the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, upholds and that his officials cannot abandon. And Iran sees possessing missiles that can reach as far as Israel as critical for self-defence.

US and Iranian officials are set to meet in Geneva this Thursday for talks seen as a last-ditch effort to find a compromise before Trump orders a strike. According to people briefed on internal administration deliberations, the two sides will consider a proposal that offers an off-ramp to war: Allowing Iran a limited nuclear enrichment programme for civilian purposes.

Trump's administration views Tehran as so weak that it should accept US demands, regional officials say. Last June, Iran suffered heavy blows during a 12-day war launched by Israel and briefly joined by US warplanes. That conflict coupled with biting international sanctions has plunged Iran's economy deeper into crisis.

In January, authorities used deadly force to crush nationwide protests demanding Ayatollah Khamenei's ouster. Some smaller protests re-emerged over the weekend, demonstrating how hostile many Iranians are towards their leaders.

On top of that, the government in Tehran is facing a major buildup of US firepower in the Persian Gulf, including two aircraft carrier strike groups, and a massing of reinforcements and refuelling jets across the Middle East.

Trump's lead negotiator with Iran, Steve Witkoff, described the president as "curious as to why they haven't" capitulated, in an interview with *Fox News* over the weekend.



A march in Tehran this month marked the anniversary of the Islamic revolution. Iran is facing an economic crisis and a major buildup of US firepower in the Persian Gulf. NYT

For Iran, refusing US demands is a risk worth taking

The vice president, J.D Vance, told *Fox* last week that despite the threat of war, Iranians "are not yet willing to actually acknowledge and work through" the president's demands.

Yet it is the very perception of Iran's weakness that experts say makes Tehran determined to resist.

"For Iran, submitting to US terms is more dangerous than suffering another US strike," said Ali Vaez, the Iran director of the International Crisis Group. "They don't believe that once they capitulate, the US will alleviate the pressure. They believe that would only encourage the US to go for the jugular."

Ayatollah Khamenei has repeatedly stressed his view that Washington's eventual aim is to topple Iran's system of governance.

"Nuclear energy is not the problem, nor are human rights; America's problem is with the very existence of the Islamic Republic," he said in a speech in 2024.

Danny Girtonowicz, an expert at the Atlantic Council who previously headed the Iran branch of Israel's Defence Intelligence, said that beyond strategic calculations, Iran is insistent on uranium enrichment as "a pillar of the regime itself." If Iran's leaders concede on those points, "they will actually undermine the existence of the regime itself," he said.

"I think they don't have any other choice than to take the bet on the military side," he added.

Two of the main questions ahead of any potential confrontation are whether a US

attack would go as far as trying to topple the political system in Iran, and whether Tehran would be able to retaliate enough to make the conflict painful for Trump, too.

Tehran would probably seek to absorb limited strikes and cap its retaliation to attacks on US bases in the Middle East, as it did last June, according to Farzin Nadimi, a defence analyst focused on Iran at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a think tank.

If Trump chooses to go further, US forces, probably with the help of Israel, would have to race in the first few days to take out as much of Iran's military capabilities as possible to hamper retaliation at a far fiercer and broader retaliation, Nadimi said.

That would require "an extensive effort both by the US and Israel — not only the air power, but also ground elements — to make sure that their missile threat is neutralised," he said.

Iran would in turn try to mimic the successes of the Houthis militia, its ally in Yemen, regional experts say.

In 2023, the Houthis derailed a US military campaign that aimed to stop the group's attacks on international shipping in the Red Sea. The group persistently attacked US drones and international vessels, including an American aircraft carrier.

The 31-day confrontation cost Washington well over \$1 billion, and Trump ultimately struck a deal instead of risking a drawn-out military engagement.

Iran could try to create a protracted and deadly confrontation that could hurt Trump in a midterm election

year, analysts said.

One unknown is whether Iran could launch strikes on oil tankers passing through strategic shipping lanes like the Strait of Hormuz, or have its Houthi allies strike vessels in the Red Sea, said Mohammad Ali Shabani, an Iran analyst and editor of the regional news website *Amnagj.medi*.

If a new conflict were to drive gasoline prices up one or two dollars per gallon, that could feel very risky for Trump before midterm elections this fall, he said.

US and Israeli forces could deal a quick and devastating blow, as they did last June, when a string of top Iranian military officials were killed within hours and Iran's nuclear and military facilities were battered.

But Tehran learned lessons from that war, Iranian and regional officials say, and has prepared several layers of leadership to replace anyone killed. This aims to ensure that the system survives the conflict even if Ayatollah Khamenei and other leaders die.

Regional officials speaking to Tehran and Washington say that if Trump chooses to strike, his aim will probably be to jolt the Iranian leadership severely enough to force it back to the negotiating table on its terms.

But several experts said that Iran refused to capitulate to US terms after the last war and that if it survived another, it would probably refuse again.

"To think that a war every time either makes Iran more flexible or facilitates diplomacy is nothing but a delusion," Vaez said.

The New York Times

Inclusion in the toys aisle

MIRKHA G R AND KETOKI MAZUMDAR

Every year, Mattel tries to make Barbie live up to her iconic tagline: "You can be anything." This year, that effort takes the form of the new Autistic Barbie, developed in collaboration with the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) and designed by Arushi Pratap, an autistic Indian-American fashion designer.

The doll is the latest addition to the Barbie Fashionistas line. She wears pink noise-cancelling headphones to help with sensory overload and carries a fidget toy to ease stress and improve focus. She also comes with a pink tablet featuring Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) apps to support daily communication. Her outfit is a relaxed, loose-fitting purple dress with short sleeves and flat shoes designed for comfort and stability.

There are other subtler changes too. Unlike Barbie's iconic lifted heels, this doll also has flat soles. She gazes slightly sideways to represent potential eye contact difficulties that some autistic people experience. Her elbows and wrists are moveable to help her with stimming and other hand movements that are common among some members of the autistic community.

Efforts to make toys more representative are not new. In the past, such efforts were often improper and ignorant. Mattel itself has produced a few of these, such as Share a Smile Becky, the Downs syndrome doll, and "Coloured" Franice and Oreo Barbie.

Barbie, in her classic form, is far from representative. Studies have consistently found that girls between five and eight years old exposed to Barbie had lower body esteem and a desire for thinness. Mattel's release of their Barbie Fashionistas Doll collection did not change things. The new Barbie came in various "body types, skin colours, and hair textures" and included a wheelchair-using doll and another with skin conditions. However, even these versions remained far from average. The "curvy" Barbie's measurements still reflected a narrow beauty ideal. Barbie has never been an accurate reflection of the average Indian woman — and she certainly is not representative of the average Indian woman either.

Keeping in mind how this doll itself is a flawed impression of feminism, the autistic Barbie marks a positive step forward. Some argue that the doll feels like a collection of different traits

remember being sad. Something that depends on its opposite cannot support us for long. The opposite of happiness is not sadness; it is maturity. Maturity is the willingness to see life as it is, without demanding that it conform or entertain you. A mature mind does not ask for stimulation; it asks for understanding. And, without this understanding, something stable arises: Joy. It does not depend on outcomes. It arises from insight, from being aligned with what is real rather than what is merely pleasant. Happiness glitters and fades. Joy remains, because it asks for nothing. To choose joy is not to gain something new. It is to finally rest.

OUR PAGES OF HISTORY

50 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 1976

ASEAN leaders favour economic over military pacts

Bali (Indonesia), February 23
Leaders of five non-Communist South-East Asian nations said today that economic rather than military co-operation was the key to stability in the region. There was, however, general agreement that security co-operation between them should continue and indeed be stepped up where necessary, though on bilateral basis. Malaysian Premier Datuk Hussein Onn said, "If we can make progress in economic co-operation, we will have made a substantial contribution towards our respective national and regional security."

25 YEARS AGO: FEBRUARY 2001

Survey admits slowdown

New Delhi, Feb 23
The pre-budget Economic Survey 2000-2001, while painting a difficult economic situation, has warned of a persistent slowdown in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate in the coming financial year and suggested hard measures in the forthcoming budget to rein in fiscal deficit and accelerate ongoing economic reforms. "The economy is currently at a difficult stage. Some problems of growth are likely in the coming year," according to the Survey, tabled by Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha in the Lok Sabha.

OASIS | ACHARYA PRASHANT

The fragile promise of happiness

We are constantly told that the purpose of life is to be happy. It sounds harmless, and very few people ever question it. Yet hidden inside this advice is the seed of lifelong dissatisfaction. The moment happiness becomes the goal, the mind also begins running from unhappiness. It starts moving in two directions at once, chasing one thing while trying to escape another. Slowly, the pursuit itself becomes the disturbance. The one who is always chasing has already accepted something, though he may never put it into words: he believes himself to be incomplete. And a mind that feels incomplete cannot receive anything lasting. It may feel

excitement or relief for a while, but it cannot settle. Look closely at what usually passes for happiness: A promotion, a holiday, approval, entertainment. None of these are wrong by themselves. But notice how they work. They feel meaningful only because the inner state is already restless and hungry. Happiness is not an independent experience. It is a reaction, a short easing of discomfort, a small rise in the emotional graph produced by changing conditions. And because conditions never stay put, happiness keeps collapsing.

This is not accidental. Happiness, as we understand it today, is largely a conditioned phenomenon. We have been trained to call certain excitement something new, the warmth of approval, the comfort of being noticed. Over time, these associations become fixed. Without this conditioning, much of what we chase would lose its appeal far more quickly than we imagine. Happiness is fragile. It leans on people, outcomes, recognition, moods. Remove one condition, and the structure begins to shake. We know we are happy only because we



OPINION

Ignore the AI Hysteria



INSIDE VIEW
By Andy Kessler

Scaremongering that artificial intelligence will kill mankind has died down. Whew. But both AI boosterism and a cacklous about AI killing jobs are whipping up public hysteria. In 1812 Luddites took hammers to knitting machines for fear of jobs. Substack and podcasts, equally misinformed, are the new word hammers.

The first hysterical scenario is utopia. Anthropic's Dario Amodei suggests that "we are near the end of the exponential." Soon, we'll have a "country of geniuses in a data center." Mass unemployment is coming, but don't worry, there's no need to work. Sit at home and play "Assassin's Creed" on your Xbox, stream "Bridgerton" Season 12, and chow down on 3-D printed Beyond Meat loaf delivered by Rosie the Robot from your foodraccycle (George Jetson's serving machine). Like Burning Man, life is one big party with infinite resources and no politics. Bernie Sanders photos are everywhere. Peace and love.

The second scenario is dystopia. Surely you've heard that Musk-like "technofascist oligarchs"—quite the mouthful—will run everything. One commentator thinks "we will be well-cared-for pets." The new world order is the fully automated neo-feudalism, and you're the serf. We'll have robot cars, roboops, termina-

tors and a fully functioning Skynet that grades social status from Instagram likes—until this time it's different, we hear. Yeah, right.

Corporations use technology to automate processes and profit (no hissing). That profit funds employees to solve bigger problems for customers. Higher productivity kills jobs only if you take a snapshot and ignore the dynamics of changing job activity. Farmers, busgy-whip manufacturers, customer service

then works its way down over decades, seeping into the economy sector by sector. But this time it's different, we hear. Yeah, right.

Corporations use technology to automate processes and profit (no hissing). That profit funds employees to solve bigger problems for customers. Higher productivity kills jobs only if you take a snapshot and ignore the dynamics of changing job activity. Farmers, busgy-whip manufacturers, customer service

We won't see a utopia or dystopia. We'll see faster growth and more productivity.

operators become Crisp gene slicers, AI engine optimizers, legal arbitrageurs using prediction markets and other jobs mostly unimaginable, yet. Utopian-living George Jetson worked—at Spacely Space Sprockets.

Can we have 20% unemployment and a growing economy? Not for long. We sometimes get a "jobless recovery" coming out of recessions, as we did following the financial crisis or Covid. But jobs are soon created as productivity supplies excess capital to invest in new and more complex problems. And we never run out of problems. Stop taking snapshots.

Riddle me this: With high unemployment, who's going to buy all the stuff AI's enhanced productivity promises for the economy? Growth won't hap-

pen. Who are they going to sell to? Influencers? It's self-defeating.

Productivity is a job creator, not destroyer. Desktop publishing meant everyone could create magazines. Spreadsheets meant everyone could be an analyst. Anthropic's Claude now allows everyone to create code. Technology may kill old jobs but it creates millions of new ones.

Sure, generative AI will fundamentally change how businesses operate. So what? We need to embrace AI in education rather than ban it. So many problems not yet solved will match with tons of untapped human potential just begging to be unleashed, creating things not yet thought of. Like what? Most guess cancer treatments, longevity discoveries and inhabiting Mars, but no one really knows.

Then again, go back and try to explain to your 2010 self that a click of a button would magically bring a car, with or without a driver, to you within five minutes. Or that you could stream 4K TV shows over Wi-Fi on your phone or a 98-inch set. Or that Generation Z gets its news from TikTok. Imagine how incredulous and cynical you'd be.

New stuff is unimaginable, except by its risk-taking creators. So ignore the AI hysterics. And mass-unemployment claims. They're ignorant near-sighted snapshots. The world is much more dynamic. I promise you won't be anyone's pet.

Write to kessler@wsj.com.

BOOKSHELF | By Gary Saul Morson

Russian Hearts And Minds

Volga Blues

By Marzio G. Mian, translated by Elettra Pauletto Norton, 304 pages, \$31.99

Wake me up in a hundred years, ask me what is happening in Russia," mused Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, a 19th-century satirist, and I'll tell you with my usual frankness: We steal, we drink, we make war." That is pretty much what Marzio G. Mian, an Italian journalist, found when he set out to discover "the mysterious Russian soul" by traveling the length of the Volga River, which, he explains, has long been considered its "mirror." On his journey, which he documents in "Volga Blues: A Journey into the Heart of Russia," Mr. Mian wanted to learn "what it means to be Russian in this moment in history, when the Russian Bear has emerged from hibernation with a hunger for revenge, expansion, and glory."

Everyone Mr. Mian meets is obsessed with Russianness, always defined in opposition to the materialist West. Whereas many Westerners see the period between the end of the U.S.S.R. and the rise of Vladimir Putin as a time of freedom, Russians, even those who have dared to be critical of the Ukraine war, describe it as an era of national humiliation when, as one Russian explains to Mr. Mian, "the West tried to destroy us by poisoning the source of our identity." Adopting "a new social ideal... based on egocentrism, hedonism, and narcissism," Russia almost allowed itself to be destroyed. Now things are different. As a well-known rapper sings: "I'm lucky to be Russian so I can stick it to the world."

In Soviet days, Mr. Mian is told by a well-placed 35-year-old he meets, "Russians had very strict ideas about good and evil," but in the 1990s, unfortunately, "everyone started to decide for themselves, à la carte," what was right and wrong. For many Russians, disagreement signals not free thought but chaotic disunity. So they appreciate, rather than deplore, Mr. Putin's persecution of dissent, seeing it as necessary for national survival. As one Russian explains to the author, Mr. Putin "reminded Russians of the profound dangers of dissent while also declaring his historic, if not divine, mandate to suppress it."

In place of communism, Russians adopted messianic nationalism. In Mr. Mian's travelogue, we meet person after person who professes adherence to Russian Orthodox Christianity, but no one speaks of salvation, sacraments or even Jesus. Priests as well as laymen view their religion as a liturgy celebrating Russia's glorious history. "Our faith and Russia's fate are inextricably linked," one young priest explains. He and others describe the Ukrainian war, regarded as a struggle against corrupting Western civilization, in apocalyptic terms. Another priest agrees that it is a battle between good and evil, "the final battle." Yet another concludes that if Russians do not win, they are prepared for a nuclear holocaust. "We're ready to martyr ourselves, sacrifice ourselves, and the whole world if it's unjust and evil. There's no need for a world like that."

Americans are likely be astonished at how grievances from centuries ago seem like fresh insults. A mercenary tells Mr. Mian that "it's time to even the score" with the Poles, who invaded Russia in the early 17th century. A priest traces the endless conflict of Russia and the West to the Crusaders' sack of Constantinople, formerly Byzantium, in 1204. "The vindictive hate of the West toward Byzantium and its heirs continues to this day," he explains, "if Russians don't understand this, we risk forgetting where we came from, who we are, and what our task is. Being Christian Orthodox is a matter not just of faith but of defending the sacred world of Russian Slavdom."

Joseph Stalin is back in fashion, not because he was a communist—his admirers overlook that—but because he defeated Russia's enemies and extended its power. Vladimir Lenin, by contrast, is looked down upon, not because he murdered millions but because he was "too European." Being a tyrant is a plus, because only tyrants can foster collectivism. In 2017, Mr. Mian writes, Mr. Putin "commissioned a statue of Ivan the Terrible in central Moscow. It immediately became a pilgrimage destination."

Stalin is back in fashion because he defeated Russia's enemies and extended its power. Lenin is derided—he was 'too European.'

As Mr. Mian reports, Russians still regard heavy drinking as a glorious national tradition. He describes a meeting with an abbot as "an entirely alcohol-free conversation, perhaps the only one of the trip." His guide, Vlad, has "a penchant for apocalyptic benders that can last days, even weeks, dulling one's consciousness as one plunges into the abyss in a desperate search for truth." Observing that young people "have been drinking much more since the war started," a philologist adds: "Imagine what it means to drink more, in Russia."

Unfortunately, it would be unwise to place too much trust in Mr. Mian's reports, since he makes so many obvious factual mistakes. He describes Stalin's promotion to head of the Leningrad Party in 1929, which never happened—Stalin was by that time consolidating his power across the U.S.S.R. He tells us that Ivan Goncharov, a 19th-century writer, published three books, when he published four. Worst of all, he states as fact that Ashkenazi Jews are descended from Central Asian Khazar converts to Judaism, a groundless myth used by Hamas and its sympathizers to deny the historical connection of today's Jews to the Holy Land.

Remarkably, Mr. Mian regards Leon Trotsky, not William Shakespeare or Leo Tolstoy, as "the greatest writer... of all time." He blames President Bill Clinton for the failure of Russian democracy, as if a different American policy would have prevented a country that had never enjoyed a democratic government from reverting to authoritarianism.

To take his journey, Mr. Mian pretended to be not a journalist but a scholar writing a history of the Volga. He thinks it lucky that, even though "a quick online search would reveal my extensive reporting on Russia... especially on sensitive topics," the authorities did not find out. Anyone who knows Russia will be amazed that it did not dawn on Mr. Mian that the FSB, Russia's successor to the KGB, knew quite well what he was up to and was staging some meetings. How many Potemkin villages did he visit? To be sure, it is hard to know what is true in a land that, as Mr. Mian correctly observes, consciously accepts what it knows to be myths and lies. As Mikhail Bakunin, a 19th-century anarchist, observed, "it's painful to live in Russia if you value the truth."

Mr. Morson is a professor of Slavic literature at Northwestern University.

The Cuban Regime's Slow Collapse



AMERICAS
By Mary Anastasia O'Grady

An Arctic thaw making the large island in the northern Western Hemisphere ever more strategically important, Mr. Trump justified the use of force, if necessary, on national-security grounds.

Another island closer to home poses a more immediate risk than Greenland, owned by U.S. ally Denmark. Cuba, by all indications, is being used for intelligence gathering by China, presenting a clear and present danger. A 2024 paper by scholars at the Center for Strategic and International Studies listed "four sites within Cuba that are most likely to be supporting China's efforts to collect intelligence on the United States and its neighbors." The authors note: "These sites have undergone observable upgrades in recent years, even as Cuba has faced increasingly dire economic prospects that have drawn it closer to China."

It would be strange if the Trump administration didn't recognize the current collapse of the Cuban economy as a unique opportunity to shore up national security by re-

storing democracy on the island. Yet Mr. Trump doesn't appear to have a plan to support such a transition. He said the capture of Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro on Jan. 3 leaves Cuba "ready to fall." But he also said a U.S. action similar to what occurred in Caracas is probably not what Cuba calls for another. With Washington.

Coming from a real-estate magnate known for his transactional approach to governance, this disturbs no small number of freedom-loving Cubans on the island and in exile. A free Cuba calls for an unconditional surrender by the ruling clique in Havana. Anything less plays into the hands of the next generation of regime thugs, who are looking to buy time.

The regime is running low on everything it needs to operate its system of repression. Acute shortages of electricity and gasoline have been exacerbated by the U.S. blockade of oil shipments. But the humanitarian crisis was well underway before the U.S. oil "quarantine." Cuban privation is the product of years of Havana greed and corruption.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio has called regime leadership "incompetent." That's wrong. It's quite good at what it does, working to accumulate power and money. As I reported in this space in January 2025, a leak to the Miami Herald of internal government records showed that

"hundreds of millions of dollars earned by companies on the island that should go to public services end up in the accounts of GAESA"—a state-owned conglomerate—"or its subsidiaries."

In 1959 Cubans gave up their freedom, some willingly, in exchange for promises that the state would provide for them. Now they have neither liberty nor bread. Society is ready to explode.

Will Trump seize the opportunity to free the island or be tempted into a deal?

Militarily, it would be easy for the U.S. to tip the regime over. But some 8.5 million people are suffering the breakdown of food distribution, widespread unemployment, the collapse of hospitals, the failure of public sanitation and potable-water supplies, a housing deficit, and epidemics of contagious diseases. Even if international aid could alleviate this suffering in the near-term, the risks of "de-Baathification"—the collapse of public security with no replacement, as happened in Iraq—haunt the U.S. An orderly transition would require assistance from the rank and file.

Mr. Trump's demurrals at the use of U.S. force in Cuba hasn't helped. As usual, Cuba

says it's ready to talk, and the words "opening" and "reform" float around. President Obama fell for that.

No doubt those clinging to power like what they see in Venezuela where the regime is still intact. The media says Mr. Rubio is engaging with the Castro family. But reports are on unnamed sources. The son of 94-year-old Raúl Castro, Alejandro Castro Espin, was rumored to be in Mexico "talking" to the Americans. When that appeared to be untrue, the story line shifted. The new Havana counterpart, now whispered to be the talking for Cuba, is Raúl Rodríguez Castro, grandson of the old man.

Mr. Rodríguez Castro, known as "El Cangrejo"—the crab—because of a birth defect, never finished school. But he is said to be much-loved by his ruthless grandfather and is buddies with the crooks running GAESA. He could be acting as a go-between. Cuba denied this on Friday, calling it speculation. It's possible that unnamed Trump officials, by advancing the story, are trying to sow division inside the Cuban government and give head of state Miguel Díaz-Canel reason to worry he is being sidelined.

The regime has been cutting deals with Washington, on and off, for nearly seven decades. Now is the time for all of them to leave.

Write to O'Grady@wsj.com.

When Is a Tax Not a Tax?

By Philip Hamburger

California's proposed billion-dollar tax is unconstitutional. The ballot initiative calling for one-time retroactive 5% tax on the net worth of the state's billionaires has prompted much unease, but the legal arguments against it have remained elusive. It's therefore important to recognize that the tax is an uncompensated taking or at least a deprivation of property without due process, contrary to the Fifth and 14th amendments, respectively.

Disgruntled taxpayers often grouse that taxation is state-sanctioned theft, and libertarians frequently complain about regulatory takings. But the billionaire tax is a problem for more basic reasons—reasons that are crucial for all of us, not only the hyper-wealthy.

Although taxes are generally lawful, that isn't true of

everything called a tax. Consider a hypothetical Bill Gates Tax (imagined by legal scholars Calvin Massey and Eric Kades) that imposes an income tax of 100% on Mr. Gates and no one else. In form, it's a tax; in reality, it's a confiscation.

When it's a taking, like California's proposed wealth levy.

The example of the Bill Gates Tax is extreme in demanding 100% of income from one person. It's less extreme, however, than the California tax in taking only income, not wealth, and in being prospective.

Three considerations coincide to make it especially clear that the California proposal is confiscatory. Taxes are furthest from

takings when they're prospective, recurring and equal in their burdens—or, if not equal, then sufficiently graduated to distribute their burdens widely and proportionately. The proposed California tax is a retrospective one-time measure targeting only billionaires, making it an uncompensated taking or at least a deprivation of property without due process of law.

Although the Supreme Court has never adopted such reasoning in a tax case, it has come close. In *Eastern Enterprises v. Apfel* (1998), it rejected the imposition of severe liability that was targeted, one-off and retroactive, holding that it was a taking.

Taxes can be targeted without being unconstitutional. They can take aim at particular events, goods and materials, and exceptions can excuse particular companies.

California's tax, however, targets a small class of individuals, billionaires, and doesn't burden anyone else, even for small amounts. This is distinctive and worrisome—particularly when imposing massive payments.

Similarly, retroactivity isn't uncommon, and taxes don't have to be recurring. But when added to the targeting, it confirms that the California measure is confiscatory.

The combination of these features sets the billionaire tax apart. A retroactive non-recurring tax that profoundly targets a small group and no one else is an uncompensated taking or at least a deprivation of property without due process. It should, therefore, be held unconstitutional.

Mr. Hamburger teaches at Columbia Law School and is CEO of the New Civil Liberties Alliance.

OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Neil Gorsuch Tries to Revive Congress

As they wait out the latest winter storm, Members of Congress ought to spend time reading Justice Neil Gorsuch's concurring opinion in the Supreme Court's rejection of President Trump's claim of emergency power to impose tariffs (*Learning Resources v. Trump*). The Justice has more confidence in Congress than the Members themselves do these days.

Justice Gorsuch rides shotgun to Chief Justice John Roberts's excellent majority opinion, and he mows down both the dissents and the concurring opinion by liberal Justice Elena Kagan. It's an intellectual tour de force. But his main theme isn't an assertion of judicial power. It's an effort to encourage Congress to reclaim its proper authority under the Constitution's separation of powers.

The Justice spends 46 pages explaining and defending the Court's major questions doctrine, which says the executive must point to clear Congressional language to justify a regulation with significant consequences. The liberal justices try to duck the doctrine while joining the majority opinion, while the three dissenting conservatives try to carve out exceptions on foreign policy and tariffs.

Justice Gorsuch thoroughly rebuts both, but his larger effort is to explain that the major questions standard is meant to protect legislative authority. "The major questions doctrine is not 'anti-administrative state,'" as Justice Kagan has asserted, Justice Gorsuch writes. "It is pro-Congress." By holding agencies to a clear-statement standard from Congress, the judiciary protects against the usurpation of legislative power by Presidents.

"Our founders understood that men are not angels, and we disregard that insight at our peril when we allow the few (or the one) to aggrandize their power based on loose or uncertain authority," he writes. "We delude ourselves, too, if we think that power will accumulate safely and only in the hands of dispassionate 'people ... found in agencies.'"

The Justice explains why the legislative process is 'the bulwark of liberty.'

As the Court has ruled, this applies when liberal Presidents impose vaccine or energy mandates, or when a Republican President claims tariff power, based on no clear law. This protects against one-man or unaccountable bureaucratic rule, which is increasingly how the U.S. has been governed under Presidents of both political parties as they seek to avoid the hard work of getting something passed in Congress.

In our view, the recent weakness of Congress vis-à-vis the President has many causes. Political polarization and narrow majorities make it harder for bipartisan coalitions to form. Media focus on the Presidency draws more readers than do stories on legislative process. The failure of civic education about the American system produces a public that is more susceptible to demagoguery and political idolatry.

But as Justice Gorsuch makes clear, the difficulty of passing legislation is a constitutional feature, not a fault. "Deliberation tempers impulse, and compromise hammers disagreements into workable solutions," he writes. "And because laws must earn such broad support to survive the legislative process, they tend to endure." He rightly calls the legislative process "the bulwark of liberty."

This ought to be a stirring message, especially to those in Congress and the press who fret about the end of democracy. The left in particular likes to write vague laws that hand power to bureaucratic "experts" who can dictate how Americans should live. Justice Kagan says forthrightly that this is a virtue.

No political system is perfect, and Congress can run off the rails. The Smoot-Hawley tariff of 1930 showed how legislative logrolling can end in disaster when a President (Hoover) lacks the courage to veto. But Congress has since ceded too much tariff power to a President who refuses to use it with restraint. Putting limits on discretionary tariff authority would be a good start on reviving the proper role of Congress.

Jack Hughes for President

There isn't much that unifies all of America these days, but the Olympic overtime victories by the U.S. men's and women's hockey teams ought to qualify for anyone with a modicum of patriotic feeling.

First the women won on a stellar goal by Megan Keller. The gold-medal game was closer than most expected since the U.S. team had rolled through the field and has been strong for a long time. But Team Canada put up a spirited fight.

The victory by the men was even more special as the first U.S. Olympic gold medal in hockey since the 1980 "miracle on ice" over the Soviets. The Canadian men have long been dominant and beat the Yanks in overtime in 2010. That made Sunday's victory all the more satisfying for American hockey.

The best moment was watching Jack Hughes—he of the gap-toothed hockey smile—celebrate in ecstatic fashion with his teammates after he slipped a shot through the legs of the Canadian goalie for the victory.

Anyone who has experienced the thrill of a team victory after years of hard work knows

His joyful patriotism was as inspiring as his winning goal in overtime.

such a moment is unlike few others in life. Mr. Hughes, who plays professionally for the New Jersey Devils, may never have to buy a drink in New Jersey again.

But the 24-year-old was even more impressive in his interview after the game on NBC. He paid tribute to the team's goal, Connor Hellebuyck, who saved the day multiple times as Team Canada outplayed the Yanks for most of the third period. And then Mr. Hughes said without a trace of cynical calculation, "This is all about our country now. I love the USA. I love my teammates. It's unbelievable. The USA hockey brotherhood is so strong ... I'm so proud to be American today."

Imagine that: An expression of unabashed patriotism from an American athlete.

No doubt Canadians feel the loss to the U.S. more acutely amid President Trump's jingoistic and needless attacks on their sovereignty. But Mr. Hughes paid tribute to the Canadians, and his patriotism was born of passionate competition rather than politics. Yet given who else is likely to run, we could do worse than Jack Hughes for President.

More About That Chinese Nuclear Test ...

The Trump Administration said recently that China conducted a nuclear explosive test and tried to conceal it from the world. The press doubts the story and insists President Trump is courting nuclear war if he tests America's nuclear arsenal. So credit the Administration for adding details to the record and educating the public about the threat from China and Russia.

"On June 22, 2020, we are aware that China conducted a nuclear explosive test," the State Department's Christopher Yeaw said at the Hudson Institute last week, reinforcing what the Administration alleged this month in Geneva. State said China had used a technique known as decoupling to muffle the register and evade detection.

Mr. Yeaw, an assistant secretary at State, added details: "The probable explosion occurred right near the Lop Nur nuclear test site" in China. A station in Kazakhstan detected a 2.75 magnitude event. There is "very little possibility I would say that it is anything but an explosion, a singular explosion."

The event was "entirely not consistent with an earthquake" or "the ripple fire explosion that you get in mining," he added. It "is quite consistent with what you would expect from a nuclear explosive test of some certain yield."

China is denying the allegation at a decibel so high ("entirely unfounded") it suggests that State has struck a nerve. Beijing insists it doesn't conduct testing with yield, in voluntary accordance with an international treaty it hasn't ratified. Yet the empirical record is that China and Russia will act in their own perceived interest regardless of international nuclear norms.

The U.S. government has said for years that Moscow may be conducting nuclear testing

with yield. Beijing is on an unconstrained nuclear break out to 1,000 warheads by 2030, and refuses to even discuss arms control with the U.S.

Don't buy that the alleged test in China wouldn't matter if it was of low nuclear yield. That isn't reassuring. The Pentagon warned late last year in a report that China "is probably pursuing nuclear weapons with yields below 10 kilotons," so Beijing can "conduct limited nuclear counterstrikes against military targets and control nuclear escalation."

In other words, China could be writing its nuclear blackmail playbook for a Taiwan crisis. The free world is at a known disadvantage in such tactical nuclear weapons, and Beijing wants to present the U.S. with the terrible options of surrender or resort to strategic weapons and risk a larger nuclear war.

Russia commands as many as 2,000 tactical nukes, and the recently expired New Start treaty did nothing to constrain them, which alone made the pact unworthy of renewing. One of the biggest contributions Mr. Trump could make would be a crash project to deploy a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile on U.S. Navy submarines before he leaves office.

Mr. Trump has reserved the right to test U.S. nuclear weapons "on an equal basis" with adversaries, which is not an escalation. The world has changed since the U.S. stopped testing nuclear weapons in the 1990s, and simulations and modeling aren't a perfect substitute.

The U.S. nuclear deterrent has been a force for peace in the world for 80 years, but preventing a nuclear exchange requires a capable and credible American arsenal. The State Department is right to explain, as it did this month, that it's time to end the era "of U.S. unilateral restraint" that has limited only the free world's defenses.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

VantageScore Predicts Risk Better Than FICO

In "Washington Inflates Credit Scores and Another Housing Bubble" (Life Science, Feb. 15), Alyssia Finley gets it wrong. FICO's model was the industry standard credit score used for mortgages during the 2008 Great Recession that led to Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac's failure and subsequent U.S. conservatorship, costing American taxpayers billions of dollars. Research from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis found FICO scores to be a poor predictor of mortgage defaults prior to the Great Recession.

Competition enables greater choice and better outcomes for markets. That's why Congress passed and the president signed into law the bipartisan 2018 Credit Score Competition Act. Lenders choose VantageScore not because it's an easier score, but because it uses more data and is better at predicting a consumer's credit risk.

Many of the nation's leading lenders, including JPMorganChase and Bank of America, have studied millions of consumer mortgages and compared VantageScore's results side-by-side with FICO over a decade.

They have found that VantageScore 4.0 is better at predicting risk. As a result, mortgage lenders and consumers will likely save nearly \$600 million in mortgage credit score fees in 2026. Analyses from Bank of America, JPMorganChase and Bloomberg Intelligence found VantageScore 4.0 captured up to 13% more incremental defaults than the legacy FICO Classic credit score.

VantageScore was designed to improve mortgage default prediction using additional trended credit data and modern modeling techniques. The model was built to withstand and prevent the next crisis. Calling VantageScore's credit scoring model "political" because it incorporates rent and utility payment data is misguided. When has less data produced more accurate results?

Mortgage credit score competition strengthens mortgage markets. Clinging to a single failed legacy credit score isn't the right path forward.

SHILOU TAVARES
President and CEO, VantageScore
San Francisco

Quality Time Is the Best Valentine's Day Gift

In "On Valentine's Day, I Want to Hold Your Invisible Hand" (op-ed, Feb. 14), Roland Fryer misses the mark on a lovely truth of romance and commitment: Verification doesn't need to come from pricey displays of affection. Last Valentine's Day, I mistakenly reserved a table at a fancy restaurant for the wrong Friday. It was my first Valentine's Day with my new girlfriend, and I was left scrambling when I realized my blunder too late to find a table anywhere.

We ended up having dinner at home that night. I cooked her ratatouille, and we shared a cheap bottle of wine. To this day, it was one of our best dates. We didn't need expensive gifts or fancy meals to confirm our love; we just needed

honest, heartfelt time together.

JACK CHORLEY
San Francisco

My wife of 42 years and I spent Feb. 14 this year in a hospital's emergency room for what turned out to be a negative CT scan. Having each other's company during that adventure confirmed our love for each other more effectively than the cards we exchanged earlier that day.

Years ago we stopped paying "the highest possible price for the lowest expected quality" for a Valentine's Day dinner out, as Mr. Fryer puts it. This year, I looked forward to a normally priced, relaxed dinner out on Feb. 16.

GREGORY MARSHALL
Marietta, Ga.

Timed Testing Doesn't Measure Competence

I have received accommodations for extended time on exams because I have dyslexia. Without these accommodations, I wouldn't have gone on to build a career in emergency medical services or pursue medicine. Our understanding of disability has evolved, and society's conception of merit has expanded with it. Yet "Back When: Does Everyone Deserve 'Extra Time'?" (Review, Feb. 7) assumes that speed equals competence, while modern professional practice increasingly separates cognitive ability from time pressure except where time itself is the skill being tested.

In the prehospital setting where I work, time matters when a patient's airway is obstructed or physiology demands immediate action. Even then, teams pause before invasive interventions to double-check medication dosing, often using calculators, and to critically reassess the plan of care. Time matters when biology requires it, not when testing convenience demands it. There are exams where timing is appropriate, such as simulation-based clinical assessments. But higher education should ask whether it is truly measuring competence or simply differentiating students based on reading, writing or recall speed.

I have often spent additional hours studying to compensate for slower reading, yet still struggled to complete timed written exams. In clinical practice, however, moving deliberately, thinking critically and acting with intention and compassion are what lead to better patient care. Timed testing doesn't reliably predict who will become an effective clinician, researcher or leader.

Rather than questioning students' need for extended time, we should reconsider whether our methods of evaluation reflect the skills we actually expect professionals to possess.

ADAM KUPST
Miami

A Not-So-Free New York Bus

Regarding "Mamandi Takes New York Hostage" (Review & Outlook, Feb. 19): When considering New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's tax increases, we can apply a twist to a famous joke by the late P.J. O'Rourke: "If you think bus fares are expensive now, wait until you see what they cost when they're free."

CHRIS SOBOLEWSKI
Fountain Hills, Ariz.

Adam Smith's Wise Counsel

Jason Riley's "GOP Doesn't Know Smith From Adam" (Upward Mobility, Feb. 18) is a timely reminder that free trade increases the wealth and standard of living of trade partners.

"In The Wealth of Nations" (1776), Smith also wrote: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

Unfortunately, 250 years later, many people believe that it's from the government's benevolence that we can expect our dinner.

DAVE EVANS
Midland Park, N.J.

The Obama and Biden Years Made Allies Distrust the U.S.

Rahm Emanuel in "The Donroe Doctrine's Year of Failure" (op-ed, Feb. 19) seems to have forgotten the role that Barack Obama and Joe Biden played in making our allies around the world uneasy about our commitment to them. When a politician like Mr. Emanuel ignores the failures of people in his own party and doesn't acknowledge their effect on international relations, he will be destined to repeat their mistakes if he becomes commander in chief.

KEN DROPEK
Houston

Free Expression From WSJ Opinion

A daily newsletter on life, politics and culture. Edited by Matthew Hennessey and featuring columnists Matthew Continetti, Kyle Smith, Louise Perry, Ben Sasse, James B. Meigs, John J. Miller, Meghan Cox Gurdon and other contributors.



Scan the QR code or visit [wsj.com/opinion/free-expression](https://www.wsj.com/opinion/free-expression)

Letters intended for publication should be emailed to wsj.letters@wsj.com. Please include your city, state and telephone number. All letters are subject to editing, and unpublished letters cannot be acknowledged.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Corinne Katon

"Well actually, it was ChatGPT that got the D's."

OPINION

Government Is a Risky Shareholder

By Robert C. Pozen

Since returning to the presidency, Donald Trump has governed with the same volatility that defined his first term—but now with a new tool in hand: federal ownership stakes in private companies. This unprecedented economic power grab, coupled with opaque decision-making and conflicts of interest, has created a climate of instability for investors and companies. While the administration says these moves promote national security and industrial revival, the reality is that Mr. Trump's use of executive power is eroding market predictability and distorting capital flows.

The Trump administration has taken direct ownership stakes in nine companies across critical sectors like semiconductors, rare earths and defense. This marks a radical departure from traditional U.S. policy, under which government purchases of equity were temporary and reserved for bailouts during systemic crises.

By acquiring stakes in private companies, the Trump administration destabilizes the markets.

The federal government now holds a 9.9% stake in Intel via an \$8.9 billion stock purchase, 15% in MP Materials, 5% in Lithium Americas, minority stakes in startups like Vulcan Elements and Trilogy Metals, 10% in USA Rare Earth. In the case of U.S. Steel, the government received a "golden share" to secure veto power over major business decisions. This veto has already been used to stop the closing of a plant in Illinois.



The administration says these deals are about protecting national-security interests—ensuring a domestic supply of critical materials and advanced technology. What's missing is a consistent standard. There is no public framework to explain why these companies were selected, what criteria they met, or when the government plans to exit. Because the process of choosing companies for equity investments is unclear, market actors are left wondering whether the choice is primarily political.

Nowhere is the appearance of favoritism more glaring than in the case of Vulcan Elements, a North Carolina-based rare-earth magnet startup. In August 2025, Donald Trump Jr.'s venture firm, 1789 Capital, invested in Vulcan. Three months later, the company received a \$620 million Pentagon loan commitment and \$50 million in Commerce Department equity funding. The investment was one of the largest industrial deals issued that year. The younger Mr. Trump says he had no role in securing the funds. But the sequence of events—and his personal investment—raised red

flags. It wasn't the only instance: 1789 Capital reportedly held stakes in at least four companies that secured federal contracts or investments. Lawmakers have since asked Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth about whether Trump family connections have influenced the granting of government contracts.

The concern isn't only questionable ethics—it's market uncertainty. When success appears to depend on political access rather than actual performance, investor confidence weakens. This warps market incentives, discourages fair competition, and introduces long-term risk to private capital.

The president himself bought between \$1 million and \$5 million in Intel bonds shortly after his administration finalized its investment in the company. While that isn't illegal, the optics are troubling. Without clear guardrails, Mr. Trump's use of economic power seems inseparable from his personal interests.

The companies benefiting from these equity deals experienced meteoric stock gains. Intel's share price rose more than 80% in 2025, MP Materials' surged more than

200%, and USA Rare Earth's rose 15% after the announcement of the government's investment.

This boom suggests a new Wall Street reality: If a company is seen as favored by Mr. Trump, investors pile in, not because of fundamentals but because of perceived political insulation. The risk is that valuations become inflated, competition narrows, and capital is allocated inefficiently.

Meanwhile, rival firms—those in the same sectors but without Washington ties—face a chilling effect. If their competitor has an equity investment from the U.S. government, raising funds and winning contracts becomes more difficult. As MP Materials CEO James Litinsky said in an earnings call that "in the very short term the administration has made sure that we have a successful national champion in MP."

The instability is reverberating across other industries. Will Mr. Trump's next target be aerospace? Biotech? Who qualifies for government capital, and who doesn't? Without transparency, every company becomes a potential beneficiary—or casualty—of political favoritism.

Economists warn that this behavior introduces an uncertainty premium—a return demanded by investors to offset unpredictable policy. That premium raises borrowing costs, suppresses investment, and slows growth.

Markets can tolerate bad news, but they struggle with no news, sudden reversals and unclear rules. Mr. Trump's governing style delivers all three. He has become the destabilizer in chief, introducing unpredictability that undermines the confidence on which healthy markets depend.

Tariff Refund Bait and Switch

Tariff Refund Bait and Switch

By Joshua Claybourn

Hoping for a tariff refund? Don't hold your breath. Winning at the Supreme Court was the easy part. To understand what comes next, consider how the government survived the legal skirmishes that led to its loss last week.

From the earliest challenges at the Court of International Trade, Justice Department lawyers made one consistent argument against preliminary injunctions: "Plaintiffs face no harm from a stay; they can fully remedy any harms by obtaining a refund of any tariffs ultimately held invalid," to quote a 2025 government motion. Justice Department lawyers entered formal stipulations in *Princess Awesome v. CBP* and a January 2026 consolidated proceeding, each promising not to contest the court's authority to order retroactive refunds after a final decision. The courts denied the injunctions, refusing to suspend liquidation (the process that finalizes tariff payments) in direct reliance on those assurances. Yet the government now appears ready to litigate those very promises.

Unless you're the importer of record—and maybe even then—you won't get back a dime of the duty you paid.

Unless you're the importer of record—and maybe even then—you won't get back a dime of the duty you paid.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh, in dissent, flagged what he called the likely "mess" of a refund process. He noted that returning billions raises serious Treasury concerns and that the majority offered no road map for how it should work. The practical difficulty is real, but it didn't come from nowhere. Courts allowed collections to continue precisely because the government called refunds simple, assured and beyond dispute. Invoking that same complexity to resist them would be an extraordinary reversal.

Judicial estoppel, the doctrine preventing parties from abandoning positions they successfully argued before, may offer importers some protection. Multiple courts noted the government's repeated assurances throughout this litigation, and several opinions flagged that reversing course would be impermissible. Even so, enforcement takes time and money. The parties best positioned to pursue it are large importers with litigation budgets. The people who need relief most aren't in that category.

Which leads to the harder problem Justice Kavanaugh didn't quite name: Federal refunds run through importers, the companies that cleared goods through customs. Under 28 U.S.C. 1581(i) and standard customs procedures, liquidation flows to the importer of record. But importers routinely passed tariff costs on through higher prices. The small manufacturer that paid more for steel components, the retailer who absorbed in-flight cost of goods, the family that paid extra for an appliance—none of them will see a check. The law has no mechanism to reach them. Even if importers recover their duties, those who ultimately paid them almost certainly won't.

Compounding all of this is the uncertainty that remains over trade policy. The authority President Trump asserted under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977 is gone. But Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 still authorizes national-security tariffs. Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 still targets unfair foreign trade practices. Section 338 of the Tariff Act of 1930 may still allow duties on countries that discriminate against U.S. goods. Congress could pass new legislation granting explicit tariff authority.

Businesses making sourcing decisions, investment plans and long-term contracts can't simply return to normal. The legal landscape shifted without clearing, and so long as the threat persists through other channels, the political pressure to fix the refund process and to make consumers whole may fade before anything gets done.

The government told federal courts, in writing, across multiple cases and stipulations, that refunds would be available, automatic and assured. It made those representations to defeat petitions for emergency relief. Courts believed it. The tariff collections ran for months on the strength of that word.

A government that argues one thing to win and another thing to avoid paying hasn't merely lost a tariff case. It has told every future court, and every future litigant, exactly what its assurances are worth.

Mr. Claybourn is an attorney with Jackson Kelly PLLC and an adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute. He filed a friend-of-the-court brief for a coalition opposing the Trump tariffs.

Tariff Ruling Leaves Plenty of Hypocrisy to Go Around



LIFE SCIENCE
By Allysia Finley

President Trump threw a tantrum on Friday after the Supreme Court struck down his emergency tariffs, gnashing his teeth and casting aspersions on the six justices who ruled against him. But note what he didn't do: vow to defy the court's ruling, as many of his opponents claimed he would if dealt a major legal defeat. So much for "dictator" Trump—though some in the liberal press still can't resist this facile narrative.

"Even After Supreme Court Ruling, Trump Insists He Can Do as He Wishes," read a New York Times headline—though the story acknowledges that "Mr. Trump gave no indication that he would defy the court's ruling, pivoting quickly to impose new tariffs using other, more constrained, mechanisms that are still available to him."

If Mr. Trump has a legitimate grievance, it's with the liberal intelligentsia who cheered on Joe Biden's student-loan forgiveness, vaccine mandate and eviction moratorium, among other overreaches. They spun a yarn that conservative justices ruled against Mr. Biden and for Mr. Trump, regardless of the legal merits of the cases and for partisan reasons.

For years they have derided conservative judges as Mr. Trump's lapdogs. So it's a little rich for them to condemn the president for holding this same view and seething when the justices don't act accordingly.

Even now, some liberal intellectuals profess shock that any of the conservative justices would rule against Mr. Trump. "It took almost a decade, but Chief Justice John Roberts and the Supreme Court finally found a way to stand up to President Donald Trump's executive power overreach," writes legal scholar Noah Feldman.

Mr. Feldman expresses astonishment that the chief justice, who he claims "invested" the major-questions doctrine "during the Biden administration as a tool to limit executive branch statutory interpretations," would take this scalpel to Mr.

Trump's tariffs. My, how short memories can be. During Mr. Trump's first term, Chief Justice Roberts joined the court's liberals in blocking Mr. Trump's attempt to put a citizenship question on the census as well as his attempt to rescind Barack Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, both of which reasonably fell in the president's discretion.

As for the major-questions doctrine, Mr. Feldman gives the chief justice too much credit for authorship. The court has applied this legal principle for decades, including in 2000 to strike down the Food and Drug Administration's move to regulate nicotine as a "drug." It didn't "magically appear" during the Biden presidency, as Justice Elena Kagan suggested in an earlier dissent.

It's understandable that Mr. Trump might be piqued that the court's liberals have interpreted laws much more expansively in challenges to actions by Democratic presidents than they did in his tariff case. Here, they held that the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, which authorizes the president to "regulate" the "importation" of goods, doesn't encompass the power to impose tariffs. Yet the liberal justices said Mr. Biden's eviction ban

could be supported by a 1944 law that authorizes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to take actions to stop the spread of disease via "inspection, fumigation, disinfection, sanitation, pest extermination," and "other measures." They also said a law that allows the Labor Department to issue emergency orders to

Trump should view the court's decision for what it is: a boon for his presidency and legacy.

protect workers from "grave danger from exposure to substances or agents" gave Mr. Biden the power to mandate Covid vaccines for on-site employees of corporations with at least 100 people on payroll.

Justice Neil Gorsuch missed Friday: "Why do my concurring colleagues read ICEPA so much more narrowly than they have other broad statutory terms found in other major legislation addressing other emergencies?" Yet the press doesn't ascribe political motives to liberal justices as it does to the conservatives. Losing stings, but Mr. Trump

The Diminishing Risk of an Iran Attack

By Marc Gustafson

Early one Saturday morning two years ago, I stood outside President Biden's house in Rehoboth Beach, Del., with intelligence that Iran was about to launch an unprecedented missile barrage at Israel. The stakes felt enormous, yet I hesitated before waking him.

My concern was that the region would spiral into chaos. Many of my friends were stationed at bases that could become targets. Working at the Central Intelligence Agency in the post-9/11 era, I had long worried about Iran and the possibility that a U.S. misstep would spark chaos.

A lot has changed in two years. The risk of regional war has greatly

diminished. Several factors have put the regime on its heels:

- *Iran's regional strength has weakened.* Sustained Israeli and U.S. strikes have significantly degraded its proxy network of Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas and Iraqi Shiite militias, the backbone of Tehran's deterrence strategy. Iran has struggled to resupply them, limiting its ability to mount coordinated retaliation.

- *The regime faces profound domestic strain.* The economy is in free fall. The rial has lost more than 90% of its value since 2018. Inflation has hovered near 50% annually. Corruption has drained the revolutionary fervor that sustained the state's legitimacy. Last month the regime killed thousands of protesters in a few days.

- *U.S. military capabilities have advanced significantly.* Precision strike systems, cyber tools, missile defenses and offensive drones can impose costs without a ground invasion. In Venezuela last month, new tools to disable the electric grid, destroy missile-defense systems, and facilitate cyberattacks helped ensure a successful operation.

- *Iran's leadership is fractured.* Last year Israeli operations killed many of Ali Khamenei's most loyal security officials, leaving behind tenuous alliances and a supreme leader who is almost 87.

- *Iran's military capabilities are hamstrung.* Last year, Israel destroyed most of Iran's long-range missile infrastructure, advanced air

defenses, ammunition depots and radar sites.

- *Tehran's response to Israeli and U.S. attacks last year was tepid.* It could muster only a missile barrage against a well-defended U.S. base in Qatar. This time around, the U.S. has deployed more advanced air defenses to protect its bases and almost doubled the naval and air assets it deployed last year.

For the Trump administration, the upside of acting at a moment of Iranian vulnerability is plainly alluring. It could further erode proxy networks, blunt the nuclear threat, and help tip the global balance of power in America's favor.

An attack on Iran would still entail risk. The regime's identity is rooted in resistance to foreign interference. An external attack could trigger pockets of fierce backlash. U.S. personnel remain within range of thousands of Iran's short-range missiles. Oil markets could convuls if Tehran disrupted Gulf shipping. The trauma of past Middle East wars has shaped Washington's Iran policy for decades. But today Iran's proxies are weakened, its economy is fragile, its population is restless and its leadership is superannuated. The risks of escalation are less pronounced than in 2024, when I hesitated on the president's doorstep.

Mr. Gustafson is head of analysis at the Eurasia Group. He served as White House chief of intelligence (2021-22) and head of the Situation Room (2022-25).

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

PUBLISHED SINCE 1888 BY DOW JONES & COMPANY

Lachlan Murdoch
Executive Chairman, News Corp

Rupert Murdoch
Chairman Emeritus, News Corp

Anna Maria
Director in Chief

Liz Harris, Managing Editor
David Crow, Deputy Editor in Chief
Alicia Whitaker-Moore, Deputy Editor in Chief
Sarah Ball, Features: Elena Cherny, Senior Editor; Dan Colarusso, Business, Finance; Economics; Chip Cummins, Newsweek; Taneah Evans, Digital; Kristin Finkelstein, World; Alex Martin, Print & Writing; Bruce Orwall, Enterprise; Damiana Paletta, Washington; Philana Patterson, Justice; Christopher S. Stewart, Investigations; Mara Ufeli, Video

Paul A. Gilgot
Editor of the Editorial Page

Gerard Baker, Editor at Large

Alana Lattauer
Chief Executive Officer and Publisher

ROBERT THOMSON
Chief Executive Officer, News Corp

DOW JONES MANAGEMENT:
Mae M. Cheng, EVP, General Manager, Events and Luxury Portfolios; Jason P. Gault, General Counsel, Chief Compliance Officer; Dianne DeSevo, Chief People Officer; Artem Fishman, Chief Technology Officer; Lisa Fitzpatrick, General Manager, Dow Jones Industries; M. Scott Havens, Chief Growth Officer; Dan Shar, EVP, General Manager, Wealth & Investment; Ashak Shaha, Chief Communications Officer; Josh Stinchcomb, EVP & Chief Revenue Officer; WSJ | Barron's Group

EDITORIAL AND CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS:
1211 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y., 10036
Telephone: 1-800-DOW-JONES

DOW JONES | News Corp

ليس الأمان من الزمان يُمكن
وإن المحال وجوداً ما لا يُمكن
(أبو الفتح البستي)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
Staying safe from changing times is impossible, and what is impossible never exists.
Abu Al-Fat'h Al-Busti
(Medieval Persian poet)

Opinion

Iran must not be allowed to use talks as a diversion

NADIM SHEHADI



Nadim Shehadi is an economist and political adviser.
X: @Confusazeus
For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

Saddam's regime was at its weakest and about to fall in 1991. After the Iran-Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War that liberated Kuwait, he was facing a countrywide uprising. That is when he agreed to the WMD inspections scheme, which kept the world busy while he was allowed to brutally crush the revolt.

In 2013, Assad's regime had lost control of most of Syria and the loyalty of the army. The country was about to fall. In addition, he had crossed a red line that US President Barack Obama had set the year before. The red line itself was an excuse not to intervene after a major massacre in Syria, a carte blanche with conditions: It allowed the regime to continue its carnage as long as it did not use chemical weapons. But in August 2013, an attack on Ghouta, near Damascus, used sarin gas and caused mass casualties, meaning Obama was again under pressure to intervene. To avoid this, the Russians mediated and proposed a dismantling of

Assad's chemical weapons arsenal.

The trick worked again: the intervention was called off and the inspectors came in, doing their work and completely ignoring the fact that Iran, Russia and Hezbollah came to the rescue.

The focus of the ongoing talks must be that the Iranian regime should be engaged on the full spectrum of its behavior — from domestic repression to proxy wars — or we risk repeating the same costly mistakes. Nobody can afford another nuclear deal charade.

The lesson is simple: Whatever happens next with Iran, nuclear diplomacy cannot be used as a diversion from regional realities. WMD diplomacy must also involve the interests of the Arab states and engage them in it. The JCPOA was neither joint nor a plan of action. Such negotiations have worked as a diversionary tactic for endangered regimes from Saddam to Assad. But for Iran, this may be one time too many.

Ware back at it — negotiations over Iran's nuclear weapons, possibly with a limited or even a comprehensive war as the other means of dealing with the Islamic Republic. Whatever happens in the coming days and weeks, these negotiations and any resulting arrangement should not give the Tehran regime a license to kill its own population or continue destabilizing the region. To negotiate with Iran on the nuclear issue alone is to repeat the mistakes of the past, granting the regime legitimacy while ignoring the regional machinery of repression and proxy warfare that sustains it.

It has happened before. When a regime feels threatened, either by its own people or by international pressure, weapons of mass destruction become the perfect diversion. Saddam Hussein strung along

UN inspectors in the 1990s while crushing uprisings. Muammar Qaddafi rehabilitated his image in the early 2000s by renouncing WMDs. Bashar Assad avoided US intervention in 2013 by agreeing to dismantle his chemical arsenal.

Then there was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or Iran nuclear deal, a version of which is now being revived. The pattern is simple: declaring readiness to negotiate over nuclear or chemical weapons immediately triggers an administrative reaction involving international organizations and bureaucracies with inspectors, fact-finding missions and rounds of technical negotiations. This gives regimes time and credibility and diverts attention from whatever else they do to their people.

One cannot exaggerate the cost of such diversions, not only for the countries involved but also the region. We are still suffering the consequences.

●●
Negotiations give regimes time and credibility and divert attention from whatever else they do to their people



COURTESY: JAMAL NEMSI/AL-AWSAT

●●
The regime change that Israel is advocating for will be messy. It would not be like Syria. The context in Syria was different

Why would the US want a war with Iran?

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB



Dr. Dania Koleilat Khatib is a specialist in US-Arab relations with a focus on lobbying. She is co-founder of the Research Center for Cooperation and Peace Building, a Lebanese nongovernmental organization focused on Track II.

Unlike the decision to go to war with Iraq in 2003, which was backed by a large majority of Americans as the general public was convinced Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, today's potential war with Iran is not popular. Beyond the fact it would probably have a very negative effect on the current administration's favorability, the important question is: What is this a war for? What would be the outcome and how would it serve US interests?

Many regional countries have been lobbying the US administration not to strike Iran, as no one wants to see a regional war. No one except Israel wants to see Iran unravel and break apart. No one wants to handle the spillover of a potential war. They have all lived through the negative consequences of the fall of the regime in Iraq and do not want a sequel to that horror movie.

Most importantly, what would the US gain from a war on Iran? To answer that question, we need to examine the scenarios that could arise. The first scenario is that the Tehran regime is weak enough that an attack would make it fall. Despite the fact that no one in the region would shed a tear over the fall of the regime, they definitely do not want this to happen — and for good reason.

In a nutshell, there is no credible opposition that could take over and control security. The regime change that Israel is advocating for will be messy. It would not be like Syria. The context in Syria was different. When the Russians came to save Bashar Assad in September 2015, they put all rebel groups in Idlib. The idea was to separate the rebels from Assad and to broker a deal that would be beneficial to Russia. This did not work because Assad did not want to make any compromises.

However, since 2015, there had been an opposition in Idlib under Turkish tutelage. Extremist groups like Hurras

Al-Din and factions of Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham were eliminated. Therefore, when Assad fell, there was someone ready and able to take over.

There is no similar scenario in Iran. If the regime were to suddenly fall, the state would fall. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps would splinter into various groups and we would have chaos in the region and a rise in terrorist activity.

The other option would be a "limited strike," as US President Donald Trump spoke about on Friday, in order to gain leverage in the negotiations. However, Trump should be careful of the change in Iran's behavior. One advantage the US had in the past was the limited aid Iran received from America's foes. Basically, Iran could only count on its proxies. However, as the threat increased and as these proxies became less and less effective, Iran has become more open to cooperating with the US' rivals, namely China and Russia. Both Russia and China have an interest

in engaging with and protecting Iran.

A limited strike might put Iran's nuclear program back or limit its ballistic capabilities for a few months, but it would also push Tehran further toward Russia and China, which is definitely not in the interests of the US. Iran's constitution prohibits foreign military bases on its mainland. But this might change if Iran was pressured. Does the US want to see Chinese or Russian airbases in Iran? I highly doubt it.

So, what should the US do? It should start by looking after its own interests and not those of Israel. America has no interest in a war with Iran. A war would lead to chaos, which the US and its allies would have to contain. The experience in Iraq showed that this is a pretty messy task. It could also lead to the entrenchment of Russia and China in the region. Both of these developments would be bad for Washington, so it would be better for the US to stick to the negotiations and listen to its allies who do not want a war.

Opinion

Megacities set to grow in importance

ANDREW HAMMOND



Andrew Hammond is an associate at LSE, CEAS at the London School of Economics.

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

world's largest city from 2000 to 2025.

Given the rapid growth of cities like Jakarta, governments are being forced to address key sustainability questions. These include whether it will be possible to continually meet the everyday needs of food, water and health, while dealing with environmental stresses exacerbated by the effects of climate change.

Jakarta is situated in a low-lying coastal area of Java and it is already facing major challenges from traffic congestion, air pollution and subsidence. Some areas of the megacity are sinking by as much as 25 centimeters a year thanks to increasing groundwater extraction and nearly 40 percent of the city now lies below sea level. Up to a quarter of the city could be underwater by 2050.

The challenges are so big that Indonesia is building a new capital city in Nusantara in Borneo's East Kalimantan province. However, the UN estimates that some 10 million more people will still be living in Jakarta by 2050.

The growing resource challenges facing megacities highlight the key issue of preparedness. As many of these cities continue to grow, demand will increase as supplies of food, water and resources for

industries and infrastructure require energy for transport, with the associated carbon emissions contributing to global warming.

The main risk for riverine megacities is their increasing vulnerability to rising sea levels and flooding. The key preparations required include state-of-the-art early-warning and monitoring systems to protect coastal communities.

The larger the urban area, the greater the damage that natural hazards can inflict. And it may become increasingly hard to protect lives, even if there are good warning

systems. As major hurricanes in some cities have shown, there is now sometimes insufficient time to evacuate safely.

So, there is a growing need for cities to also develop emergency refuge areas. Governments must consider how to best identify and design

such emergency centers and how they should be connected to the wider urban system, including transport.

Taken together, despite the economic success of many megacities, now is the time to prepare for the growing risks that these massive urban centers face, including environmental stress. Many nations are now seeking to redefine what sustainability means due to their population growth.

Population movement tends to happen slowly, driven by factors such as births, deaths, age structures and migration. However, the recent UN World Urbanization Prospects report shows how demographic change can also happen comparatively quickly through the prism of the growth of megacities, which are defined as urban areas with more than 10 million inhabitants.

The UN report shows that Cairo is the only megacity outside of Asia to make the top 10 of the world's largest urban areas, with its population of about 23 million. Meanwhile, Lagos (about 18 million), is the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa. Other cities in the region that are on track to become megacities by mid-century include Addis Ababa, whose current population is just over 6 million.

Yet, as important as the Middle East and Africa — long seen as the cradles of civilization — are in this global story, there is an even larger narrative in play about how the world's center of population growth is shifting east. Not only does Asia now boast nine of the world's top 10 most populous cities, but it also hosts an astonishing 19 of

the world's 33 megacities. Looking to 2050, Dhaka is expected to become the world's most populous city, overtaking Jakarta. The UN report also forecasts that several other urban areas will join the megacity category, including Addis Ababa, Kuala Lumpur and Hajipur.

However, a small number of these megacities, like Tokyo and Seoul, will experience a declining population due to aging and falling birth rates. This highlights how demographic decline in some developed nations will be the counterpart to high population growth in many emerging markets.

So, there is no question that the center of population gravity, as well as economic, is shifting eastward, even if there are some disputes around the exact populations of many of these cities. Part of the reason for the significant

changes in the latest figures from the UN is an alteration to its methodology for calculating the size of major urban areas.

The UN has shifted from an administrative boundary-based tally to a methodology based on continuous urban areas, in which economic and living spheres are seen as connected. As a result, Jakarta moved from 30th position in 2018 to seize top spot from Tokyo, which was the

There is an even larger narrative in play about how the world's center of population growth is shifting east

Inequality will make the next pandemic worse

JOSEPH E. STIGLITZ, MONICA GEINGOS AND MICHAEL MARMOT

The science of fighting disease has never been stronger. We have the means to detect outbreaks immediately, sequence pathogens in the space of days and develop new vaccines in just months. Yet pandemics are coming faster and spreading more widely, threatening more lives and livelihoods than ever before.

Recall the trauma of COVID-19, which inflicted economic hardship on billions of people and caused an estimated 18.2 million excess deaths between Jan. 1, 2020, and Dec. 31, 2021.

Once again, public health officials are warning that another pandemic is a matter of "when, not if." Yet, despite the devastating effects of the last one, the world seems to have turned a blind eye to the issue.

The Global Council on Inequality, AIDS and Pandemics, which we co-chair, recently issued a report on this risk, in conjunction with the G20 meeting of health ministers in Johannesburg. Using evidence from COVID-19, AIDS, Ebola and mpox, the report identifies a vicious cycle: inequality and its associated deprivations increase the chances of pandemics and deepen their

effects; and pandemics increase inequality, often with devastating effects for the lowest-income people.

In the case of COVID-19, low-wage frontline workers typically suffered disproportionately — exhibiting a greater incidence of illness and hospitalization — partly because they could not retreat to Zoom meetings. And when they did fall ill, they had no choice but to dig into their meager savings.

Thus, addressing pandemics entails more than a medical response. We must also look at socioeconomic factors. Crowded living conditions, front-line occupations and poverty all contribute to the spread of pandemics, as do poor nutrition and baseline health characteristics.

Addressing inequality thus must be central to how we prepare for, and respond to, future pandemics, not just because caring for the vulnerable is the right thing to do but also because it is the best approach overall.

The lessons of COVID-19 may explain why some developed countries are showing slightly more generosity nowadays. For example, a recent G20 initiative will help enable the technology transfers needed for the construction of pharmaceutical manufacturing facilities in every region of



Joseph E. Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics, is a former chief economist of the World Bank, a former chair of the US President's Council of Economic Advisors, University Professor at Columbia University, and the author, most recently, of "The Road to Freedom: Economics and the Good Society" (W. Norton & Company, Allen Lane, 2024).

Monica Geingos, a former first lady of Namibia, is Executive Chairperson of the One Economy Foundation and Founder of Leadership Lab-Yetu.

Michael Marmot is Professor of Epidemiology at University College London, Director of the UCL Institute of Health Equity, and Past President of the World Medical Association.

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

the world — a key step in preparing for the next crisis.

But this program is not enough. There must be an automatic intellectual property waiver for all critical therapies and products, triggered the moment the World Health Organization declares a pandemic. This would allow any firm that has the technical capacity to produce desperately needed pandemic-related products to do so, as long as it pays the intellectual property owner a fair royalty.

If the know-how and the right to produce vaccines are not shared, what good will global vaccine production facilities be in the next pandemic?

Finally, providing healthcare and protections for everyone during pandemics requires money. During the COVID-19 pandemic, rich countries spent 8 percent of their (much larger) gross domestic products to address the crisis, while low-income countries spent just 2 percent. And now, owing to the previous pandemic, developing countries are saddled with \$31 trillion in debt — the highest level in more than 20 years. As a result, many lower-income countries lack the resources to respond to current pandemics like AIDS, let alone

prepare for the next one.

This injustice helps us see how pandemics can create greater inequality (between countries, in this case). Countries in sub-Saharan Africa are spending between 40 percent and more than 50 percent of the taxes they raise on debt repayments to their creditors and many spend more on debt service than on education and health combined. If there is to be any hope for an adequate pandemic response from these countries, they must

receive debt relief.

Moreover, a large automatic disbursement of funds from the World Bank or other international financial institutions (perhaps in the form of the International Monetary Fund's special drawing rights) should be part of the response to the next crisis. Like an intellectual property waiver, it should be triggered as soon as a pandemic is declared.

We can break the inequality-pandemic cycle. Doing so will require resources, but doing nothing will ultimately be far more expensive. It will also take political will to implement the policies needed to ensure greater health equity. That starts with prioritizing ordinary people's lives over drug companies' monopoly profits.

Addressing pandemics entails more than a medical response. We must also look at socioeconomic factors

Many countries lack resources to respond to current pandemics, let alone prepare for the next one

srmq
Saudi Research & Media Group

Established in 1987 by
Prince Ahmad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz

CEO
Jamana Rashid Alrahd

ARAB NEWS

is a daily international newspaper published by the
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY

Founded in 1973 by
Hisham & Muhammad Al Hafiz

Editor-in-Chief
Faisal J. Abbas

Deputy Editor-in-Chief
Noor Osama Nugali

ARAB NEWS WELCOMES
FEEDBACK FROM READERS

Letters sent from within the Kingdom should include the writer's name, address, phone and ID numbers. E-mails from readers abroad should include a name and city. Letters should be mailed to P.O. Box 478, Riyadh 11411, Saudi Arabia. Tel: +96612128000 • Fax: +96611418071 • E-mail: general@arabnews.com

EDITORIAL: general@arabnews.com
MARKETING: marketing@arabnews.com

TOLL FREE NUMBER: 8002440076

PRINTED AT: HALA PRINTING CO., RIYADH

Bahrain 200 Fils; Iran 200 R; Egypt LE 3; India 12 Rs; Indonesia 2000 R; Japan 250 Y; Jordan 250 Fils; Kuwait 200 Fils; Lebanon 1000

L: Morocco 2 D; Oman 200 P; Pakistan 15 Rs; Philippines 25 P; Qatar 2 QR; Singapore S\$; Syria 20 L; Thailand 40 BHT; UAE 2 AED; UK 30 P; U.S. \$1.50; Republic of Yemen R 00; Sudan 25 P.

SRPG AND AFFILIATED AGENCIES

JEDDAH: Tel: (966-12)283-0200; Fax: (966-12)283-6228. RIYADH: Tel: (966-11)212-8000; Fax: (966-11)442-9004. DAMMAM: Tel: (966-13)835-3930; Fax: (966-13)834-0489. ABU DHABI: Tel: (971-2)681-9999; Fax: (971-2)681-7595. CAIRO: Tel: (202-3)748-2775; (202-3)748-2996; (202-3)338-8054; Fax: (202-3)748-2884; (202-3)748-2855. MOROCCO: Tel: (212-5)37292-818; Fax: (212-5)37693-818. JORDAN: Tel: (962-8)593-7101; (962-8)593-7102; (962-8)593-9409; Fax: (962-8)593-7103. LONDON: Tel: (44-20)7631-8181; Fax: (44-20)7631-2310.

ADVERTISING:
SAUDI RESEARCH AND MEDIA GROUP
KSA: +966-11-294 0500
UAE: +971 4 2919500
E-mail: revenue@srmq.com
Website: www.srmq.com

DISTRIBUTION AGENT
TOLL FREE: (800)890-244-0376
Head Office: (Riyadh) P.O. Box 8278, Riyadh 11588
Tel: (966-11)448933; Fax: (966-11)212774
E-mail: info@saudi-distribution.com
Western Region: Tel: (966-12)653-0909
Eastern Region: Tel: (966-13)847-3589
Southern Region: Tel: (966-17)221-8693
Northern Region: Tel: (966-16)324-3070
Dubai: Tel: (971-4)391-6553; Fax: (971-4)391-8354
Abu Dhabi: Tel: (971-2)673-3553; Fax: (971-2)673-3364
Kuwait: Tel: (965)483-4222; Fax: (965)463-4779
Manama: Tel: (973-7)677770

SUBSCRIPTION
Head Office: (Riyadh)
P.O. Box 22304, Riyadh 11495
Tel: (966-11)448933; Fax: (966-11)4429555
TOLL FREE: +866-800-244-0376
E-mail: info@arabmedico.com
Web: www.arabmedico.com

PRINTING CENTER
Riyadh: P.O. Box 212
Riyadh 11583; Tel: (966-11)2657000
Fax: (966-11)2658900
Sales: Tel: (966-11)4709007
Fax: (966-11)4708920
www.halajprint.com

DISCLAIMER
Views expressed by writers
in this section are their
own and do not necessarily
reflect Arab News' point of view.

The FT View



FINANCIAL TIMES

"Without fear and without favour"

The Supreme Court's tariff blow to Trump

Uncertainty will linger as the president tests alternative legal options

With US President Donald Trump ever more eager to push the limits of the powers of his office, the Supreme Court's 6-3 decision to rule illegal the bulk of his totemic tariff agenda is a reassuring demonstration of enduring checks and balances in American democracy. Trump's decision to invoke the 1977 International Emergency Economic Powers Act last year, citing a "large and persistent" trade deficit and a supposed fentanyl "crisis", to justify sweeping import duties was dubious from the start. Besides, as the justices noted, although IEPPA enables the executive to "regulate" imports, this does not extend to tariffs.

The ruling brings temporary relief to US businesses and trading partners. It reduces the US average effective tariff

rate by 7.8 percentage points, according to Yale's Budget Lab. The S&P 500 rose following the Court's announcement, as did European auto and luxury shares. But the decision will now give way to another period of global economic uncertainty.

The White House has been planning for this eventuality and has many other legal routes to rebuild the tariff wall. On Friday, at a hastily arranged press conference following the decision, an angry Trump said he would invoke Section 122 of the US Trade Act to impose global tariffs of 10 per cent on top of those already in place. He raised it to 15 per cent over the weekend. The provision allows the president to implement import duties up to this limit, without congressional approval, for up to 150 days. The president also said his administration would initiate actions under Section 301, which allows him to impose unlimited tariff rates in response to discrimination against US businesses, pending an investigation. There are other legal levers

he could pull beyond these options too.

The saving grace for the global economy is that these alternative routes come with more hurdles and limits than IEPPA. Nonetheless, this means that a paralysing uncertainty may linger for many businesses, with industries and countries unclear on what rates they face and when.

Another unknown is whether and when importers might receive refunds, which could potentially total up to \$175bn, for duties they have already paid. The Court did not rule on whether the administration must make such refunds, leaving lower courts to evaluate how to make any remedies. This has implications for the US Treasury market. Revenue from Trump's tariffs had been forecast to help contain the country's large fiscal deficit and debt burden, but the ruling – and the prospect of rebates – makes the income stream look shaky. Long-term government bond yields nudged only slightly higher on Friday, suggesting traders assume

One unknown is whether and when importers might receive refunds, which could potentially total up to \$175bn, for duties they have already paid

new tariffs will be implemented. Still, policy uncertainty will hang over markets as well as the calculations of the US Federal Reserve.

Indeed, though Trump vowed to fight back against what he called a "disgraceful" decision by potentially pushing tariffs even higher, the president is in an awkward political position. Cost of living pressures mean voters have increasingly soured on his tariff plans. With the US midterm elections looming in November, the Republicans are keen to support households. Withholding or delaying tariff refunds from businesses would not be a good look either.

Either way, now that the justices have done their job, it will increasingly be up to Congress to push back on the self-proclaimed "tariff man's" stuttering and misguided plans to revive US manufacturing. The court's ruling may not alter the overall tendency towards protectionism under Trump but, crucially, it has slowed its progress and made its path more uncertain.

Opinion Geopolitics

Europe and US wrestle over 'western civilisation'

Ben Huhns



Anne-Marie Slaughter

Judging by the standing ovation he received at the recent Munich Security Conference, US secretary of state Marco Rubio succeeded in his mission to soothe European sensitivities. From his opening line – "We gather here today as members of a historical alliance... that saved and changed the world" – he repeated themes of transatlantic unity. After all, he said, Europe and America are "part of one civilisation – western civilisation". Both sides have an interest in amplifying this message. Rubio wants to show he can adhere to the Maga message but still keep the US liked in the world. And the Europeans want to use the language of unshakable unity to shore up the defence of Ukraine and develop a united approach to negotiating with Russia.

Just below the surface, however,

The two sides disagree deeply about the basis for the transatlantic alliance

lurks a profound difference over what the heritage of western civilisation actually is. The two sides agree on a concrete agenda of practical action, and on the premise that a stronger Europe means a stronger transatlantic alliance. But they disagree deeply about the basis for that alliance.

These differences became apparent on a careful reading of Rubio's speech. He was not in fact committing to the existing transatlantic alliance. He was offering a new one, focused not "just on military co-operation and reclaiming the industries of the past," but on "advancing our mutual interests and new frontiers, unshackling our ingenuity, our creativity, and the dynamic spirit to build a new western century."

And here's the rub. As Rubio repeatedly made clear, "western" means white, Christian and nationalist. He invited Europe to join America in ensuring that the "west's age of dominance" is not over, but instead enters a glorious new chapter in this century. As one German friend remarked to me just after the speech, "I thought America was the product of the American and French Revolutions." Those convulsions were sparked not by civilisational ideals, but by universal ones: the rights to life, liberty, equality, justice, and self-government – first claimed for white men, and later for

all humans. Indeed, one of the defining features of western civilisation is that, for all its hypocrisy, it has continually widened the circle of entitlement to those rights.

European leaders accepted Rubio's message of unity, but not his invitation to joint civilisational renewal. On the contrary, they outlined the values that they seek to protect through the transatlantic alliance.

Ursula von der Leyen, European Commission president, in effect issued a European declaration of independence – an irony not lost in the year the United States marks the 250th anniversary of its own declaration of independence from a European empire.

She outlined a series of practical steps towards achieving that independence, "in every dimension that affects our security and prosperity". Yet she closed on a loftier note, calling for a Europe devoted to "peace and freedom" – what "Ukraine is fighting for today" and what, she insisted, "will always remain Europe's purpose".

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz also focused on freedom. British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer emphasised the importance of fighting for common values: liberty, democracy and the rule of law.

French President Emmanuel Macron, agreeing with Rubio on the need for a "much more positive mindset", listed a whole set of Europe's achievements, including freedom, peace, prosperity and high marks for equality.

These values are moral values, the beliefs for which people will lay down their lives. That is why Thomas Jefferson, 250 years ago, began with a recitation of American beliefs so deep as to be self-evident truths: equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Those values made the moral case for America's decision to create a new nation. The leaders of the EU, by contrast, are creating and defending a new entity. Macron championed the bloc as a "radically original political construction of free, sovereign states" that had succeeded in "institutionalising" peace through economic interdependence. Merz argued for a strong and sovereign Europe through a streamlined and expanded EU, specifically countering Rubio's vision of a Europe of nation states.

Peace through pooling of sovereignty. Freedom for all. Democracy and the rule of law. While the phrases lack Jeffersonian resonance, if you add a healthy dose of pluralism and tolerance, you get a far better version of a universal civilisational heritage than Rubio's imperial vision of the white west versus the world.

The writer is chief executive of the New America think-tank and an FT contributing editor

Letters

A defence loan can be a deterrent and offer investors a return

You report that bond investors are warning against a "ruse" to fund higher UK defence spending through increased government debt (Report, February 19). Are these the same so-called bond vigilantes who actively pushed negative yields and paid governments to borrow even more?

Five years ago, a third of government debt globally carried a negative yield. Today, positive nominal and real yields prevail. The consequential capital losses, whether paper or real, say that strategy was neither vigilant, rational nor wise.

YouGov recently found 68 per cent of UK respondents support Nato; 65 per cent reject taxes rising to boost defence

spending; 65 per cent eschew cutting other spending to fund defence. We all want security; two-thirds refuse to pay more for it. So who will pay?

A hypothesised fixed-term "national defence loan" raised from financial institutions is a logical answer. It would be for the government to determine the loan principal; Germany is spending an extra €100bn (£87bn) on defence catch-up. Our situation is as parlous. Specific covenants tied to measurable results (including early redemption penalties for missed targets) for defence capex would a) limit the duration of the financial commitment, b) explicitly link it to "value for money" and c) enable it to be clearly

articulated as to why the money is needed in the national interest.

The term would be fixed at five years. If Nato secretary-general Mark Rutte is correct, the UK must be ready to fight a full-scale war in Europe by 2050; we need urgency.

Naysayers argue that patriotism does not drive returns. Forget the emotion; consider financial pragmatism. Fund managers have a responsibility to protect as well as enhance clients' assets, commensurate with investor risk appetite or the fund mandate. In the event of war the UK would very likely be under physical and cyber attack: bricks and mortar and infrastructure assets would be

degraded or destroyed as would the value of financial assets. Why not protect those assets as a matter of principle by investing in a deterrent that also includes a market return? And the cost of sustaining a war? In 1944, the UK spent over half its annual GDP on the war effort against 2.4 per cent of GDP on defence today. As then, government, investors and the public really would be unable to duck hard choices.

The threat of war does not diminish because nobody wants to pay more to deter it. If anything, it raises the risk of it happening.

Alastair Irvine
Grantham, Lincolnshire, UK

Fiscal responsibility is the Conservatives' lodestar

Robert Shrimley writes that the last Conservative government "stopped arguing that public spending had to be paid for" and that this attitude "continues into the current leadership of Kemi Badenoch" ("Conservatives' foundational sin", Opinion, February 20).

Fiscal responsibility is the foundation of any true Conservative government, and Kemi and I have placed it at the heart of our economic plan. At our party conference last year we set out our golden economic rule: for every pound of savings we find from public expenditure, at least half will be used to reduce government borrowing.

It would be dishonest for me, as shadow chancellor, to criticise the profligacy of the current government without setting out how a Conservative government would go about putting it right. That is why at conference we set out a package of £47bn in savings, with the majority going towards deficit reduction to get our national debt under control.

Being serious about the public finances does not mean we have to accept that taxes need to rise inexorably, as Shrimley seems to suggest. We can get the tax burden down – indeed, that is vital if we are to restore dynamism to our economy – but that can only be done when public finances are balanced and when plans are fully costed.

That was the great error of the 2022 mini-Budget – and as I set out in a speech last year, Kemi and I will never allow that to happen again.

Where I do agree with Shrimley is that for all of their claims to a sudden Damascene conversion to sound money, Reform UK are not a serious party of fiscal responsibility. Robert Jenrick said last week that Reform's numbers would always add up and they were happy to have their homework marked. Yet only two weeks ago they announced a package of tax cuts with an unfunded £10bn hole in it – and are still refusing to explain their maths.

Rt Hon Sir Mel Stride
Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer,
House of Commons, London SW1, UK

Tories have always shied away from the hard choices

While I agree with Robert Shrimley ("The Conservatives' foundational sin", Opinion, February 20) that the Tory party has in recent years shied away from presenting the electorate with hard choices and trade-offs, I'm not so sure the Tories really do so. Inasmuch as the Thatcher governments balanced the books, for



Picnic intermission: opera lovers at the Glyndebourne Festival in Sussex

example, they did it by counting one-off privatisation receipts as reduced spending and on the back of (similarly temporary) North Sea oil revenue. Likewise, the Conservative Party under David Cameron and George Osborne were no less economic with the truth when they claimed that austerity would somehow help restore the country to growth without doing tangible, and possibly irreversible, harm to the country's infrastructure and public services.

Tory rhetoric and Tory reality, in other words, are – much like Labour rhetoric and Labour reality – often two very different things. Talking the talk on fiscal probity is easy. Walking the walk is much, much harder.

Tim Bale
Professor of Politics, Queen Mary University of London, London E1, UK

AI's shortcomings – evident with every email

Re Guru Madhavan's column "The beauty of friction that lets us feel the world" (Opinion, February 5), one of the many ominous aspects of artificial intelligence is that it takes away our voice and calls it assistance. Every time I receive an email, AI presents a possible response that I will never use because it sounds nothing like me. The content is correct but the voice is all wrong. It is AI's voice, a mix of bland and obsequious, not mine.

The subtleties of expression as unique to individuals as their fingerprints are clearly beyond AI's current capacities.

Why are we content then to use these colourless, generic communications with our fellows? I guess I'll have to be grateful AI only suggests the response and doesn't presume to send it as well. Margaret McGirr
Greenwich, CT, US

What Lasch wrote about elites and the global bazaar

In her excellent analysis "Trump is the wrong answer to right questions" (Opinion, January 26), Rana Foroohar looks at the hypocrisy that explains why "few" (in the American and European elites) saw Donald Trump's rise "coming". It might be worth recalling what the foremost American social historian Christopher Lasch wrote back in 1995 in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*.

When we "speak of democracy today, we refer, more often than not, to the democratisation of 'self-esteem'. The current catchwords – diversity, compassion, empowerment, entitlement – express the wishful hope that deep divisions in American society can be bridged by goodwill and sanitised speech. We are called upon to recognise that all minorities are entitled to respect not by virtue of their achievement but by virtue of their sufferings in the past... In our preoccupation with words, we have lost sight of the tough realities that cannot be softened simply by flattering people's self-image."

This was not the first book in which Lasch had wondered whether democracy had a future. Foroohar speaks of hypocrisy. She is right but as Lasch reminds us: "Patriotism does not rank very high in their [the elites] hierarchy of virtues. 'Multiculturalism', on the other hand, suits them to perfection, conjuring up the agreeable image of a global bazaar in which exotic cuisines, exotic styles of dress, exotic music, exotic tribal customs can be savoured indiscriminately, with no questions asked and no commitments required. The new elites are at home only in transit, en route to high level conferences, to the grand opening of a new franchise, to an international film festival, or to an undiscovered resort. Theirs is essentially a tourist's view of the world – not a perspective likely to encourage a passionate devotion to democracy."

Francis Giles
Senior Researcher
Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Paris, France

Positively Orwellian

Friday's front page illustrates how close we have come to George Orwell's world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. A news story about US threats to Iran ("Trump sets 10-day window to decide on Iran strikes as US builds up forces" Report, February 20) is accompanied by a photograph of the president flanked by Jared Kushner, his son-in-law, and JD Vance at the inauguration of his "Board of Peace". "The Peace" is indeed.

Tony Tyler
Hong Kong

Maga's Delors effect

Janan Ganesh is of course correct to point out ("Maga will regret ties to Europe's hard right", Opinion, February 19) that Donald Trump and his Maga supporters may in the medium term regret their overt support for rightwing European populist parties.

In power, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement National (National Rally), and even Nigel Farage's Reform UK would probably take stand against US influence over time and turn eastward. What Ganesh misses however is the nationalists' anti-EU stance, which is something they have in common with Trump, who rightly sees a united Europe as a counter to his position as the strongest kid in the playground. A united Europe is a real challenge to his bullying tactics, so opposition to that aligns Maga with the populist right.

The irony is that Trump has probably done more to bring Europe together than anyone since Jacques Delors. He's not very good at "divide and rule" either.

Chris Boyd
Sète, France

Wagner: the only composer on the DMT wavelength

Your article about DMT and ayahuasca as a cure for depression ("Psychedic in ayahuasca shows promise against depression", Report, February 17) reminded me of when I was introduced to DMT in 1966 by music students from New York's Inland Empire School.

They said they had listened to all the classical composers while taking DMT and said the only composer who was on that wavelength was Richard Wagner. So they played the overture to *Tannhäuser* and that set me off – I became a life-long Wagnerian.

It was to learn that Wagner had written about his own depression to his friend Ernst Kietz in 1852 in these words: "I'm mentally ill – and mental illness is incurable – it is for me no longer a question of recovering, but one of surviving. The only source of my existence more bearable and I can only do this through artistic creation."

So Wagner's exhilarating music was his self-medication for depression – his DMT if you like. I believe that helps to explain why his music stands out compared to that of any other composer.

Perhaps researchers working with ayahuasca and DMT should consider using Wagner's music as a supportive therapy?

Trips to Glyndebourne, Longborough or the Royal Opera House on the NHS? Craig Sams
Hastings, East Sussex, UK

Opinion

Gold enters the storybook stage

MARKETS

Ruchir Sharma



After surging for years, the price of gold has entered the realm where storytelling drives its price. Breaking free of the fundamental forces that long explained its ups and downs, it is now rising on tales of global risk and uncertainty – which make this era feel to some observers like the gold rush of the 1970s.

Gold has long been seen as a safe haven because its price has kept pace with the rate of inflation for centuries, albeit punctuated by busts and booms. The booms tended to come in periods when real interest rates declined. As returns fell on money held in savings accounts or bonds, people tended to move their wealth into gold, which offers no yield but at least can rise in price.

That pattern started to change in a material way in 2023. Real interest rates were high compared to the recent past and rising, but gold prices began to take off. The main driver was a huge increase in purchases by central banks looking to shift their holdings away from the dollar, which the US weaponised for use in sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine war. The price of gold has skyrocketed since then, but what I once called the “anti-dollar revolution led by foreign central banks” can no longer explain it.

Over the past year, the pace of central bank purchases has slowed down. Jewelry demand has plunged as consumers balk at the high prices. Instead, demand has exploded from investors in all the major markets from the US to India and the UK. The investor share of gold purchases doubled last year to 35 per cent worldwide, led by torrential flows into gold ETFs. Nowhere is the fervour more intense than in China, where retail “auntie” investors have jumped head-first into the buying spree.

In short, gold is being driven largely by financial demand, and this shift is

upending the traditional understanding of how to calculate its value. The models long used to explain the price of gold, which include real bond yields and inflation expectations, have all broken down.

Relative to inflation, for example, the price of gold is now five standard deviations above its historical norm; put plainly, this is freakishly unusual behaviour. Meanwhile, a model developed by

Its price is five standard deviations above its historical norm; put plainly, this is freakishly unusual

the World Gold Council attributes more than 80 per cent of gold's latest gains to “risk and uncertainty” or “residuals”. That’s another way of saying scary stories and “we have no idea”.

The story gold bulls are telling is that the current state of the world evokes the backdrops of past gold super cycles – meaning long and strong bull markets like those of the 2000s and, especially,

the 1970s. But inflation today is nowhere near the double-digit levels of the Jimmy Carter era. And it is hard to argue that uncertainties such as Donald Trump, tariffs and Ukraine are objectively more disconcerting than, say, oil embargoes, Vietnam and the Iran hostage crisis were back then.

Another popular argument is that gold continues to thrive as a haven from “dollar debasement”. But if that is so, why have other alternatives to the dollar such as bitcoin been tanking, and why have other dollar assets like US stocks and bonds been holding up?

Gold also broke free of fundamentals in the later stages of its 1970s boom. By the end of that decade, gold was selling for \$500 per ounce, or about 2.5 times its implied value based on real interest rates. Today the price of gold is five times this implied or “fair” value, at nearly \$5,000 per ounce.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to see what might break this momentum. Liquidity remains plentiful worldwide, so a lot of people are looking for more places to put money. Even after the recent buying spree, investors hold relatively little

gold in their portfolios. The 1970s super cycle ended only when the Federal Reserve began to aggressively raise rates to fight inflation, and there is little chance of that happening now.

Gold bugs therefore say the yellow metal has plenty of room to rise, and they may be right. So far, in inflation-adjusted terms, it is up more than three-fold over the past 10 years. But that’s not much relative to its 12-fold rise during the 1970s. And while prices may appear to have risen parabolically in recent months, the rise has been much less spectacular than the spike in the final stage of the 1970s boom, when gold doubled in price over two months.

While I have been bullish on gold for many years, I’m more agnostic now. In a market divorced from fundamentals and driven by an increasing number of random stories, it is hard to know which narrative is for real and will hold. If you want to buy more gold, you just gotta believe.

The writer is chair of Rockefeller International. His latest book is ‘What Went Wrong With Capitalism’

US allies need to learn the art of the trade deal

Chrystia Freeland

The Supreme Court’s tariffs decision on Friday gives the US and its allies the chance for a reset. “Liberation day” tariffs imposed in April, and the ineffective international reaction to them, hurt regular Americans and strained the country’s relationship with its closest friends. The Supreme Court’s ruling offers a rare opportunity to fix that historic error. If they are smart, leaders on both sides of the aisle in Washington, and on both sides of the Atlantic, will seize it.

A reset needs to start with something America’s bruised and insulted allies may be loath to admit: when he first burst on to the US national political scene, President Donald Trump was right to say the global trading system wasn’t working for working people in the US. And it wasn’t working for working people in much of the rich, industrialised world either.

A permanently imbalanced global economy, in which the world’s advanced manufactured goods are mostly made and increasingly invented in China, is not politically sustainable for the democracies of the west. Nor is a good deal for China’s people, who continue to be asked to consume less than they earn, for the sake of risky geo-economic dominance.

That truth at the heart of Washington’s trade policy could be the beginning of a transatlantic reset. While Europe has long paid polite lip-service to American concerns about Chinese overcapacity, over the past year, the China Shock has crossed the Atlantic. Blocked by tar-

The Supreme Court’s ruling offers a rare opportunity to fix a historic error

iffs from the rich American market, subsidised Chinese exports including wind turbines, industrial chemicals and EVs are hitting Europe hard.

A reset built around shared action on Chinese overcapacity would be a political victory for the White House – and it would be good for working people on both sides of the Atlantic.

But while a transatlantic trade pact on China makes sense for Americans, and it makes sense for the world, Europe and its friends shouldn’t assume it will be an easy sell in Washington. That’s because somewhere between the first Trump administration, when the president built a bipartisan consensus on China and when I represented Canada in the renegotiation of a North American trade agreement, the rightly called “the best trade deal ever”, Trump went from using tariffs as a tool to recalibrate an off-kilter global trading system to an all-purpose weapon of predatory global hegemony, wielded with as much, or more, zeal against friends as against foes.

America’s allies were the unwitting midwives of that transformation, when they surprised Wall Street and even some voices in the White House by acquiescing to tariffs last year. Much of the market opposition to tariffs was based on the assumption that the world would fight back. China did, but the rest of the world, led by America’s closest allies, largely capitulated when they should have retaliated.

Weakness is a provocation. Apprehension by America’s allies didn’t mollify Trump. It emboldened him to press further, moving from tariffs to territory. The “too trade” is a misnomer. The president doesn’t always chicken out. He is a much canner negotiator than his critics will allow. He pushes until he meets resistance – and that approach often gets him a much better deal than more traditional analysts imagined possible.

The Supreme Court ruling has given America’s partners a golden opportunity to reset the transatlantic relationship and correct the miscalculation of last spring. They could give the White House a win on China, and American consumers some welcome relief by offering a common front on Beijing in exchange for friendship with allies. But to do that, they need to learn the Art of the Deal and take a page from the president’s hardball playbook. That means a careful, co-ordinated retaliation plan, alongside an attractive off-ramp. Imitation is, after all, the sincerest form of flattery.

The writer is the former deputy prime minister of Canada

America is becoming a petrostate

BUSINESS

Rana Foroohar



The US is once again going where no rich country has gone before. Earlier this month, the White House topped off a year of regulatory rollbacks around climate change by repealing the “endangerment finding,” which is the rule that allows the Environmental Protection Agency to curb carbon emissions because of their health consequences.

President Donald Trump heralds this as great news for the US economy, energy security, the fossil fuel industry and the people who work in it, like the coal miners he welcomed to the White House earlier this month after signing an executive order requiring the Department of War (it pains me to write that) to use more coal power. The truth is that it is none of those things. Trump’s war on clean energy is going to make America sicker and poorer.

Let’s start with the fact that the administration’s sabotage of existing federal tax credits for electric vehicles, clawbacks of already funded grants and loans for clean energy projects, and cuts to federal fuel efficiency mandates are costing Detroit \$50bn. That’s the amount of write-downs being taken by

the Big Three automakers – GM, Ford and Stellantis – since they are now being disincentivised to move into EVs.

But that number, large though it is, doesn’t begin to capture all the costs to the federal flip flops on both the demand and investment side of the transportation business, which is the largest single source of greenhouse gas in the US.

The BlueGreen Alliance, an association of labour unions and environmental groups, put out research last year estimating that the repeal of the clean energy manufacturing tax credit alone puts over 2m jobs at risk in places like Arizona, Kentucky, Michigan, South Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia, which were starting to benefit from a clean energy-related manufacturing investment boom.

That boom is already turning to bust. Manufacturing jobs have fallen under Trump, who promised to bring industrial work back to the US. Research firm Rhodium Group estimates that \$22bn in planned EV, battery and critical mineral investment has dried up.

Meanwhile, workers in fossil fuel-dependent states who had been successfully transitioned to jobs in clean tech are getting laid off. This past December, for example, Ford shut a huge battery facility in Kentucky, a coal state, firing 1,600 workers in a place where state and local government had spent \$250m to lure the new business in.

Some workers may get pushed back into coal mining. If so, they will not be protected by the stronger silica

standard endorsed by the Biden administration. That was an effort to eradicate the black lung disease that a fifth of veteran coal miners now have from using the more powerful machinery needed to reach coal in mature mines as it becomes harder to extract, kicking up more silica dust.

The Trump administration passed enforcement of the standard amid a restructuring of numerous federal agencies that resulted in thousands of labour and health workers losing their jobs. “The guy who says he’s a champion of coal miners literally doesn’t care whether they live or die,” points out BlueGreen Alliance executive director Jason Walsh.

I could go on, but you get the idea. While the White House lauds the money

Trump’s war on clean energy is going to make the country sicker and poorer

saved from regulatory cuts, public health and environmental advocates are worried about the hundreds of thousands of premature deaths linked to climate change in the pre-regulatory era we seem to be regressing to. People in Mississippi worried about pollution from an influx of Venezuelan oil expected to hit a Chevron refinery in their community are asking the oil company to buy their homes. As China serves up cheap solar panels to emerging markets, America is becoming one.

The immediate costs I’ve laid out are just the beginning. For the US automotive industry, stagnation is now the best possible outcome. Even if we get a post-2028 rollback of Trump’s rollbacks, that will put America years behind China, which clearly owns the clean energy future.

The legal battles over all this have begun (the first lawsuit over the endangerment rule was filed last week, adding to many others). The lack of certainty resulting from ongoing legal action is itself a huge impediment to foreign investment, not just in the

transport sector, but in the supply chain that serves it.

One wonders what risk premium might be put on a nation with less interest in high-growth industries, as well as drier water and air, at a time when the insurance industry wants to push more costs from climate-related disasters on to companies, banks and governments. Premiums that have already risen by double digits in some places are likely to rise more. Overall borrowing costs for those investing in the US might too.

Beyond this, I must wonder if America’s utter abdication of any responsibility for global warming will someday come back to bite in the form of retaliatory tariffs or financial sanctions placed on the US by other countries. What’s to stop a group of nations with record climate-related economic losses from eventually penalising the US, just as America has penalised nations that support terrorism? The costs – both human and economic – of the former are already far higher.

rana.foroohar@ft.com

It is time for Europe to weaponise its chokepoints

WORLD AFFAIRS

Martin Sandbu



Europeans’ great geopolitical awakening has been to realise, first, that they depend on other powers in many near-existential ways, and second, that those powers are increasingly willing to use their strangleholds to bend Europe to their wills.

This fear first fully emerged vis-à-vis China, with concerns over Huawei’s role in 5G networks a decade or so ago. Vulnerability to Vladimir Putin over energy flows was something countries near Russia warned against early on, but became commonly understood only after his open weaponisation of gas sales in 2022.

Yet what has most shocked Europeans is how the US has joined those turning their dependence against them. The most egregious economic case is Donald

Trump’s punitive tariff threats against countries opposing his land grab in Greenland. In addition, Europeans acutely feel their reliance on US provision of strategic military technology.

These (and more) cases all amount to a list of “chokepoints” – supplies of vital goods and services where Europe is at the mercy of producers elsewhere. Their weaponisation has left Europe economically and politically, and even philosophically, bereft, since Europeans practised and preached economic interdependence more earnestly than any other part of the world.

European leaders are now accepting the new reality, by converging around autonomy and resilience in a bid to undo the chokeholds others have laid over them. That is a purely defensive reaction. Aiming solely for *resilience* obscures any consideration of countervailing *power* that Europe itself possesses and could wield against others.

But something more ambitious is beginning to stir. In a study last year, participants from policymaking and industry told the Paris-based Institut Montaigne think-tank they had less confi-

dence in achieving autonomy than in fostering European “indispensability”, especially with a group of reliable allies (which may or may not include the US).

The study concluded: “By fostering European leadership in cutting-edge semiconductor technologies, the EU can create choke points on which others depend, strengthening its geopolitical leverage. Specifically, this would then strengthen European means to deter the

Research has shown the continent is better armed for geopolitical conflict than its leaders might think

imposition on Europe of export boycotts and perhaps even military adventurism by rival states.”

The technologies in question refer to Europe’s domination of extreme ultraviolet lithography through Dutch company ASML, and could, with the right policies, in future include photonic and quantum chips, according to the think-tank.

Europe dominates in other sectors too. A group of experts called the Geostategic Europe Taskforce last week published a report which “identifies 41 critical chokepoints where China depends on the EU for more than 80 per cent of its imports, and 67 such dependencies for the United States. These span essential inputs including insulin, pharmaceutical intermediates, medical technologies, and specialised machinery for agriculture, paper production, and industrial processing.”

And the German economic think-tank Deutscher Zukunft has also just released a study highlighting that “Europe has more cards than it thinks. We control 80 per cent of US uranium imports. Siemens dominates the turbines US data centres desperately need.”

These researchers do a great service in showing Europe is better armed for geopolitical conflict than its leaders might think. Simply mapping the levers one might use is a step towards a more assertive stance. These exercises also offer a number of further lessons for European leaders.

One is the need to broaden one’s per-

spective from “managing partnerships to projecting power”, as Geostategic Europe Taskforce puts it. Specifically, for the EU, this means lowering the threshold for the “anti-coercion instrument”, which permits many kinds of retaliation, to also be deployed to see off any threat before it materialises, rather than just reactively.

Another lesson, as Deutscher Zukunft emphasises, is that it is not all about supplying scarce goods. Being a large consumer and financial market – access to which can be denied – is also a form of leverage. A third is that the EU and the UK must find ways to align on the use of chokepoints (like they have on sanctions against Russia).

This knowledge is welcome and necessary, but only a start. Power in the sense of having instruments of coercion is not the same as power in the sense of successfully securing one’s interests. The latter requires a willingness to make use of the former – perhaps aggressively so. That is a step Europe’s political leaders have yet to take.

martin.sandbu@ft.com

