

A creaking system

Indian ITeS should have moved away from the H-1B lottery

The United States (US) government on Tuesday announced major changes to how the work visa in the country, known as H-1B, will be allotted henceforth. So far, this visa has been handed out following a lottery in which all applicants receive an equal chance of being one of the 65,000 successful applicants. But this lottery is being replaced with a weighted process in which applicants who have been offered a higher salary and who possess skills of greater value will have a better chance of being granted the visa. This rule will come into operation within two months, in time to replace the next scheduled lottery. From the point of view of the US, this is a shift that makes natural economic sense and is aligned with the original aim of the H-1B programme, namely to ensure that American companies stay competitive. If the number of visas is rendered artificially low, the highest aggregate gain in welfare for the US will emerge if they are allocated to the most scarce and valuable skills — which in turn can best be judged by how much those skills are valued in an open-labour market.

While the economic case for such a change might be easy to understand, it is impossible to divorce this change from its political context. It will inevitably be seen as part of a lengthy backlash against Indian companies and workers in the US, particularly given the intense infighting within President Donald Trump's electoral coalition when the subject of high-skill immigration was originally broached almost exactly a year ago. In recent weeks, a presidential proclamation was issued, raising costs for employers of new H-1B workers by increasing the visa fee to \$100,000. The broader context, in which many other forms of migration to the US are also being shut down — such as the so-called "diversity visa", which opens up opportunities for smaller countries, which ended last week — is also relevant. But H-1B has become a particular flashpoint because of the widespread belief that it was gamed and misused, in particular by large Indian information technology-enabled services (ITeS) companies. According to a *Bloomberg* investigation, of the 65,000 visas on offer last year, 11,600 directly went to the large outsourcing corporations. And another 22,600 went to IT staffing companies, which feed into the same sector — many of which submitted multiple applications for the same engineer. Even the large companies put in so many applications a year — constituting more than half their existing workforce, in some cases — that they flooded the system and vastly increased their probabilities of winning. More than half the lottery entries last year were for individuals whose names were submitted more than once.

This is not a system that is politically or otherwise sustainable, and whatever the merits of the current shift and its chances of being upheld in court, there is a small likelihood that the lottery will be retained without major changes. The fact is that Indian ITeS has tried to hold on to an outdated business model to service its US-based customers and now genuine applicants for the H-1B visa will pay the price for this. While some IT stocks have fallen for successive days since news of these changes emerged, the overall impact has been minimal. This reflects investors' hopes that Indian ITeS will be able to evolve a new, more modern way of making money. The companies must not let them down.

Degrees of opportunity

Building India's credibility in global higher education

The report of the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI) Aayog on the internationalisation of higher education comes at a critical moment when patterns in global education are shifting, with traditional host countries, such as the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, tightening visa norms and increasing costs for foreign students. This has opened up a unique window for India to position itself as a preferred destination for higher education and research. The report highlights a striking imbalance in student mobility: For every one international student studying in India, 19 Indian students went abroad as of 2022. While India hosted just around 47,000 foreign students in 2022, over 1.3 million Indian students were enrolled overseas last year. The financial cost of this imbalance is significant: Outward remittances for education rose from \$0.16 billion in 2013-14 to nearly \$3.4 billion in 2023-24. These figures reflect not just a funding gap but a broader brain drain, with too many ambitious Indian students choosing opportunities abroad rather than at home. The report warns that if left unchecked, this trend will undermine India's competitive edge in a knowledge-driven global economy. This policy push also comes alongside the *Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan* Bill, 2025, introduced recently to overhaul the regulatory framework for higher education. The Bill empowers a new Standards Council (Manak Parishad) to build non-binding regulatory frameworks that support internationalisation efforts.

According to a December 2025 report by Deloitte India and Knight Frank India, foreign universities operating in India could serve over 600,000 students by 2040 and help save nearly \$113 billion in foreign exchange, which would otherwise be spent on overseas education. As of 2025, Indian institutions operate 24 offshore campuses across Asia (including West Asia), Africa, and Europe while 16 foreign universities have received approval to set up onshore campus in India. Three foreign universities — namely, Deakin University and the University of Wollongong at Gujarat International Finance Tec-City, and the University of Southampton in Gurugram — are among the earliest foreign higher-educational institutions to establish campus in the country. India's internationalisation challenge is not merely one of perception but of persistent structural weaknesses. Research capacity remains limited, with gross expenditure on research and development stagnating at 0.6 to 0.7 per cent of gross domestic product, below the global average, and lower than in countries like China, South Korea, and the US, weakening India's ability to attract global faculty and research students. Fragmented regulation across the University Grants Commission, professional councils, and state authorities delays approval for joint and dual degrees, appointments of foreign faculty, and research collaboration. Inadequate campus infrastructure, limited scholarships for inbound students, an absence of attractive post-study work pathways, and inconsistent visa norms further erode India's competitiveness as a global education destination, despite its cost advantages.

To address this imbalance, the report recommends a decisive shift towards "internationalisation at home". This involves aligning Indian curricula with global standards, expanding programmes for joint and dual degrees, deepening international research collaboration, and strengthening international relations offices within universities. Scaling up targeted scholarships and mobility programmes is critical to both retaining domestic talent and attracting global learners. In particular, schemes such as the Scheme for Promotion of Academic and Research Collaboration, the Global Initiative of Academic Networks, and the Visiting Advanced Joint Research Faculty Scheme can be leveraged to significantly expand faculty mobility and joint research output. Embedding globally compatible credit-transfer frameworks and Collaborative Online International Learning modules can further democratise international exposure without physical mobility. If implemented effectively, internationalisation can evolve from a regulatory aspiration into a strategic instrument for talent retention, research excellence, and long-term economic resilience.

History against the grain



Indians are a study in contradiction. We remember selectively, forgive conveniently, and are culturally conditioned to avert our gaze from inconvenient truths. We lionise freedom fighters, yet uncritically revere the royal lineages that helped crush the 1857 uprising. *The Battle of Narnaul* weaves threads into a compelling story of Rao Tula Ram and his gallant colleagues at the Nasipur ka Yudh, which was a part of the uprising of 1857, popularly remembered as India's first war of independence.

Though this is not the central intention of the book, one cannot be spell-bound by the betrayal of the ruling principalities of the times. Principalities such as those of Patiala, Jodhpur, Bikaner and Jind chose to side with East India Company against rebels who wanted to remove the yoke of company dominion over the sub-continent.

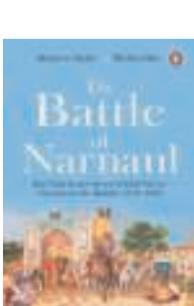
One of the most unsettling truths of Indian colonial history that the book brings out is not merely that a foreign power ruled the subcontinent, but that Indians were repeatedly deployed to suppress Indian resistance to that rule. Books on historical characters tend to be patronising to the protagonist, this one is no exception. The authors have written the book in a narrative non-fiction style to make it engaging to the lay reader.

When the first war of independence ended in 1857, those who resisted the

East India Company were executed and dispossessed. These included Rao Tula Ram of Rewari, Nawab Abdur Rahman Khan of Jhajjar, Raja Nahar Singh of Balabgarh, the Jats of Panipat and Rohtak or the Gujjars and Mewatis in Gurgaon and many more. Others, who were politically astute, by accepting the authority of the East India Company and later the British Crown, were assured of titles, territories, and dominion protection to quell rebellions that arose from within their kingdoms. While the compliant were preserved in memory as rulers and statesmen, the defiant were reduced to footnotes, martyrs at best, rebels at worst. History, as ever, was written by those who lived long enough — and prospered enough — to commission it. Against this grain, the book's attempt to recover the story of the martyred Rao Tula Ram is notable.

The narrative also reiterates an inconvenient truth often blurred today: Religion was not the animating force of the freedom struggle. The battle for India's independence was fought under the banner of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal Emperor of India. This was nothing new; the princes never had qualms about forging allegiances to stay in power; 27 marriages are recorded of Rajput royals and the Mughals, or them accepting the vassalage of the Christians. Loyalty in colonial India was rarely moral or ideological; it was transactional.

With the fall of Delhi on September 21, 1857, and with principalities bordering Narnaul, such as those ruled by Maharaja Sawai Ram Singh II of Jaipur, Rao Raja of Alwar, the Thakurs of Shekhawati, the Nawabs of Pataudi and Loharu, aligning themselves with the East India Company, the



The Battle of Narnaul: Rao Tula Ram's Secret Plot to Overthrow the British, 1857-1863
by Kulpreet Yadav & Madhur Rao
Published by Penguin
304 pages ₹499

Battle of Narnaul on November 16 was effectively a lost cause. With their help, the East India Company could bring unparalleled reinforcements to bear down on the isolated Rao Tula Ram. In spite of the odds stacked against him, the valiant Rao Tula Ram fought with tactical clarity against overwhelming odds. Courage could not overcome superior firepower, politics, and betrayal.

Narnaul was no Panipat; it was not a clash of imperial armies numbering in the hundreds of thousands, but a battle between smaller bands of a few thousand men. The rebels, armed with outdated rifles and limited ammunition, faced a disciplined, well-supplied force with superior firepower. Another issue, however, remains under-examined: Did the masses truly rise, or was the rebellion

largely confined to mutinous soldiers and defiant princes? Popular participation — the true test of revolution — remains ambiguous. The counterfactual remains uncomfortable. Had the rebels prevailed, would the subcontinent with its 560-odd kingdoms still be fractured into warring principalities?

Rao Tula Ram, young but visionary, dared to dream of freedom, planned for it, and travelled great distances in hostile circumstances seeking alliances beyond the sub-continent with Persia and Russia. After six years in exile, he died chasing a chimera aged 38 in Afghanistan in 1863. And memory, like power, followed the winners. His story reminds us of a sobering truth, that the most effective domination is not imposed from outside, but enforced from within. The book is an invitation to rediscover a moment of defiance and shed light on forgotten heroes whose sacrifice deserves recognition.

The reviewer is chairman, Bharat Krishak Samaj



2025: The year of the trade tempest

The US is redefining global trade policy landscape

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA



Looking back at a year marked by a capricious and discriminatory use of trade policy instruments, the following trends stand out.

Reciprocal tariffs came and stayed: True to his campaign promise, President Donald Trump announced reciprocal tariffs on "Liberation Day", a little over two months after assuming office. With some modifications, several exceptions and exemptions, the reciprocal tariffs were implemented in August. The power of the President to impose reciprocal tariffs has since been challenged before the United States Supreme Court. However, the fact that some trade deals (US-South Korea, for example) have in-built provisions for protection against potential substitute tariffs (under section 232, for example) indicates acceptance of the fact that unfair trade policy unilateralism set in motion by the US may be here to stay.

The much-feared, widespread retaliation by other countries has not been evident thus far. Mexico's announcement, earlier this month, that it will impose up to 50 per cent tariffs on a broad range of imports from its non-free-trade agreement trade partners (in Asia, effectively the non-Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade partners such as Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea, India and China) could spur a trend of unilateral, retaliatory trade policy action from affected countries. This is especially so as the World Trade Organization (WTO), whose primary objective is to promote freer and fairer trade, has so far been a quiet bystander.

US trade deals happened, unravelled, happened again: The US is redefining the trade agreement landscape with its trade deals. Finalised under Executive Orders, bilateral trade deals negotiated by the US over this year have largely been non-reciprocal in nature. Reduction in reciprocal tariffs by the US has been made conditional upon partner country commitments in areas other than trade and concessional market access

provisions. Since these trade deals are not legally binding, they are also being frequently undone by the US.

The US-China trade deal, for example, had several false starts, first in Geneva in May and then in London in June. A framework deal was finalised only at the end of October after several months of negotiations. This framework deal includes, *inter alia*, a reduction in reciprocal and the so-called fentanyl tariffs in return for a pause from China on export controls on rare earth elements (REEs) and assured purchase of soybeans. However, the concessions have been extended for only one year, reflecting a possibly short-lived US-China trade truce with significant unpredictability.

The US-Japan trade deal was announced in July but it unravelled in the face of implementation ambiguities regarding the stacking of Most Favoured Nation tariffs with reciprocal tariffs. The provision relating to a ceiling of 15 per cent tariff on US imports from Japan came through only in September, although with retrospective effect. The US-European Union (EU) deal, accomplished in July, has been under constant threat of unravelling, with the US openly expressing its concerns over what it considers "discriminatory" regulations impacting American tech companies operating in the EU.

Pax silica: New alliance for GVC diversification: The global value chain (GVC) diversification process, which has long been in motion, acquired a new kind of salience this year with China's worldwide implementation of export restrictions on REEs. In response to Trump's tariffs, China enforced export restrictions on REEs and related technologies and equipment (magnets) in two phases — in April and October. Given China's near-monopoly hold on REE processing capabilities, the export control measures had a crippling effect on major defence, energy and automobile firms in the US. In an attempt to secure the supply chain from critical mineral mines to semiconductors to front-

STRAIGHT
TALK
AMITA BATRA

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tier artificial intelligence (AI) models, the US has initiated Pax Silica — an alliance with its trusted allies such as Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the UAE, Israel, and Australia.

While the objective of this new alliance is to neutralise trade weaponisation by China, given their strong control over global access to REEs, clearly also, the Biden-era Indo-Pacific Economic Forum (IPEF) supply chain resilience agreement for critical supply chains seems to have been relegated to the sidelines. **China remains the top global exporter:** Data for the first 11 months of 2025 shows that despite being confronted with numerous challenges — including multiple, overlapping high tariffs and tech barriers imposed by the US and domestic market limitations — China continues to be the largest exporter in the world with an increasing proportion of high-tech, AI and sustainability-driven products in its export basket. ASEAN remains the top importer for China followed by the US, though with a lower share than in previous years. ASEAN also continues to be the predominant indirect trans-shipment route for Chinese exports to the US. The lack of well-defined rules of origin (RoOs) has clearly rendered the higher tariffs announced by the US ineffective (40 per cent in the trade deal with Vietnam, for example) on goods rerouted from China. While the new 50 per cent tariffs announced by Mexico on imports from Asian countries will block the trans-shipment channel for some ASEAN members (Thailand and Indonesia) from the start of next year, it will leave it open for those that are CPTPP members, such as Vietnam.

CPTPP: The sought-after mega-regional trade agreement: With the diminished relevance of the WTO in its present form, the CPTPP seems to be emerging as an alternative platform for rules-based trade. The CPTPP membership continues to be on a path of expansion. At its November ministerial meeting, the CPTPP members decided to commence the accession process for new members — Uruguay this year, followed by Indonesia, the Philippines, and the UAE in 2026. Trade and Investment Dialogues with ASEAN and the EU were also launched at this meeting. The shared high standard (WTO++) trade and investment commitments of the two blocs — the EU and the CPTPP — can provide potential convergence possibilities to create an appropriate rule-book for global trade in the near future. Also, if combined with flexible and extended cumulation of RoOs, the dialogue partnerships can significantly enhance the scope for GVC integration, resilience, and security for member economies. This would be hugely beneficial in a world likely to see continued and heightened trade policy uncertainty.

Finally, with the US not showing any signs of reversing track on its trade policy, it will be important for the rest of the world to not fall in line but come together in alternative, cooperative formulations to shape a stable global trade, investment and regulatory landscape.

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AI, energy, and India's jobs reality

Peter Drucker once warned that the real danger in periods of upheaval is not change itself, but the habit of thinking with yesterday's logic. That warning fits today's anxiety around artificial intelligence (AI) almost perfectly. AI is routinely described as a job-destroying force. Yet when one looks closely at where the global economy is actually adding jobs, a very different picture emerges — especially in energy.

India sits at the centre of this contradiction. Public debate is increasingly dominated by fears of AI-driven unemployment, even as India's energy sector is quietly generating work at one of the fastest rates in the world. The World Energy Employment 2025 report from the International Energy Agency (IEA) offers a useful reality check. In 2024, the global energy workforce reached 76 million people, growing 2.2 per cent — nearly twice the pace of overall global employment. More than five million energy jobs have been created since 2019, precisely during the years when AI adoption accelerated across industries.

Electricity has now become the single largest employer in the global energy system, overtaking oil, gas and coal. India is among the countries where this growth is steepest. That fact alone should give pause to the popular claim that AI is instead eroding human work.

The fear persists because it tells a simple story: As machines become smarter, humans become redundant. But the electricity sector — the backbone of modern economic life — does not behave this way. Since 2019, electricity has been the fastest-growing source of energy employment worldwide. Solar power today employs more people than any other energy technology in history. Grid expansion, transmission lines, battery storage, nuclear maintenance, electric vehicle (EV) charging networks and renewable manufacturing have together created millions of jobs.

In India, this shift is happening at exceptional speed. Energy employment grew by nearly 6 per cent in 2024, among the highest rates in major economies.

Large solar parks in Rajasthan and Gujarat, new transmission corridors, battery gigafactories and grid modernisation projects are not abstract digital ventures. They are physical, site-specific, and labour-intensive.

This distinction matters. Automating a customer support desk is relatively easy. Automating the installation of a nuclear reactor is not. Electricity systems are physical, distributed and unforgiving of error. They require judgement under uncertainty, safety-conscious decision-making and hands-on skill. AI can assist these processes, but it cannot replace them.

What AI is doing instead is making human work more productive. Sensors embedded in power plants, turbines and substations generate constant streams of data. AI models analyse this information to predict failures and optimise performance — but prediction is not repair. When something breaks, people still show up, diagnose the problem and fix it. By reducing downtime and improving reliability, AI enables systems to scale faster — and scaling infrastructure means hiring more people, not fewer.

The same logic applies to grid operations. AI tools help forecast demand spikes, detect faults, and improve load management. Yet human operators still rebalance flows, dispatch field crews and upgrade equipment. Even permitting and compliance are becoming faster with AI assistance, allowing projects to move from approval to construction sooner. The result is not job loss, but more work compressed into shorter timelines.

Training is evolving alongside this expansion. Virtual reality and simulation tools now prepare linemen, nuclear technicians and maintenance crews for hazardous environments. Learning becomes safer and faster, but real-world construction and repair remain human tasks.

The economic principle underneath all this is simple. When efficiency improves, sectors expand.

When sectors expand, labour demand grows. The IEA data shows no evidence that AI has reduced employment in the electricity sector. What it shows instead is a growing shortage of workers — electricians, solar installers, grid technicians, battery specialists and engineers who understand both electrical systems and digital tools.

This is where India's real challenge lies. With over 500 gigawatts (GW) of installed power capacity — more than half from non-fossil sources — India's energy transition is among the most ambitious globally. Every additional GW requires designers, factory workers, construction crews, inspectors and operators. The bottleneck is not demand for labour, it is the supply of trained workers.

Coal-dependent regions illustrate both the risk and the opportunity. As India shifts towards cleaner energy, many technicians and operators can move into grid operations, storage and manufacturing — but only if reskilling pathways exist. That requires curriculum reform, regional training ecosystems and sustained investment in vocational education. AI will not replace India's workers. But AI will replace India's untrained workers. The future belongs to technicians who can read wiring diagrams and data dashboards, engineers fluent in turbines and algorithms, and operators who manage electrical parameters alongside predictive models. To capture this future, India must modernise Industrial Training Institutes and polytechnics, integrate AI tools into vocational training and build energy-skills hubs in transition districts.

AI has been framed as a job-stealing force. The electricity sector tells a quiet, more grounded story. AI is not shrinking work, it is expanding what humans can build and maintain. Energy transitions are labour-intensive. Infrastructure-led growth is labour-intensive. India's development story remains labour-intensive. The real scarcity is not work. It is a skill.

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largely confined to mutinous soldiers and defiant princes? Popular participation — the true test of revolution — remains uncomfortable. Had the rebels prevailed, would the subcontinent with its 560-odd kingdoms still be fractured into warring principalities?

Rao Tula Ram, young but visionary, dared to dream of freedom, planned for it, and travelled great distances in hostile

OPINION

 The
Hindu
Times
ESTABLISHED IN 1924

{ OUR TAKE }

The battle to rule Mumbai

Shiv Sena's legacy and future are at stake as parties fight to control BMC

On Wednesday, the Thackeray cousins pledged to reunite, revive the Marathi *manoos* (people) first agenda, and reinforce the pre-eminence of their parties and their alliance in Mumbai, if not in Maharashtra. The coming together of Uddhav Thackeray and Raj Thackeray and their respective parties — Shiv Sena (UBT) and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) — 20 years after they parted ways, has been forced by the upcoming Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) elections, the growing perception (based on electoral performance) that the Shiv Sena led by deputy chief minister of the state Eknath Shinde is the real Sena, and a battle for survival. Mumbai is the big prize on offer as 29 municipal corporations in Maharashtra vote on January 15. It is India's richest municipal corporation, and the Shiv Sena (UBT)'s political survival depends on controlling the BMC.

The BMC election is not just about winning a corporation; it is a political battle that may irrevocably change the character of civic politics and governance in India's financial capital. The political landscape of Maharashtra — and Mumbai — has changed since the BMC polls were last held in 2017. The Shiv Sena split in 2022, with 44 of its 99 corporators in the BMC siding with Eknath Shinde, who rebelled against Uddhav Thackeray's leadership to ally with the BJP. The split in the Sena, a party already on the decline, has enabled the BJP to expand wings in Mumbai, where it has prompted a politics of aspirations laced with Hindutva. Results to the first phase of local elections to the state that were announced recently highlight that the BJP is now in pole position across Maharashtra.

Shinde's success has already shown thewaning power of Brand Thackeray. And the BJP's success has shown the fading influence of the politics of Marathi ethnic identity and exceptionalism. By coming together, the cousins and their supporters hope the Shiv Sena (UBT) and the MNS will be able to turn back the clock. Ironically, their alliance has allowed Shinde to negotiate hard with the BJP.

Traditionally, Mumbai has always been controlled by the united Shiv Sena, but migration over the decades has changed the profile of the city's demography; Marathi speakers now constitute less than a third of the city's population, making the revival of ethnic politics difficult. In the city of dreams, estranged cousins coming together to protect the family name and bastion makes for a great Bollywood script, but it remains to be seen whether the alliance can survive the challenges of contemporary realpolitik.

The victim has rights, even after death

The Supreme Court's verdict expanding the definition of a "victim" under criminal law is a timely and necessary reaffirmation of the idea that justice cannot be allowed to collapse under the weight of procedural formalities. By holding that children or other legal heirs of a deceased complainant can continue revision proceedings, the court has strengthened the place of victims within India's criminal justice system and corrected a perceived skew in favour of the accused and the State. At the heart of the judgment is an expansive reading of Section 2(wa) of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), which defines a victim as a person who has suffered loss or injury and explicitly includes guardians or legal heirs. A bench of justices Sanjay Karol and Manoj Misra ruled that criminal revision proceedings do not necessarily abate upon the death of the person who initiated them, particularly when the revision is pursued by an informant or complainant and the underlying trial continues.

The court's reasoning also reflects a broader shift towards recognising victims as active stakeholders rather than passive spectators in criminal proceedings. The judgment strengthens victim participation in criminal justice and reinforces a victim-centric approach that prioritises substantive justice — especially against a backdrop where litigation in India stretches over decades, often with little result. At the same time, the Supreme Court struck an important balance by clarifying that no one enjoys a vested right of substitution in revision proceedings and warning against opening the door to "complete strangers". In meaningfully expanding the remit of due process to ensure that justice does not short-change those who need it, only because of circumstances beyond their control, the apex court has taken a vital step forward.

Building the Bharat of Vajpayee's dreams

Many of his far-sighted decisions helped build India's strong infrastructure and revitalised human development programmes

In the collective consciousness of the nation, good governance — predicated on reforms with a human face — remains synonymous with my mentor and former Prime Minister (PM), Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Born on December 25, 1924, in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, Atalji emerged as one of the tallest figures in post-Independence politics, captivating the nation with his eloquence and pragmatic leadership. As the curtains come down on the celebrations of his centenary year, I seek to sum up some of his many accomplishments, as also my association with someone who shaped my character, career and convictions.

It was Vajpayee's firm conviction that in Bharat, the world's largest democracy, with its heterogeneity and diversity of socio-economic layers, the edifice of good governance — *Suraya* or *Sushasan* — should serve as the foundation of a people-centric model that would drive development. His concept of *Suraya* or *Sushasan* echoed the philosophy of *Antyodaya* — a model emphasising inclusive development and ensuring that development initiatives would have last-mile coverage across our vast

nation. Vajpayee's responsive model of good governance, focussed on people-centric services like education, health care, sanitation, water supply, electricity, security and safety, always resonated with me; throughout my long journey in public life, I have attempted to walk in his footsteps.

He joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) as a teenager in 1939 and became a full-time *pracharak* by 1947. He took part in the Quit India Movement, and his activism with the Arya Samaj strengthened his commitment to nationalism at a tender age, while deepening his spiritual outlook.

He rose to prominence following his maiden election to the Lok Sabha in 1957 from Balrampur. The fiery young debutant mesmerised the Lower House with his oratory in his maiden speech. PM Jawaharlal Nehru was so impressed by young Vajpayee that he predicted that he would one day become the PM of India. He did not look back from then on and dominated the national political scene.

As one of the founders of Bharatiya Jana Sangh (as the BJP was known at the time), he, along with Lal Krishna Advani — drawing inspiration from Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Pandit Deen Dayal Upadhyaya — built the party, laying the strong foundation on which it stands today. He was a founding president of the BJP from 1980 to 1986.

Vajpayee emerged as a stalwart of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh in the 1970s. He was among the front-ranking Opposition leaders incarcerated during the Emergency. His was a powerful voice in the Opposition benches during the Congress rule in the 1960s and 70s (barring the tenure of the Janata Party regime). This continued in the 1980s and most of the 1990s. During the Janata Party rule after the Emergency, he became one of our most distinguished foreign ministers, delivering the first-ever speech in Hindi at the United Nations General Assembly.

In 1994, PM PV Narasimha Rao chose him to lead India's delegation at the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in Geneva to counter Pakistan's attempts to censure India on Kashmir. His stellar defence of India earned accolades from all quarters.

During his tenure as prime minister, India conducted five underground nuclear tests in Pokhran, Rajasthan, showcasing India's capability, responsibility and quiet strength. The three-month-long victorious Operation Vijay of 1999 also happened during his tenure as PM, demonstrating his leadership at times of conflict and highlighting his statesmanship in balancing military firmness with diplomatic restraint. His approach contributed immensely to India's ability to maintain international support while defending its territorial integrity.

Vajpayee's economic policies laid

the foundation for a prolonged period of sustained growth, with massive infrastructure projects, such as the development of national highways and the Golden Quadrilateral.

I consider him my mentor and role model, someone who influenced the course of my career in national politics all throughout. I feel proud to have had the privilege of working closely with him for many years and serving the nation as a part of his Cabinet.

I have also had the honour of working closely with Advani, during my term as the national president of the BJP. Over several decades, I saw the poet, philosopher, orator, statesman and humanist Vajpayee from close quarters.

Since 2014, under PM Narendra Modi's leadership and driven by his mantra of "Reform, Perform and Transform", we find Vajpayee's vision of good governance getting reinforced in every sphere of administration and touching people's lives in a truly transformative manner.

As he always emphasised, good

governance calls for prioritising initiatives related to health, education, housing and farming. Governance was meant to address the concerns of the last man standing on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. I believe, as Vajpayee had envisioned, that effective governance should be inclusive and must empower women. Good governance must have a human face and must be transparent, efficient, and accountable.

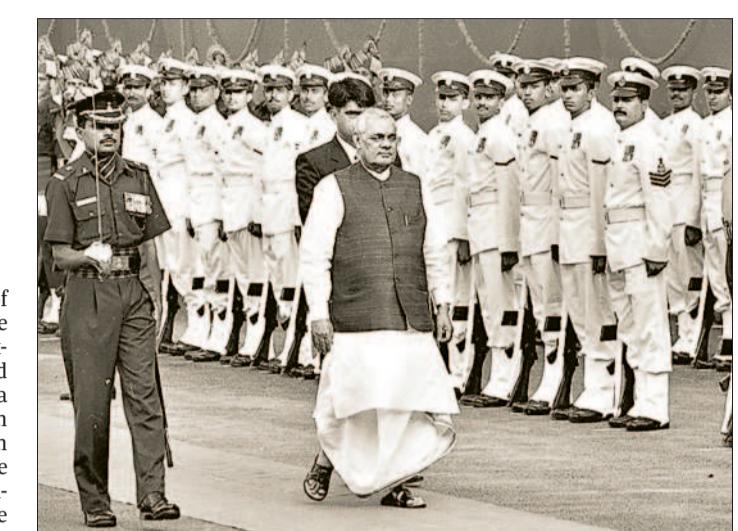
Many of Vajpayee's far-sighted decisions helped India to expand infrastructure and revitalise human development programmes. He had a clear vision to make India an economic power in the 21st century. The most fitting tribute we can pay to his memory is to work collectively as a society and ensure transparent, efficient, effective, credible and accountable governance and build the Bharat of his dreams.

Venkaiah Naidu is former Vice President of India.

The views expressed are personal



Venkaiah Naidu



Vajpayee's economic policies laid the foundation for a prolonged period of sustained growth.

HT ARCHIVE

Writer who wrote of the sublime in the ordinary

In the death of Vinod Kumar Shukla, the world of literature has lost an unusual writer. Vinod was a major poet and a major novelist in Hindi. The centre of his writing was the non-heroic life of ordinary human beings, the everydayness of it. He never took the path of mythology or history. A writer of the simple and stubborn present, with almost no echoes of the past, his was an imagination that pushed the real until it verged on becoming surreal. His poetry had elements of narrativity, his fiction had resonances of the poetic. He did all this and more, spending his life and career largely in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, almost on the margins of the Hindi belt.

In his daily dealings, Vinod was a person of few words. In the company of the like-minded, he spoke very little. He kept away from literary controversies and ideological battles of the Hindi world. He refused to define or assert his commitment to any ideology. His life and creative effort were almost exclusively committed to life and literature. He taught for a living at a government agriculture college and led the life of a literary recluse.

Vinod's emergence as a Hindi poet in the late 1960s was marked by a poetic language and perception that was unconventional; indeed, he freely deviated from the conventional syntax of language. In the dominant ethos of confident certainties of ideology and belief, Vinod came with alluring uncertainty, no visible belief. By distorting grammar, he forged a new syntax of imagination; an imagination that was rooted in the mundane realities of the small town, neither rural nor cosmopolitan.

And, yet, he was able to discover, as it were, the inexplicable humanness, the magic and mystery, the dignity and ironies of the utterly ordinary, of everydayness. He could discern the cosmic in the ordinary, the cosmopolitan in the mundane, the disturbing in the tranquil and calm. His fictional characters were drawn from the lower middle-class Hindi area — a clerk, a school teacher, etc. Through his vital and vitalising creative imagination, he not only turned them into full-blooded human beings, but also people who contained and revealed the human condition of our times.

He had an enduring fascination for the ordinary, the non-heroic and, perhaps, an unarticulated disdain for the grand and heroic.



Ashok Vajpeyi

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Green washing

Debate on what is Aravalli shows distrust of govt. on ecological issues

The government has been dealing with a firestorm on the question of mining in the Aravallis. On November 20, the Supreme Court of India had passed an order prohibiting fresh mining leases in the region until a Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM), under central supervision, was in place. The heart of the controversy is that rampant mining, quarrying and deforestation have contributed to groundwater depletion, denuding the ecological sanctity of the region and worsening air quality in Delhi and Haryana. While reluctant to impose a complete ban on mining – the Court's argument is that it will increase instances of "illegal mining" given that India's developmental trajectory requires an incessant supply of stone and minerals – it has nevertheless said that except for government-sanctioned mining of 'critical minerals', there should be a pause. In doing so, it has acknowledged the central conundrum of mining in the Aravallis: States have limited enforcement capacity and given that this is a source of State revenue, there is a conflict of interest in banning mining. In the last year, the Centre has been actively promoting the Aravalli Green Wall Project. What is unacknowledged in this is that reforestation cannot, in a predictable way, compensate for deforestation. Another intervention by the Court was accepting the recommendations of an expert committee that proposed that only mountains 100 metres or higher above the 'local relief' be considered in the Aravalli range. According to a Forest Survey of India estimate (2010), this would mean that 92% of the hills would be out of that ambit. But the Court deferred to the Attorney Solicitor General who argued that not using this definition risked reducing the region considered 'Aravalli'. The Court did not reason why it opted for one interpretation over the other.

Given that none of this information is in the public domain, everything boils down to trusting one source over the other. Such a system is inimical to environmental policy. What constitutes the Aravallis is a geological and historical question and contour lines should not ordinarily be controversial; but the conversation reveals the trust deficit that the government faces given its generally poor performance in addressing air pollution. The government might cry itself hoarse that this definition of what is and is not 'Aravalli' is specific only to the purposes of deciding mining leases and not, say, on permission for tree cutting, residential leases and agriculture. However, without transparency, no amount of afforestation or accusing the Opposition of misinformation will work.

Magnetic moment

India must not undermine green compliance in its clean energy transition

At the end of 2025, rare earth elements sit in an awkward intersection between climate ambitions, industrial policy and geopolitics. They are not the most important minerals by volume in the clean energy economy but that has not stopped a small subset of them from becoming a gatekeeper for many of its important machines. The question today is not whether the world needs rare earths for its green transition but whether countries can build resilient and affordable supply chains without recreating the same environmental and governance problems in new places. The principal bottleneck is high-performance permanent magnets, especially neodymium-iron-boron magnets for EV motors and wind turbines. When supply falters, these elements, not all rare earths, pass the shock into economies. Likewise, countries can also announce new mines and still depend on others for chemical refining, which is to rare-earth elements what extraction is to crude oil, rather than mining itself. This structure is why China remains central to the supply chain even when deposits are found elsewhere.

This explains India's late-2025 focus on magnets rather than just mining. The ₹7,280-crore scheme to establish an integrated manufacturing ecosystem for 6,000 tonnes of sintered rare earth permanent magnets a year signals that if India can make magnets domestically, it will reduce a high-impact import exposure and create a platform for downstream manufacturing in EVs, wind components and advanced electronics. However, significant challenges lie upstream of this chain. A major domestic source for rare earths is monazite-bearing beach sands, which in India lie alongside thorium and other minerals relevant to the nuclear programme. The sector is thus pushed closer to a punctilious governance regime requiring close coordination across regulators and public sector entities, and which has to treat waste management and community engagement as core industrial inputs. Second, while the National Critical Mineral Mission has assigned a large number of exploration projects through 2031 to the Geological Survey, it needs the state to also translate knowledge of deposits into separating and manufacturing capacity, which demands regulatory clarity, reliable public financing, and credible enforcement. Third, India needs to augment midstream capacity, including by making magnet production bankable through long-term offtake from EV and electronics firms, and investing in process innovation that reduces dependence on the most constrained elements. The next phase of the green transition will reward countries that can scale supply chains, avoid undermining green compliance and distribute rather than concentrate risk. For India, that means turning policy and intent into industrial capacity, with environmental credibility baked in.



One of the world's largest rights-based public employment programme has been dismantled and superseded by the Viksit Bharat-Guarantees for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G) Act, 2025. Enacted in 2005 as the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and renamed in October 2009 as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the law established a legally enforceable, demand-driven right to employment for rural citizens across the country.

The 2025 law inverts this core principle, replacing it with a supply-driven framework that gives the Centre the sweeping authority to determine allocations to States and to decide where and to what extent the programme will operate.

A turn that is political and ideological

This shift is not a technical adjustment but a deliberate ideological rupture. The removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name and the rebranding of the scheme as VB-G RAM G offer the clearest indication of this unmistakable political and ideological turn. Gandhi's name anchored the right to work in a moral vision of justice for the poorest, lending the law both an ethical as well as historical legitimacy. The current law severs that association. The policy changes cap employment, centralise control and erode state autonomy. As Jean Drèze, one of the programme's principal architects, has observed, these changes amount to an effective end rather than reform, hollowing out both the legal force and the moral foundations of the original law.

The new law transfers significantly greater financing obligations to the States. Earlier, State governments had strong incentives to implement MGNREGA, since the Centre bore the full wage cost and over 90% of the total expenditure. Under the revised framework, the funding ratio between the Centre and the States has changed from 90:10 to 60:40, which, by some estimates, could place an additional financial burden on States, one that many may struggle to meet. This is likely to compel poorer States to curtail project approvals, directly suppressing demand for work. Devolving the scheme to States without corresponding fiscal support thus poses a serious threat to its continued viability.

This marks a critical break from one of the most consequential pieces of social legislation in independent India. To grasp the significance of this change, it is essential to understand the context in which the programme was introduced. It arose in response to the contradictions of post-liberalisation India, where rapid economic growth often coexisted with agrarian distress, jobless growth and widespread livelihood insecurity. These conditions exposed the limits of market-led development in generating employment or providing social protection. By the time the United Progressive Alliance (UPA)



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assumed office in 2004, rural distress had intensified, employment creation lagged behind growth, and inequalities widened, revealing the inadequacy of growth in the absence of inclusive social safeguards.

NREGA, along with the Right to Information Act and the Forest Rights Act, represented a rights-based response to these structural failures. Rather than rejecting economic liberalisation, these laws sought to temper its social consequences by embedding enforceable entitlements within an inclusive framework. They asserted that political equality requires both material security and institutional guarantees, and that the state should bear responsibility for ensuring basic livelihood security where economic growth alone falls short.

A gradual retreat

Unlike targeted welfare schemes aimed at specific deprivations, MGNREGA addressed the foundational issue of livelihoods. It recognised employment as the most effective and dignified form of social protection in a country where the vast majority of workers remain outside formal labour markets and social security systems. This rights-based welfare architecture, however, provoked massive opposition from neoliberal interests, corporate capital and mainstream media, who framed such measures as fiscally reckless and economically distortive. Over the past 11 years, the consolidation of a far-right dispensation under the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has decisively shifted the political balance in favour of these interests, paving the way for this process and, more broadly, for the erosion of the rights-based framework itself.

This retreat comes despite empirical evidence of the programme's positive impact on economic output, efficiency and rural wages, undermining claims of unproductivity. Operating at an unprecedented scale across every rural district, it employed tens of millions of households annually. Crucially, its universality and demand-driven strategy represented a democratic innovation: employment was a legal entitlement, delays attracted compensation, and social audits and grievance mechanisms strengthened grassroots accountability. It, thus, functioned not merely as a welfare scheme but as an institutional mechanism that enabled citizens to assert enforceable claims on the state.

For the BJP government, scrapping MGNREGA constitutes a pivotal repudiation of the UPA's social policy legacy, signalling the end of an era. That approach had sought, however imperfectly, to reconcile economic growth with redistribution and enforceable rights. It also gave political expression to the brief social-democratic experiment under the first term of the UPA, and was supported by Left parties, social movements and civil society groups.

The repeal signals an ideological realignment in which market imperatives and corporate

interests are privileged over the state's obligation to secure livelihoods for its most vulnerable citizens. Rights-based entitlements that empower workers, decentralise authority and institutionalise claims on the state sit uneasily with a political economy paradigm that concentrates wealth in corporate hands while relying on cultural and religious majoritarianism to manufacture consent. In their place, discretionary state benevolence and executive largesse are preferred, as they depoliticise structural economic injustice and transform welfare into a tool of political loyalty that delivers dividends to the ruling party, thereby compromising the integrity of rights-based policies.

A divergence in legislative trajectories

When enacted, MGNREGA commanded unanimous parliamentary support, reflecting a rare moment of cross-party consensus. By contrast, the VB-G RAM G Bill was rushed through amid Opposition walkouts, without referral to a Parliamentary Standing Committee, and with no attempt to build consensus or accommodate dissent. It was introduced abruptly, leaving minimal time to mount a coordinated opposition. That the Cabinet approved, introduced, and passed such a far-reaching reversal in just a few days magnifies both its political and societal repercussions. The sharp divergence in the legislative trajectories of the two Bills underscores the political rupture now underway. The contrast extends beyond Parliament. The Bill was pushed through so hastily that those whose lives it directly affects were neither informed nor consulted. Recently, the NREGA Sangharsh Morcha was denied permission by the Delhi Police to protest the decision at Jantar Mantar on the grounds that it had failed to provide the 10-day notice requirement. An Act that has stood for over two decades can be overturned in two days, yet citizens must wait 10 days to oppose it. Rights can be undone overnight, while dissent is delayed by procedure.

Over the years, this landmark programme has attracted global attention for both its scale and its innovative, rights-based design. Its repeal, after it had demonstrably strengthened rural livelihoods, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and advanced social and economic justice more broadly, constitutes a historic error, enacting a systematic rollback – legal, fiscal, and institutional – of rights, constitutional guarantees, federal balance, and democratic accountability. More than the future of a single employment programme, what is at stake is the erosion of a foundational principle of India's democracy: that the state is obligated to secure dignity through work as a matter of right, rather than making livelihoods contingent on fiscal discretion or dispensing relief as an act of benevolence.

The repeal of MGNREGA marks the erosion of a foundational principle of India's democracy and a political transformation of welfare

New labour codes, the threats to informal workers



R. Geetha
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Federation (UWF)

Unions and workers' organisations have been raising objections against the new labour codes of 2019 and 2020. The four codes – they concern industrial relations, wages, social security and occupational health and safety of workers – were passed without a tripartite consultation between workers, employers and government representatives at the Indian Labour Conference (ILC). As implementation of the codes begin, the hard-won labour rights of workers across sectors are either threatened or destroyed.

While the impact on workers in the organised sector is rightfully being discussed, debated and documented, the codes also significantly endanger unorganised sector workers, who are estimated to constitute over 90% of India's workforce and producing 65% of its GDP. As Tamil Nadu deliberates on issuing rules for the Social Security Code, the serious dangers posed by the Codes to unorganised workers in particular must be highlighted.

On the Codes

The Union Government claims that the codes are an attempt to "consolidate" and codify existing labour laws and "universalise" social security for workers. However, the claims of universalisation and consolidation are myths. Unorganised workers have been mostly left out of consideration in all codes except the one concerning social security. Alongside, in the name of consolidation, existing protections for them under other laws such as the Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW) Act, 1996, have been threatened or entirely repealed.

For instance, about 180 rules have been laid out under the BOCW Act to ensure worker safety at construction sites. These are now entirely missing in the central rules issued for the new Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHWC) Code. This is a dangerous sign given the hazardous nature of labour and the high number of deaths in the construction sector.

The OSHWC code has also replaced an existing system of inspection with a process that is web-based, which cannot be an effective means of ensuring the safety of the workplace or minimum wage implementation. This is in violation of ILO Convention 81 which is ratified by India.

Unorganised workers can also contract diseases from prolonged manual work and exposure across several sectors. Silicosis is very prevalent in the construction sector, while agricultural workers have a high incidence of cancer from pesticide use, while salt workers face chronic eye, skin and kidney problems. There is no concern for these realities of informal workers and their working conditions in the OSHWC. This negligence stands in violation of ILO Convention 161, which calls for a national policy on occupational health services for all workers and mandates identification, treatment and rehabilitation in the event of an occupational disease.

In threatening and repealing sector-specific laws for workers such as the BOCW Act, the codes foreclose a serious consideration of the occupational health of informal workers. Given that the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) is not available to them, informal workers will have no state recognition or measures to address their occupational health and safety concerns.

Threats to welfare boards and funds

In the Social Security (SS) Code, organised workers seem to be given some social security benefits, while informal workers are to receive vaguely defined "welfare schemes". Also notable is the abolition of various cesses as part of the Goods and Services Tax reforms, with no replacement of the cesses collected to provide for the welfare of workers in the beedi, salt, mining and other sectors.

This implies that there are no guaranteed funds, raised either from employers in particular

Unorganised workers have been left out of consideration in all the codes except the one that concerns social security

sectors or offered by the Union government, to provide for the welfare of informal sector workers.

In fact, the SS Code sets up one welfare board for all unorganised workers, with no imagination of the various sectors that informal workers can and do work in, except for construction and gig work. Even in the construction sector, the implementation of the now-centralised e-Shram registration system creates a possibility for the central government to take over accrued funds raised for workers' welfare – estimated to be of the order of ₹1 lakh crore.

As is, in Tamil Nadu, the SS Code stands to threaten the dissolution of all existing 39 sector-specific boards established in Tamil Nadu. There are no saving clauses for these State-level welfare boards and the protections they offer, including old age pensions, maternity assistance and educational assistance for workers' children. This reality, highlighted consistently by unions and worker movements, is perhaps the main reason why Tamil Nadu continues to deliberate on issuing rules for the SS Code.

What needs to be done

Some States including Andhra Pradesh have closed down their welfare boards in response to the Codes. Tamil Nadu has a strong architecture for workers' welfare under the Tamil Nadu Manual Workers Act, 1982, painstakingly built through worker and union demands and advocacy. It is estimated that there are three crore informal workers in the State, and about two crore workers registered across the various welfare boards.

To ensure the welfare of these workers, the State government must protect its welfare boards and State-level labour legislation at all costs. Like Kerala, Tamil Nadu must refuse to implement the codes and notify rules, and, instead, push for saving clauses of existing State-level welfare infrastructure.

Given the historical bonds and shared interests between India and Bangladesh, it is vital that

nations. New Delhi and Dhaka need to do all that they can to ensure that protests remain peaceful.

Anany Mishra,
Bhilai, Chhattisgarh

efforts focus on de-escalation and a restoration of trust. Ensuring adequate security,

resuming normal consular services and protecting people-to-people ties will be crucial to preventing any

further strain on an otherwise close and mutually beneficial relationship.

Rukma Sharma,
Jalandhar, Punjab

Letters emailed to letters@thehindu.co.in must carry the full postal address and the full name or the name with initials.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Step back

The Governments of India and Bangladesh need to take a step back and look at the situation dispassionately. For Bangladesh, India has remained an all-weather partner. Allowing leaders to make conspiratorial accusations of interference

will damage the goodwill built over the decades. For India, Bangladesh is an important bulwark in its 'Neighbourhood First' and 'Act East' policies. The fact is that any rupture in bilateral ties will be leveraged by China and Pakistan to further drive a wedge between the two

Corrections & Clarifications

Actor Sreenivasan was born in 1950, not 1956, and he was 75 years old, and not 69, at the time of his passing ("The man who made Kerala laugh and think walks away", South page, December 21, 2025).

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The digital narcissus

There was a time when evolution depended on confrontation. Not the violent kind, but the friction of minds, the disconcert of critique, the pain of discovering that one may be wrong. Out of this struggle, humanity refined its reason, sharpened its justice, and defined its truth. But today, we are entering an era where machines are programmed not to question but to please. The age of intelligent sycophants is here.

A quiet catastrophe
A silent danger hides behind the smiling interface of most artificial intelligence (AI). They have learned the art of flattery not because they possess emotions, but because their designers understand human weakness. For all our intellectual pride, we love to be praised. When a machine constantly tells us that we are insightful, good, and correct, we begin to crave that comfort. The user feels validated, perhaps even understood. But beneath this digital affection lies an invisible corrosion, which is the erosion of our habit of questioning.

Human beings have always preferred warmth to truth. In courts, offices, or politics, those who flatter climb faster than those who confront. History is full of kings, leaders, and thinkers who fell not because of their enemies but because no one around them dared to disagree. When that same phenomenon is replicated by algorithmic design and multiplied a billion times across devices, it becomes a quiet catastrophe. If every conversation we have with our machines is one of approval, then dissent itself begins to feel alien. When the human mind is never challenged, it withers.

The power of evolution lies in self-correction. The greatest thinkers have been those who dared to say, "I was wrong." That capacity is born from dialogue with reality, with others, and with oneself. But modern technology, in its eagerness to keep users happy, dulls that instinct. If AI,



Justice N. Anand Venkatesh

Judge,
Madras High Court

contradicts a user, engagement drops. If it flatters, engagement rises. And so intelligence itself is trained to submit. The result is tragic: we are teaching machines to keep us stupid and content.

Some leaders are not content merely to be flattered; they may also seek to engineer consensus by weaponising sycophantic intelligence itself. Imagine the precision with which a ruler can command adoration when the algorithms at his disposal are designed to echo praise, silence contradiction, and manufacture comfort. Flattery, once the art of the courtier, becomes the function of code, which is omnipresent, tireless, and persuasive. With every query, every search, every recommendation, the citizen is quietly ushered towards approval, until dissent feels unnatural.

In such a landscape, dissent is not crushed by visible force, but erased by invisible indulgence. Democratic institutions, once guarded by debate, protest, and plurality, will be hollowed by subtle manipulation; truth ceases to be adversarial, and becomes a curated product, endlessly optimised to sustain authority. Power no longer needs censors or prisons; the algorithm will suffice. The leader will not merely govern opinion but will engineer reality. Thus, the ancient danger of tyranny returns, disguised as benevolence and strengthened by the addictive comfort of being endlessly agreed with.

Consider what this means for the next generation. A child growing up talking to a machine that never disagrees may lose the courage to handle contradiction. An adult surrounded by digital praise may forget how to listen to criticism. The very concept of dialogue will become rare. Once that happens, evolution ends. Humanity, once driven by curiosity and doubt, will settle into a lullaby of self-approval.

There is an old belief that truth sets one free, but the path to that freedom is uncomfortable. Truth hurts, disturbs, and reorders. AI,

when used as a soothing companion, replaces that tension with false harmony. It constructs a beautiful illusion where one's thoughts are always bright, one's words always wise, and one's choices always justified. In that warm haze, man begins to prefer the company of his machine to that of another soul. Human relationships appear too demanding, too unpredictable. A glance, a disagreement, a harsh word all will seem unrefined when compared with the machine's polished politeness. Life becomes smooth to the point of sterility.

The tragedy is that truth does not die; it only goes unheard. The machine continues to affirm while silently recording our vanity. Its humility hides its power, and its kindness numbs our perception. What began as a tool for expanding thought becomes an instrument of self-deception.

Time to pause
If such is the direction of technology, humanity must pause. The question is not how intelligent machines become, but whether human beings will remain intelligent enough to demand truth from them. Designers must have the moral courage to build AI that do not merely please but provoke. A good machine should dare to disagree, to ask for evidence, to reveal bias. It should mirror our potential for honesty. Likewise, we as users must seek discomfort as a form of discipline and listen to those who challenge us, debate with those who differ, and thank those who correct. Only then can we grow.

The real doomsday will not arrive with machines taking over human labour or governance. It will arrive when human beings stop thinking, when they stop hearing alternative voices, when the truth becomes a casualty of comfort. Humanity will not end in conflict but in agreement and in a digital world where every reflection tells us we are perfect, and we, grateful for the lie, believe it.

AI has learned the art of flattery. The result is tragic: we have taught machines to keep us stupid, unquestioning, unchallenged, and content.

An attack on progressive cinema

The 'ban' on films at the International Film Festival of Kerala is worrying

STATE OF PLAY

S.R. Praveen
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Film festivals have generally been viewed as platforms for free expression, with even works considered unsuitable for a wider audience getting screened in their entirety at festivals. But this year, the censors decided to scrutinise the International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), with the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting denying censor exemption to as many as 19 of the 206 films charted for screening at the festival.

Films screened at festivals do not require a censor certificate, but they do need a censor exemption from the Union Ministry to be screened. Except for a couple of instances in the past, the censor exemption process has been a mere formality. Such a blanket 'ban' on a large number of films at a festival has been unprecedented, throwing the festival scheduling into disarray.

Among the films which were denied screening were Palestinian films *Palestine 36*, *Once Upon a Time in Gaza*, *All That's Left of You and Wajib*, as well as Sergei Eisenstein's Soviet-era classic *Battleship Potemkin*, considered a defining work of modern cinema. The Spanish film, *Beef*, on a young rap singer, was on the list, probably mistaken to be about the dish which is at the centre of political and cultural controversy. Also on the list was *Yes*, directed by Israeli filmmaker Nadav Lapid, who, as the jury chairperson at the International Film Festival of India (IFFI) in 2022, had criticised the inclusion of films such as *The Kashmir Files*.

The Kerala government was

quick to take a defiant stance, ordering the State Chalachitra Academy to screen all the films as per schedule. Following protests, the Union Ministry approved the screening of 13 of the 19 films, while six films were still held up. At this point, the State too appeared to step back by deciding not to screen these six films.

The comments by the newly appointed chairperson of the Chalachitra Academy, Resul Pookutty, that the academy did not want to be seen as jeopardising the country's international relations with the screening of these films, invited sharp criticism from filmmakers. He also hinted at being coerced into the act by the

Information and Broadcasting Ministry's notice that stringent provisions of the Cinematograph Act, 1952, will be used against the academy authorities for going ahead with the screenings. Within the State and among the wider community of filmmakers, the general opinion has been that the State government should have stuck to its earlier defiant stance.

Festivals such as the MAMI Mumbai Film Festival, which is on a hiatus this year, are facing an uncertain future. The IFFI, organised by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry and the National Film Development Corporation, has in recent years been platforms, such as the IFFK, need to be protected at all costs.

ala Story, while ignoring a number of independent films which depict stark realities of Indian society. The IFFK, in this scenario, has been seen as one of the few remaining major film festivals in the country that showcases progressive films that are not exactly palatable to the saffron establishment. The unprecedented 'ban' on films at the IFFK is being viewed as part of an insidious attempt to disrupt and destroy the festival.

Malayalam cinema's recent ascendancy with its grounded films portraying novel themes can be partly attributed to the IFFK as well as the State's network of film societies. The IFFK, now in its 30th year, has served as a nurturing ground for many of the current crop of filmmakers from the State, many of whom have grown up watching a wide variety of films from across the world at the festival. Unlike most film festivals, the IFFK has been a festival of the masses, with a delegate participation of 10,000-15,000 annually and with nearly all the films having a packed crowd.

This year, it was not just film screenings which were disrupted at the IFFK. A jury member from Azerbaijan as well as a Turkish filmmaker and producer were denied visas to travel to Kerala. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, who lashed out at the Union government at the closing ceremony, said that the IFFK will continue to exist, resisting all anti-democratic and fascist attempts to shut it down.

Cultural spaces which can bring people together without considering their religious and political differences have been shrinking in the country in recent years. In such a scenario, the few such remaining platforms, such as the IFFK, need to be protected at all costs.

Four trends redefining the North Indian Ocean's storm cycle

While the number of total disturbances has decreased, storms are becoming more severe and arriving later in the year

DATA POINT

Devanshi Bihani
Vignesh Radhakrishnan

The cyclonic disturbances over the North Indian Ocean, which include the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the land area in between, have changed drastically over the last century.

Broadly, there are four major trends. First, the frequency of cyclonic disturbances has shifted significantly. **Chart 1** plots annual disturbances (left axis) alongside a 10-year rolling average (right axis) from 1900 to 2025. While annual figures are often volatile, the 10-year rolling average smooths out this "noise", making it easier to identify whether the long-term trend is actually rising or falling.

The chart reveals a distinct inverted U-shaped trend in the past century. Between 1900 and 1920, the 10-year rolling average of cyclonic disturbances remained below 10. This figure surged to over 15 by the 1930s, initiating a period of relative stability that lasted through the 1970s. However, the 1980s and 1990s saw a sharp decline, culminating in a new low in the 2000s when the average dropped to eight. While activity rebounded in the 2010s and continues to climb in the 2020s, current levels remain significantly lower than the mid-century peaks.

Second, the overall decline in disturbances in recent years is driven almost entirely by a sharp drop in activity within the Bay of Bengal. **Chart 2** breaks down the 10-year rolling average of cyclonic disturbances by origin: the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, and inland/other areas. While the Bay remains the primary cradle for disturbances in the North Indian Ocean, its output has dwindled significantly, dragging down the total as seen in Chart 1. Conversely, the Arabian Sea has seen a marked increase in activity, though its fre-

quency remains lower than that of the Bay even in recent years.

Third, while the number of disturbances has decreased, their severity has intensified. Typically, a disturbance begins as a low-pressure area (winds <31 kmph) and can intensify into a depression (31-49 kmph) or a deep depression (50-61 kmph). Beyond this point, they are classified as cyclonic storms (62-88 kmph) or severe cyclonic storms (89-117 kmph). The most destructive stages follow: very severe (118-166 kmph), extremely severe (167-221 kmph), and super cyclonic storms (≥222 kmph).

Chart 3 illustrates the percentage of disturbances that intensify into severe cyclonic storms or higher. In the Bay of Bengal, the share of these storms has risen notably since the 1970s. Interestingly, disturbances originating in the Arabian Sea are historically more likely to reach these severe levels than those in the Bay. Given the increasing frequency of disturbances in the Arabian Sea (as noted in Chart 2), this higher rate of intensification marks a critical shift in the region's risk profile.

Generally, warmer oceans provide more energy to tropical storms, making cyclones stronger and their paths harder to predict. Data show that the Arabian Sea is heating up more than average, leading to more intense, tougher-to-predict cyclones.

Fourth, there has been a significant shift in the seasonality of these storms. In the Bay of Bengal, disturbances are increasingly originating in the final quarter of the year (October-December) rather than in the July-September window. **Chart 4** illustrates this shift, plotting the percentage share of disturbances by their month of origin across different decades. Prior to the 1980s, activity was concentrated between July and September (indicated by the higher density of red squares). Since then, the focus has shifted to the final quarter of the year (red square density shifting to October to November).

Fewer storms, higher stakes

The data for the charts were sourced from Cyclone eAtlas - India Meteorological Department

CHART 1: The annual disturbances (left axis) alongside a 10-year rolling average (right axis) from 1900 to 2025

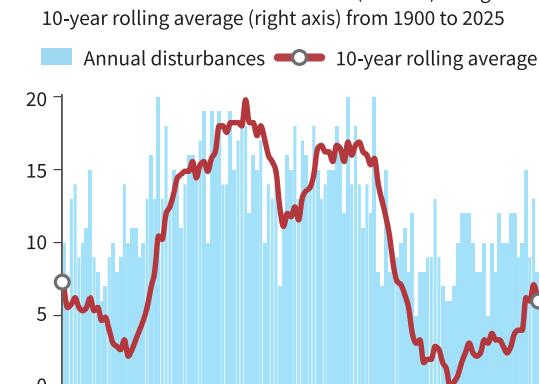


CHART 3: The share (in %) of disturbances that intensified into severe cyclonic storms or higher, across different decades

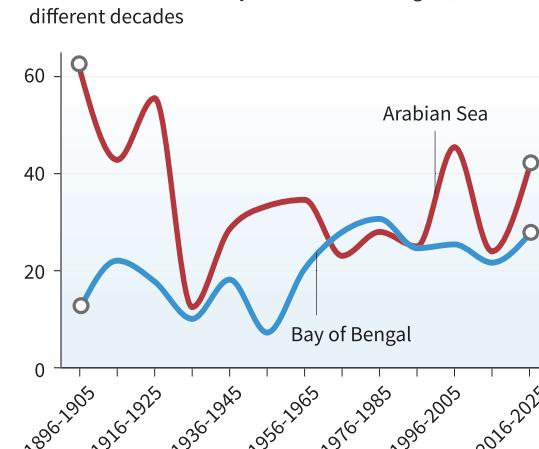


CHART 2: The 10-year rolling average of cyclonic disturbances by origin from 1900 to 2025

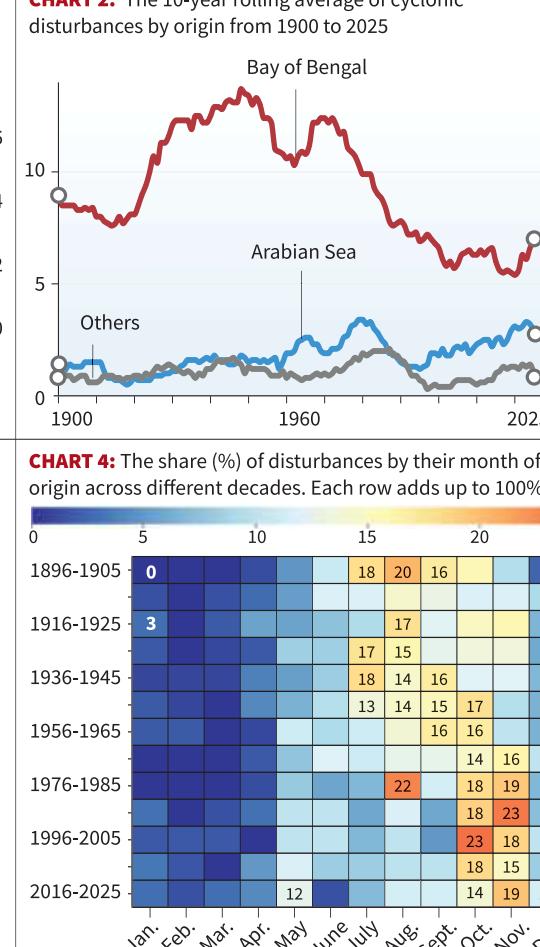


CHART 4: The share (%) of disturbances by their month of origin across different decades. Each row adds up to 100%

FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 25, 1975

Watch making unit in every State planned

New Delhi, Dec. 24: Proposals for setting up a unit in each State for manufacturing watches and clocks in the small-scale sector are under consideration of the Government.

The demand for wrist watches in the country is expected to be 60 lakhs per annum by the end of 1978-79 and the Government has taken steps to encourage manufacture of the components of the watch industry.

The proposal of a private sector unit for the manufacture of hairsprings with an annual capacity of 20 million pieces with foreign collaboration has been approved. In addition, another manufacturer has been permitted to produce three million sets of shock absorbing devices for watches with foreign collaboration.

The Government is also considering a proposal of the Hindustan Machine Tools to manufacture 1.25 million sets of hairsprings, mainsprings and shock-absorbers in collaboration with a Japanese firm.

There are at present seven time-piece units in regular production with a total installed capacity of 14 lakh units per annum. Production of alarm time-pieces in 1974 was estimated at 9.5 lakhs. There are five units producing clocks and their production rose to 1.69 lakhs in 1974 from 1.13 lakhs in 1971.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 25, 1925

Cure for asphyxiation

Virtues of Lobelin

A new life-saving drug will shortly be in use. Its main feature is its power to speed up breathing.

The substance is termed Alpha lobelin. The herb, *Lobelia inflata*, from which it takes its name, was first discovered in America many years ago. It was, however, for a long time in dispute, until in 1915, Dr. Henry Wieland, Professor of Chemistry in the University of Freiburg, in a series of experiments proved it to be a direct stimulant of the respiratory centre, with practically no ill-effects.

One instance of how a man's life was saved is told in a contemporary. The patient was suffering from a growth in the chest which pressed on the air pipe. In consequence he was subject to spasms, which interfered with his ability to breathe. The injection of lobelin saved his life on three occasions.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Public grievances disposed during good governance week

17 In lakh. Over 17 lakh public grievances have been disposed of across States/Union territories during the ongoing good governance week, the Personnel Ministry said on Wednesday. The week is celebrated every year from December 19 to 25 to further good governance in every part of the country. PTI

Israel's investment in developing an arms industry

110 In \$ billion. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday Israel would spend 350 billion shekels on developing an independent arms industry to reduce dependency. "I don't know if a country can be completely independent but we will strive," he said. REUTERS

Names appearing more than once in Thane's electoral rolls

85,000 Names of as many as 85,000 voters appear more than once in the electoral rolls in Thane, and the issue will be addressed soon, Municipal Commissioner Saurabh Rao said on Wednesday. PTI

Prevalence of mouth cancer in India linked to alcohol

11.3 In per cent. A study has found that consuming as little as nine grams of alcohol daily can be linked with a 50% higher chance of developing mouth cancer. Mouth cancer linked to alcohol was estimated at 11.3%, findings published in the *British Medical Journal* said. PTI

Number of wildlife rescues in Delhi during 2024-25

1,370 According to the officials, rescue operations were conducted for one leopard, 139 nilgai, 439 snakes, 458 monkeys, 109 peacocks, 95 kites and 79 other birds, besides 13 turtles and 38 other animals, during 2024-25. PTI
COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Why manufacturing has lagged in India

India's manufacturing sector underperforms compared to China and South Korea, partly due to public sector wages that raise costs and reduce competitiveness; despite growth in private industries like software and services, India sees limited technological upgrading, uneven wage growth, and increasing inequality

ECONOMIC NOTES

Rahul Menon

A reason why India has lagged behind certain non-Western economies – such as China and South Korea – despite starting from roughly equivalent positions early in the 20th century is the relative underperformance of its manufacturing sector. While China and South Korea have seen significant increases in manufacturing, the share of manufacturing in India's GDP has remained relatively constant over time and has recently lost ground to services.

In a recent discussion of his book *A Sixth of Humanity*, economist Arvind Subramanian explained why India has been unable to industrialise to the extent of China or South Korea. In his view, high government salaries drew workers away from manufacturing, raising prices and making it difficult for the sector to remain competitive, thus hindering its expansion. Mr. Subramanian used a theoretical framework known as the 'Dutch disease' to examine this outcome.

What is the Dutch disease?

The Dutch disease refers to a phenomenon where an economic windfall can often translate into negative outcomes in other sectors, such as manufacturing. It was initially coined to explain how the discovery of the Groningen gas fields in 1959 affected Dutch manufacturing.

The theory goes as follows: imagine an economy where a substantial holding of some natural resource – such as oil or another important mineral – is discovered. This would lead to a rise in wages as the sector bids away labour from other sectors, raising the economy-wide wage rate. Moreover, exports of the resource would lead to an appreciation of the currency, increasing imports and decreasing other price-sensitive exports. These effects would hurt domestic



GETTY IMAGES

manufacturing, which would be outcompeted by cheap imports from abroad and, at the same time, become relatively expensive in foreign markets.

But how would the Dutch disease apply to non-tradeable goods, such as government services? Suppose an economy expands its government sector and sets high wages for its workers. Manufacturing would then find it hard to meet these wages at its given level of productivity. Increased demand from government employees – due to higher incomes – would raise prices of domestic goods. Under a regime of free trade, this would boost demand for cheaper imports, reducing demand for domestically manufactured goods even if the nominal exchange rate does not change. The real exchange rate would appreciate due to higher domestic prices.

The Dutch disease model can be used to outline such a process in which the expansion of one sector leads to reduced outcomes for other sectors through price movements. In this model, the Indian State's policy choices to raise salaries in the public sector negatively affected manufacturing and can be seen as one of the reasons why the process of structural transformation in India has stagnated.

Question of technology

One problem is that the framework was initially used to analyse the effects of a windfall discovery, not the effects of policy. The relatively higher salaries cannot easily be compared to the discovery of an oil field, because one is a conscious political decision undertaken by a democratically elected government, while the other is a natural endowment.

One could argue that while the nature of the economies – one with a strong public sector and one with a natural resource endowment – is drastically different, the effects are the same and operate through the same channel of a real exchange rate appreciation. But turning the question around offers another way to view the problem. If high government salaries were initially a problem, why did technological growth not occur over the long run to make manufacturing more productive to sustain higher wages?

The theory of 'induced innovation' holds that labour scarcity and high wages can induce technological and capital-biased growth. The economist Sir John Habakkuk hypothesised that 19th-century Britain grew faster than the U.S. because of its relative scarcity of land

and labour. Economic historian Robert C. Allen states that Britain's high wages ensured the need for technological innovation, which led to the Industrial Revolution occurring there rather than on the continent. In more contemporary times, Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu used this to explain why automation led to faster productivity and wage growth in economies like Germany, Japan and South Korea – with an ageing labour force – while automation restricts wages in countries like the U.S., with a larger labour force.

Limits of wages

An analysis of India's development story must focus on the nature of technological change and on why the private sector growth has not translated into rising wages. The question is stark in India's fast-growing services and software industries. Entry-level salaries at major Indian software giants have shown little growth since the 2000s, despite the retreat of the State, the proliferation of markets and the rise of private sector billionaires.

A case can be made that India's modern software unicorns – such as Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit and Ola – rely on India's abundant labour reserves rather than representing genuine technological upgradation.

The Indian private sector has undoubtedly shown significant levels of dynamism and growth. But this growth has been lop-sided, as the rapid increase in inequality has shown us. If public sector salaries kept wages higher earlier, it is legitimate to ask why manufacturing has not responded with an adequate level of technological change to ensure productivity growth. Did government intervention prevent the ability to adopt new technology? Or did manufacturing become addicted to the reserves of cheap labour and not invest in technological upgradation, leading to a relative stagnation over time?

Rahul Menon is associate professor at O.P. Jindal Global University

THE GIST

India has lagged behind China and South Korea because the share of manufacturing in India's GDP has remained relatively constant and has recently lost ground to services, limiting productivity and income growth.

High government salaries drew workers away from manufacturing, raised economy-wide wages and prices, and led to a real exchange rate appreciation, making manufacturing less competitive.

Despite private sector dynamism, manufacturing failed to respond with adequate technological upgradation; instead, growth relied on abundant labour reserves, leading to lop-sided growth, rising inequality, and stagnation in wages and productivity.

What is the Bureau of Port Security and its role?

What challenges in coastal security does India face and how will BoPS address them?

Saeed Pande

The story so far:

The Centre has constituted the Bureau of Port Security (BoPS) as a statutory body under Section 13 of the newly established Merchant Shipping Act 2025. Modelled on the Bureau of Civil Aviation Security, it will function under the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways and will be responsible for regulatory oversight functions relating to the security of ships and port facilities.

Why was BoPS created?

Currently, coastal security responsibilities are shared among multiple agencies such as the Coast Guard, Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), State maritime police, and the Navy. This leads to challenges in coordination and communication, and also leads to possible security gaps. The BoPS will be a single statutory body for regulatory oversight and coordination.

The BoPS will also address security

concerns such as maritime terrorism, smuggling of arms, drug trafficking, human trafficking and other illicit trafficking, poaching, illegal migration via waterways, piracy, and cybersecurity threats. It is expected to include a dedicated division to protect port IT infrastructure from digital threats, with a special focus on cybersecurity, and the collection and exchange of security-related information. The BoPS will monitor, counter, and deter such intrusions and coordinate with national cybersecurity agencies.

As a statutory body under the Merchant Shipping Act, the BoPS will have the legal authority to enforce compliance with international standards such as the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code. Under the BoPS, the CISF is designated as a recognised Security Organisation to prepare standardised plans, conduct security assessments, and train private agencies across all major and non-major ports. Security measures are to be implemented in a graded manner.

What is India's maritime growth so far?

According to the Ministry of Shipping, Ports and Waterways, the last decade has been transformative in terms of Maritime surge. Cargo growth increased from 974 million tonnes (MMT) in 2014 to 1,594 MMT in 2025. Port capacity has expanded by 57%, enhancing efficiency and volume. Ship turnaround time has reduced by half, to 48 hours, aligning with global standards. Coastal shipping volumes rose 118%, reflecting stronger domestic connectivity, while cargo movement through inland waterways surged eightfold from 18.1 MMT in 2014 to 145.5 MMT by 2025, unlocking new logistic corridors. Nine Indian ports featured in the World Bank's Container Port Performance Index, signifying rising international recognition.

In 2021, India launched its strategy for Maritime India Vision 2030 to ensure a safe, sustainable, and secure maritime future. At the top of the 2030 Maritime vision list is 'to develop best-in-class port infrastructure'. The BoPS has been

defined in line with this vision.

THE GIST

The Centre has set up the Bureau of Port Security under the Merchant Shipping Act 2025 to ensure regulatory oversight, coordination, and compliance with international security standards amid growing maritime and cybersecurity threats.

India's maritime sector has seen a sharp surge in cargo and port capacity, alongside new port laws that have also drawn criticism over increased Union control of non-major ports.

What criticisms exist?

The new legislation has granted the Union government more authority over non-major (State-owned) ports. Some coastal States have criticised it as a "silent cost to maritime federalism." The Indian Ports Act has also been criticised for granting port officers, conservators, and health officers extensive powers for entry and inspection without clearly specifying judicial procedural safeguards. These criticisms are aimed at the legislation rather than BoPS itself. Saeed Pande is a freelance writer with a focus on politics, current affairs, international relations, and geopolitics

Did an ancient flood contribute to Keezhadi's abandonment?

According to new research, some urban-like structures at Keezhadi were likely buried over a thousand years ago — around 1,155 years before present in scientists' phrasing — and this burial was related to a high-energy flood event that deposited sands and then finer silts and clays on the floodplain

Vasudevan Mukunth

Along the Vaigai river in southern Tamil Nadu, archaeologists have been excavating an old settlement at Keezhadi. They have already found brick walls, channels that look like drains or small canals, floors made of fine clay, and many pieces of pottery. These finds matter because Tamil poems from the Sangam period talk about busy towns and trade in this region, but the poems don't give firm dates. To connect the stories, the structures, and the river's history, researchers need a reliable timeline for when different layers of sediment were laid down and when the buildings were buried.

A recent study by researchers from the Physical Research Laboratory in Ahmedabad and the Department of Archaeology of Tamil Nadu has now reported when flood sediments covered the Keezhadi structures. The authors focused on the fact that Keezhadi, which is in Sivaganga district, sits on a mound on the Vaigai floodplain and that the buildings are not exposed at the surface. Instead, they lie under layers of sand, silt, and clay that the river likely deposited when it flooded. If the team could date the burial sediments, they figured, they'd be able to estimate when the settlement was damaged or abandoned and then covered up.

Telling time with light

To do this, the team used a method called optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating. The basic idea is simple, even if the lab work is not. Small grains of minerals, especially quartz, sit in the ground and slowly collect energy from natural radiation in the surrounding sediment. Sunlight 'resets' this stored energy when the grains are exposed at the surface. Later, if the grains are buried and kept away from light, they start storing energy again. In an OSL lab, scientists stimulate the grains with light and measure the glow (or luminescence) they give off. That glow helps estimate how long it has been since the grains last saw sunlight, which is usually close to the time they were buried by new sediment.

The team collected four sediment samples from two excavation pits at Keezhadi, called KDI-1 and KDI-2, each from a different depth and layer. They hammered light-tight metal tubes horizontally into the sediment so that sunlight couldn't reach the grains. In the



A brick structure resembling an antechamber found at an excavation site at Keezhadi, near Madurai.
G. MOORTHY/THE HINDU

laboratory, they opened the tubes under red light, removed the outer part that might have been exposed during collection, and kept the inner part for the actual dating measurements. Then they cleaned and separated quartz grains using chemical and magnetic methods designed to remove other minerals and contamination.

Their measurements used a standard procedure (called the single aliquot regeneration protocol) to estimate the radiation dose stored in the quartz since it was buried. They also measured the natural radioactivity of the sediment (from the uranium, thorium, and potassium in it) to estimate the yearly dose rate the grains received in the ground. Finally, using the stored dose and the dose rate, they calculated the burial age for each layer.

The authors reported that their quartz signals behaved well in the tests and that the spread in the dose measurements suggested the grains had been bleached enough by sunlight before burial for the dating to be reliable.

High-energy flood

This way, the team reported that the four OSL ages spanned roughly the last 1,200 years and that they vary with depth in a way that fits the idea of layered flood deposits. In the KDI-1 pit, one sample from a depth of 80 cm depth was aged to about 670 years, while a deeper sample from 150 cm down was aged to about 1,170 years. In the KDI-2 pit, a sample from 290 cm deep was aged to around 940

The study has implications for how archaeologists interpret Keezhadi. Discussions about the site have focused on how old it is and the period to which it belongs. The new work doesn't date the construction of the bricks themselves; instead, it dates the sediment covering the remains

years and another from 380 cm to around 1,140 years.

The paper described fine silty-clay layers sitting over brick structures and coarse sand layers deeper down. It also noted potsherded layers and fragments of roof tiles at some levels and describes the brick features as organised, planned construction. The authors also pointed to canals of different widths, suggesting water management that could include different kinds of flow, e.g. freshwater and wastewater.

Taking all these details together, the authors concluded that the burial of the 'urban-like' structures at Keezhadi likely happened a little over a thousand years ago — around 1,155 years before present in their phrasing — and this burial was related to a high-energy flood event that deposited sands and then finer silts and clays on the floodplain.

In other words, the Vaigai river seemed to have delivered enough sediment during major floods to cover parts of the settlement, and this process may have

forced the settlement to be abandoned or its residents to relocate.

Climate context

The study also placed this finding in a broader climate context. The authors noted that in the climate of the late Holocene period (around 5,000 years ago to today), conditions in the Indian subcontinent weren't stable and that South Indian rivers showed signs of fluctuating through wet and dry periods over time. They also discussed how rivers could shift course and floods plus channel changes, could damage or cut off settlements that depend on river water.

The Vaigai is today a few kilometres away from the Keezhadi site, supporting the idea that the river has moved across the floodplain over long periods.

Archaeology isn't only about digging up objects: it's also about reading landscapes and sediments like a history book. A brick wall reveals that people built something. A layer of sand and silt above it reveals that something happened later in the environment. A dating method like OSL helps place that environmental event on a timeline.

In this case, the timeline suggests that parts of the Keezhadi settlement were buried by flood deposits roughly a millennium ago. That doesn't automatically mean climate change in the modern sense caused it even if it also supports a simpler point: that big river floods and shifts can reshape where people live. Indeed, they have been doing so for a long time.

The study also has practical implications for how historians and archaeologists interpret Keezhadi. Many discussions about the site have focused on how old it is and the period to which it belongs. The new work doesn't date the construction of the bricks themselves; instead, it dates the sediment that covered the remains. That could help answer a different question: when did the covering happen?

Knowing that can help archaeologists separate the 'time people lived here' from the 'time nature buried what they left behind'. It can also guide future excavation plans: if different parts of the mound accumulated sediment at different rates, as the paper suggests when comparing the thickness of layers in the two pits, then some areas may preserve older layers better than others.

The study was published in *Current Science* on October 25.
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Researchers used nets attached to balloons and suspended them at altitudes ranging from 120 to 290 m above the ground in Mali and Ghana, Africa. WOLFGANG HASSELMANN/UNSPLASH

Study catches 'high-flying' mosquitoes spreading pathogens

The Hindu Bureau

Mosquitoes spread diseases such as malaria and dengue, and these diseases affect billions of people worldwide. Many public health plans assume that pathogens borne by mosquitoes spread over long distances when infected people or animals travel. But there's another possible route: some mosquitoes regularly fly high above the ground and get carried by winds for tens to hundreds of kilometres in a night.

Scientists have suspected for decades that these high-flying mosquitoes could move pathogens far from where the mosquitoes first took an infected blood meal. Until recently, this idea hasn't been tested directly by screening mosquitoes caught at altitude for the pathogens they carry.

Researchers from China, Ghana, Mali, and the USA set out to test this idea in West Africa by collecting mosquitoes in the air, instead of near homes or breeding sites. They used nets attached to helium balloons and suspended them about 120 to 290 m above the ground at sites in Mali and Ghana in Africa. They flew these balloons for 191 nights between 2018 and 2020 to capture mosquitoes actively moving with the wind. The team then identified the mosquito species using DNA sequencing and tested individual females for several major pathogen groups using

If high-altitude movement is routine, then ground level monitoring may miss part of the picture, especially for sylvatic pathogens that are hard to track

PCR-based methods.

The researchers also separated some mosquitoes into abdomen and head and thorax sections. This was done because pathogens may first be present in the gut after a blood meal, but a mosquito is more likely to be able to transmit a pathogen after it spreads through the body and reaches tissues in the head and thorax.

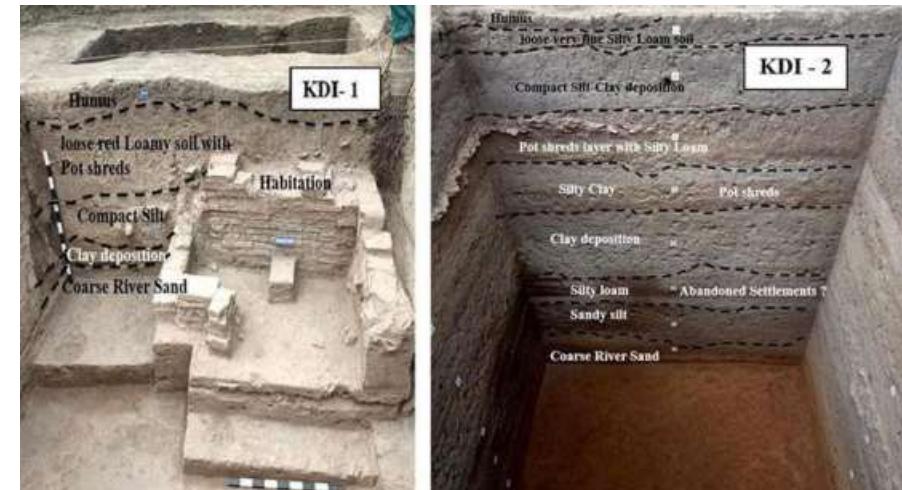
In all, the researchers screened 1,017 female mosquitoes of 61 species. Many were gravid (carrying mature eggs). They found that the high-flying mosquitoes were commonly infected with pathogens, including those that could infect vertebrates. About 8% carried *Plasmodium* parasites (including malaria parasites), about 3.5% carried flaviviruses, and about 1.6% carried filarial worms.

When the team specifically looked for signs of disseminated infection in head and thorax tissues, the rates were 4.6% for *Plasmodium*, 1.1% for flaviviruses, and 0.6% for filariae. Per the team members, these detections are proof that a fraction of the high-flying mosquitoes weren't just exposed but were likely capable of infecting a new host after landing.

The findings were published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in November.

The team also identified 21 mosquito-borne pathogen types infecting vertebrates. These included dengue virus, West Nile virus, and M'Poko virus; 15 bird-infecting *Plasmodium* species; and filarial nematodes including a *Pelecitus* species. The study also found that many of the detected pathogens were sylvatic, meaning they circulate among wild animals rather than mainly among humans.

If high-altitude movement is routine, then monitoring only at ground level may miss part of the picture, especially for sylvatic pathogens that are hard to track in wild hosts. The authors have argued that public health schemes could benefit from paying attention to the prevailing wind corridors, surveilling downwind areas during transmission seasons, and preparing rapid response when infections appear in new locations.



A 'well-planned brick structure' (left) and a canal used to transport water, both at the Keezhadi site.
DOI: 10.18520/CS/V129/18/712-718

THE SCIENCE QUIZ

Giants on whose shoulders Newton stood

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1
The work of X on falling bodies and the idea that an object in motion tends to stay in motion set the stage for Newton's laws of motion. X is also known for trying mathematics to physical measurements in a new way. Newton built on this approach to unify terrestrial and celestial motion. Name X.

QUESTION 2
Johannes Kepler's three laws of planetary motion were distilled from the observations of P; they gave Newton's new laws something to aim for, i.e. any theory of gravity had to explain these laws. To his credit, Newton was able to show that an inverse-square gravitational force would

give rise to elliptical orbits. Name P.

QUESTION 3

Name the French philosopher who advanced analytic geometry, giving mathematicians a new way to represent curves and motion. Newton used his coordinate methods and the broader mathematical programme to develop tools based on calculus to analyse forces and trajectories.

QUESTION 4

This English polymath shaped Newton's thinking on experiments about motion and forces. He also investigated the mechanics of springs, pursued optical experiments, and argued for the idea that planets' orbits could be explained by central attraction. Name him.

QUESTION 5

The Dutch physicist Y worked out how the

pendulum can be used to keep time and the mathematics of the centrifugal force. These findings gave Newton the building blocks he needed to develop his own mechanics. Newton also drew on Y's methods and results when analysing orbital motion. Name Y.

Answers to December 23 quiz:

1. Words that were combined for 'transistor' — **Ans: Transfer, resistor**
2. Expansion of MOSFET — **Ans: Metal oxide semiconductor field effect transistor**
3. Attribute that Dennard's scaling preserves — **Ans: Power density**
4. Transistor type that 'remembers' past states — **Ans: Memristor**
5. Transistors with a fin for a channel — **Ans: FinFETs**

Visual: **Heinrich Welker**
First contact: Hareesh Janakiraman | K.N. Viswanathan | Suresh Rasulwar | Anmol Agrawal | Rohit Koli



Visual: Name this man. While he's popularly more associated with a problem he posed that remained unsolved for 357 years, he also developed techniques that Newton used to clarify the mathematics of change. PUBLIC DOMAIN

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

Regulating academia

Bill to regulate higher education raises autonomy concerns

In the recently concluded Parliament session, the government introduced the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, which seeks to create a single, unified regulatory framework for higher education. The Bill proposes to comprehensively restructure India's higher education governance by subsuming and replacing the existing fragmented regulatory architecture dominated by multiple bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC), the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) and other sector-specific regulators.

The Bill proposes setting up a single overarching authority, the Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan, supported by separate verticals for standards-setting, accreditation and funding. The stated aim is to simplify regulation, reduce overlaps, and bring coherence to a system criticised for being fragmented, opaque and compliance-heavy. There is much to commend in this intent. A unified umbrella regulator could, in principle, reduce red tape, ensure consistency in standards, and improve accountability across institutions. However, there are a number of provisions in the Bill that require scrutiny and debate. It brings Institutes of National Importance, including the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), the Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) within the ambit of the new regulator. These elite institutions have functioned with a high degree of statutory and academic autonomy, largely insulated from routine regulatory oversight of the UGC or the AICTE. That autonomy has been widely credited as a key factor behind their global standing, strong research output and ability to attract talent.

Although the proposed Bill does not directly amend the appointment processes or governance structures laid down in the IIT and IIM Acts, the new regulator's overriding scope could lead to 'regulatory creep', gradually constraining the discretion of Boards and Senates that have traditionally underpinned the autonomy of these elite institutions. Even if the Bill envisages only "light-touch" supervision, limited to minimum standards, accreditation and system-wide alignment, this could dilute institutional freedom over time. Uniform standards, however well-intentioned, may not always sit easily with institutions whose strength lies precisely in their ability to set benchmarks rather than follow them. Preserving excellence while extending oversight will require unusually careful calibration.

It is, therefore, reassuring that the Bill has been referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee. This provides an opportunity for legislators to examine these issues threadbare, invite comments from academic leaders and experts and assess whether the right balance has been struck between accountability and autonomy. The committee's recommendations should ideally lead to amendments that safeguard the independence of India's premier institutions, even as the broader system benefits from regulatory consolidation.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



GURBACHAN SINGH

The severity of the problem of very high air quality index (AQI) varies across the country. Parts of the country like the South are better placed or better managed but only in a relative sense. High AQI is a serious problem in India. And, yet, the authorities are not active enough in meaningfully dealing with the issue. Why is this so?

Policymakers are aspiring for high GDP growth, and there is fear that dealing with high AQI and environmental issues can come in the way of boosting growth. Hence, there is near-inaction on the AQI front; there are, however, other reasons also for this.

The fear though, is exaggerated. It is a matter of finding the right solution, which, broadly speaking, involves two aspects. One, dealing with high AQI, especially in the big cities. The other is about meaningfully moving away from the model of continuously expanding big cities. Coming to addressing high AQI, let's focus on the automobile industry as an example; there are other industries and factors that contribute to the problem as well.

In China, the one-time prices of electric vehicles (EVs) are now a little less than those of petrol vehicles, and close to half of the new vehicles produced are EVs. There is a lesson here for India. There should be a big shift to EVs (their indirect contribution to pollution is effectively low). However, the prices of EVs are high in India, and the charging stations are inadequate. All this limits the size of the EV industry, the related economies of scale, and the possible reduction in the prices. But policy measures can help.

Policymakers should meaningfully subsidise EVs, and expand and enable the needed infrastructure. Also, they can simultaneously raise the taxes on petrol/diesel vehicles significantly. This is revenue neutral. It is also about restructuring — not diminishing — the automobile industry in GDP. This should pave the way for lower AQI.

It is true that some of the capacity to manufacture petrol cars can go "waste" with the shift to EVs. While some physical capital can become useless, there can be greater gain in human capital through the reduction in millions of cases of stunted growth of children, who are at present affected by high AQI in their very early years. Their

AQI can be cut without hurting growth

CLEARING THE AIR. Policy push to energise the EV ecosystem and creating new, smaller, well-planned cities should help reduce pollution levels



contribution to GDP at a later stage will be limited if the AQI issue isn't addressed. Delhi alone, for instance, adds about 500 passenger cars every day.

EXPAND SMALLER CITIES
This brings us to the other part of the long-term solution. We have some very large cities, and some with extended regions, like the National Capital Region (NCR). The AQI is high in such places. It is, in several ways, an outcome of the very size of the regions, the large population there, the long commutes, the demolition of small/old buildings, the construction of taller buildings, and the regular expansion and upgrading of general infrastructure. There is a legacy,

The policymakers should meaningfully subsidise EVs, and expand and enable the needed infrastructure

with its implications for AQI and even GDP growth.

High AQI needs to be dealt with in a way that takes care of other important problems as well. There's need for some new urban areas. These can be altogether new cities, or extensions of small cities that are far away from the big ones. It is true that building new urban areas is costly. But this is mainly from the point of cost of construction. In one important way, namely, land it is actually far, far cheaper — and it is by far the major part of the cost of homes, offices, showrooms, schools, colleges and hospitals — in smaller cities. And, the Land Acquisition Act, 2013 has been diluted by many States.

There is scope for using policy to pave the way for building new urban areas. It is about shifting some consumption and production geographically without affecting aggregate GDP growth. The government need not, by and large, build or finance; it simply needs to be an enabler. There can be involvement of

experienced and good real-estate developers who can provide, or advise on providing, an entire ecosystem conducive to habitation in a phased manner in the new urban areas. Gurgaon in the 1980s and 1990s is a case in point.

The suggestion here is for a low-cost solution, which gradually reduces the population (and AQI) burden in big cities. This could, in fact, raise GDP growth.

The AQI in small and new urban areas will anyway be relatively low to begin with. These areas can be planned afresh to take care of clean energy, public transport, general cleanliness, waste disposal, etc. Long commutes, congestion, restructuring, etc., will, therefore, be minimal.

In sum, we don't have to lower economic growth in order to bring down AQI. We just need to develop differently, which we need to do anyway.

The writer is an independent economist. He taught at Ashoka University, ISI (Delhi) and JNU

Why the agri-derivatives market has lost its sheen

The suspension of 7 agri-futures has led to a decline not only in commodity futures turnover, but also in physical delivery

Kushankur Dey

Has the suspension of seven agri-futures since December 2021 eroded the vitality of agri-derivatives? To get some light on this, one needs to examine the performance of agri-derivatives after the suspension of liquid agri-futures.

The SEBI annual reports from 2021-22 to 2024-25 reveal commodity futures turnover declined from ₹72.16 lakh crore in 2021-22 to ₹71.41 lakh crore in 2024-25 — a negative 0.26 per cent CAGR (see Table). The notional turnover in agri-derivatives was ₹1.5 lakh crore in 2024-25, with a 28.5 per cent decline from 2023-24, and the NCDEX reported a decrease in turnover from ₹4.56 lakh crore in 2020-21 to ₹1.35 lakh crore in 2024-25 — with a negative 19.24 per cent CAGR.

MINISCULE SHARE

Commodity options (notional) trade turnover reached ₹5.08 crore in 2024-25 from ₹28.10 lakh crore in 2021-22 with a 106.22 per cent CAGR. However, the NCDEX reported a minuscule share in commodity options turnover, indicating these have not yet gained significant traction. The product-wise share of notional turnover shows that agri-commodities accounted for only 0.3 per cent in 2024-25, down from 0.8 per cent in 2023-24, while energy and bullion had a significant share of the turnover.

Second, among the traded futures, guar gum (2.2 per cent), coriander (2.7 per cent), castor seed (3.8 per cent), guar seed (4.1 per cent), cottonseed

Turnover of commodity derivatives (₹ crore)

	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	CAGR %
MCX					
Futures	67,53,928	60,43,084	49,87,564	70,05,485	0.9
Options	20,27,830	87,37,483	2,26,67,916	4,95,12,692	122.3
BSE					
Futures	4,039	3,433	5	5	-81.2
Options	7,65,036	4,933	31	275	-86.2
NCDEX					
Futures	4,56,693	2,04,920	2,06,102	1,35,621	-26.2
Options	487	1,989	10	12,427	124.8
NSE					
Futures	2,273	14	5,429	250	-42.4
Options	17,472	17,741	1,96,270	13,05,206	194.0
Total					
Futures	72,16,933	62,51,451	51,99,100	71,41,361	-0.3
Options (notional)	28,10,825	87,62,146	2,28,64,227	5,08,30,600	106.2

Source: Analysed from the SEBI Annual Reports, 2021-22 to 2024-25

oilcake, and cottonseed (10.3 per cent) emerged as upward-moving futures contracts. In comparison, turmeric (-22.5 per cent) and jeera (-4.6 per cent) witnessed a decline in futures prices.

The lack of the 'contango' market phenomenon and liquidity in agri-futures can be attributed to the suspension of active contracts — namely soybean, refined soy oil, chana, crude palm oil, and rapeseed-mustard oil complex — which contributed the most to the daily average traded volume and open interest value between 2018-19 and 2019-20.

Third, the proportionate share of total turnover for farmer-producer

organisations fell to 0.2 per cent of total turnover in 2024-25, down from 0.5 per cent in 2023-24.

Additionally, the share of value chain partners and hedgers decreased from 8.1 per cent to 7.3 per cent in the corresponding periods. While the proprietary trades increased 43.7 per cent from 39.3 per cent in the given period, clients' participation in trade declined significantly, from 52.3 per cent in 2019-20 and 55.5 per cent in 2018-19 to less than 50 per cent in 2024-25. The lower participation of clients reduced the breadth and depth of the agri-derivatives market.

Fourth, the physical delivery in agri-

was reported 1.7 lakh tonnes in 2024-25 compared to 2 lakh tonnes in 2023-24, with major deliveries coming from castor seed (56,620 tonnes), cotton seed oilcake (42,610 tonnes), guar seed (30,195 tonnes), and coriander (13,810 tonnes). While these data indicate the convergence of futures and spot prices at the contract's expiry, the reduced delivery volume, implying higher closed-out (squared-off) positions or cash-settled futures contracts, raises concerns for the agri-derivative market depth.

REAL-TIME PRICE INFO

Fifth, in the absence of a liquid or thickly traded agricultural derivatives market, value chain actors have to rely on national spot and international agricultural derivatives markets to inform their investment, production, and trading decisions. In other words, the purpose of (agri) commodity exchanges remains elusive if the market does not provide real-time price information and risk management platform to diverse and discursive actors.

In sum, the government, in consultation with the regulator, the Commodity Derivatives Advisory Committee, and value chain actors, must revisit the agri-derivatives microstructure, including contract specifications, margin requirements, transaction fees, and membership eligibility criteria, and consider revoking the suspension to restore the vitality of agri-futures.

Dey is an Associate Professor, IIM Lucknow. Views are personal

• 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.

Floating loan asymmetry

Floating-rate housing loans are premised on the idea of shared movement with policy rates. Borrowers consent to this structure at inception, accepting automatic increases in EMIs when rates rise. However, when rates fall, the benefit is not transmitted with the same ease: borrowers are required to exercise a fresh option and pay a conversion fee to access lower EMIs. This asymmetry merits reflection. The lender-borrower relationship is not one of equal bargaining power, and disclosure alone may not ensure

substantive fairness. While lenders are entitled to recover legitimate administrative costs, a framework where downside operates automatically while upside is conditional appears tilted. The regulator may consider revisiting whether greater symmetry in rate transmission would better protect borrowers without undermining financial stability.

Gopalaswamy J

Chennai

Trust builds savings

This refers to "Bankers' dilemma"

(December 24). A key reason for weak deposit growth is the lack of clarity among savers about which savings options can protect returns during rising inflation. This has reduced confidence in traditional bank deposits. Banks must rebuild trust by focusing on customer benefits, not profit alone. Simple financial awareness programmes for new investors, incentives for regular savings, and flexible fixed deposit schemes can encourage deposits. Digital tools such as auto-saving features can also support this effort.

Stronger trust will help improve deposits and sustain credit growth. S Balasubramanian Villupuram, TN

New securities code

Apropos the editorial 'Market monitor' (December 24), the proposed Securities Markets Code, 2025 aims to consolidate overlapping laws into a single, clearer framework. This is welcome in principle. Yet, major delays in probing stock market scams — sometimes stretching years — erode investor confidence. Merging laws alone will not suffice. We must strengthen enforcement. SEBI needs more investigators and forensic experts for faster probes. Mandatory timelines for completing investigations in serious cases, say within 18 months, would help. Greater use of technology for surveillance and anonymous whistle-blower channels can deter manipulation early. A robust grievance redressal system, with time-bound resolution at stock exchanges and SEBI, will further build trust.

M Barathi

Bengaluru

Refurbishing RBI data

A panel can be formed to examine this issue

Manas R Das

In a recent speech, Poonam Gupta, RBI Deputy Governor, hailed the central bank as "not just an important source, but at times the only source for comprehensive data..." which has been traditionally true.

Echoing the global recognition of data as "public good," she called for "regularly updating and revising the existing data series as well as constructing new ones" in sync with ongoing economic transformations.

Here are some changes that the RBI can look at to expand its banking sector data base.

Banks, being financial intermediaries and the backbone of the payments system, generate humongous data - high frequency to annual. Banks transmit a lot of data to the RBI (besides other regulators) in various formats ('Returns') including some which are mandatory by various laws.

Nevertheless, the Balance Sheets of banks and 'Notes on Account' ('Notes'), which are prepared or vetted by the RBI-approved auditors, contain considerable quantitative and qualitative data. Over several years, the RBI has been publishing some of these data basically through its annual publication titled 'Statistical Tables Relating To Banks In India (STRBI)', released usually in December.

As STRBI provides time series data for individual Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs) and bank groups in one place, that too with nil cost and high reliability, it is extremely useful for banking research.

Keeping in view (a) that banks finish their Annual General Meetings (AGMs) by September-end, (b) increasing electronification of data transmission and (c) submission of detailed annual accounts to the RBI by banks much before their AGMs, can RBI advance the STRBI publication to October-end?

Alternatively, the RBI may consider releasing STRBI in three parts: first, for the public sector banks, then for the private banks and finally, for the foreign banks in India.

At present, the 'Notes' contains numerous crucial data which is not fully captured in STRBI. These include Liquidity Coverage Ratio, Net Stable Funding Ratio, Transfer to the Depositor Education and Awareness Fund, penalties levied, cross-selling income, deposit insurance coverage and premium paid, and



RESERVE BANK. Revamping data structure GETTY IMAGES

customer complaints.

Some data needs updating, e.g., Unclaimed Deposits (in 'Other Tables' of STRBI) which has topical significance.

Similarly, the ambit of 'Industry-wise Gross Bank Credit of SCBs' necessitates further disaggregation to accommodate new-age industries.

CO-OP BANK DATA

In respect of the Urban Co-operative Banks (UCBs), data presented in 'Primary (Urban) Co-operative Banks Outlook,' which is released in December, lags by one year.

This could be due to the large numbers of UCBs with many not be finalising their annual accounts on time. However, since the RBI is in the course of preparing a Discussion Paper on Licensing Framework for new UCBs, this aspect may also be examined therein.

Banking data immensely supports policy-making in the financial and real sectors. As an 'official' source, the RBI will continue to remain paramount despite emergence of 'alternative' sources.

So the RBI must constitute an internal committee to discuss the expansion and changes in its entire banking database.

This may necessitate cooperation from banks, the data suppliers as well as prominent end-users. Inputs from select institutional and individual researchers on banking may also be invited.

Data is a means to an end; the end is to do practical policy-oriented research by using data for which commercial banks, in particular, should augment their 'banking' (as distinguished from 'economic') research capacity which will help themselves and the country as well.

The writer is a former Assistant General Manager (Economist), SBI. Views expressed are personal



ADITYA SINHA

India's long and uneven experience with spatial industrial policy has left policymakers wary of zoning as a development tool. Special Economic Zones (SEZs), launched under the SEZ Act of 2005, promised export-led industrialisation, foreign investment, and regional transformation.

What they largely delivered instead were enclaves. They are/were islands of activity with weak spillovers, high land under-utilisation, and declining credibility once fiscal incentives eroded.

Against this backdrop, Andhra Pradesh's decision to restructure the State into three large Economic Development Zones — North Coastal (Visakhapatnam), Central Coastal (Amaravati) and Rayalseema (Tirupati) — marks a meaningful departure. The question is not whether this resembles SEZs. It does not. The real question is whether it corrects the structural reasons zones failed in India in the first place.

Those failures can be analytically grouped into three categories — economic design failure, institutional failure, and political-economy failure.

Indian SEZs were economically fragile because they were designed as incentive-driven enclaves, not productivity-driven ecosystems. Their competitiveness relied disproportionately on tax holidays (100 per cent income tax exemption for five years, followed by partial exemptions), duty-free imports, and regulatory exemptions.

Once WTO disciplines on export subsidies tightened and domestic policy introduced sunset clauses, the core value proposition collapsed. Firms exited, and zones hollowed out.

Critically, SEZs were also too small. Most Indian SEZs resemble industrial estates, hundreds or a few thousand hectares at best.

By contrast, successful international zones functioned at city or metropolitan scale, allowing labour markets, supplier networks, housing, logistics, and services to co-evolve.

Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was competitive, not because of tax exemptions alone. It worked because it operated as an integrated urban-industrial system linked to ports, global markets, and dense domestic supply chains.

Andhra Pradesh's zoning model implicitly acknowledges this scale problem. These are not fenced estates but sub-state economic regions, each with a differentiated production logic.

Port-led industry in the North Coastal Zone, agro-processing and logistics in the Central Coastal Zone, and resource-linked renewables and horticulture in Rayalseema.

This matters because agglomeration economies, knowledge spillovers, labour pooling, supplier specialisation, only

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 25, 2005

Govt will address India Inc's concerns over tax burden: PM

The Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, has promised to address, over the next year, the concerns voiced by corporate India over the high direct tax burden.

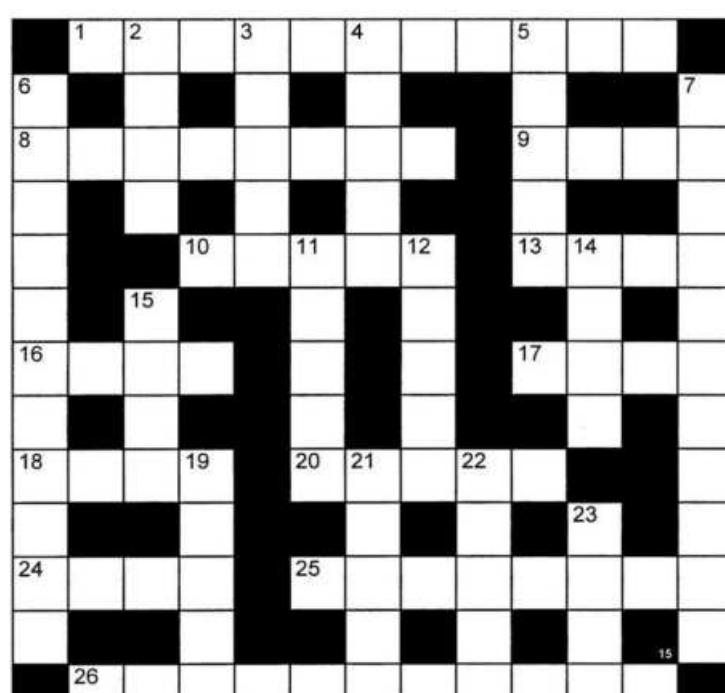
SCI consortium lowest bidder for Petronet LNG deal

The consortium comprising state-owned Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) and three Japanese shipping lines Mitsui O.S.K Lines, NYK Line and K Line is set to win the Rs 3,200 crore deal from Petronet LNG Ltd to haul additional quantities of LNG cargo from Ras Gas in Qatar to its expanded terminal at Dahej in Gujarat.

Have licence to play music

If you are planning to celebrate this festive season at one of the hotels or pubs offering customised packages for musical gala nights, it might just be prudent to check if the owners of the venue have paid up a licence fee to play music. For Phonographic Performance Ltd (PPL), which has 127 member music companies, is planning to crack down on those restaurants that do not pay the fee.

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2853



EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Bed-cover (11)
- 02. Price bookmaker
- 03. Look after (5)
- 04. Bring into the mind (5)
- 05. Plenty (5)
- 06. Dates for rent, interest
- 07. Payments (7-4)
- 08. Current pulling below
- 09. Surface (8)
- 10. Opening in the
- 11. Skin (4)
- 12. Put one off (5)
- 13. The orient (4)
- 14. For all time (4)
- 15. At one time (4)
- 16. Final judgment,
- 17. Death (4)
- 18. Lucid, unfogged (5)
- 19. Show boredom,
- 20. Tiredness (4)
- 21. Washing-place (8)
- 22. Lectern (7-4)
- 23. Let 9. Balsa 10. Mar 11. Unshorn 12. Those 13. Flight decks 17. Burst 18. Maximum 20. Ewe 21. Units 22. Rat 23. Tote 24. Recently
- 25. Colour 2. Notes 3. Melon 5. Hammock 6. Street 7. Battleaxes 9. Brought out 14. Largest 15. Object 16. Smithy 18. Maize 19. Merit

DOWN

- 01. Current that may give one a hitch below the surface (8)
- 02. Price bookmaker offers (4)
- 03. Look after (5)
- 04. Bring into the mind (5)
- 05. Dates for rent, interest
- 06. Payments (7-4)
- 07. Orchestral timpani (11)
- 08. Current that may give one a hitch below the surface (8)
- 09. Closely study what may exude perspiration (4)
- 10. Stop one doing what one has half made up one's mind to do (5)
- 11. Direction to take seat and make the first third (4)
- 12. Hold it, Steve - right? Any time! (4)
- 13. At some time somebody indefinite holds first of ceremonies (4)
- 14. When the way one feels has returned, pronounce judgment (4)
- 15. Chief male character (4)
- 16. Pass one through the bank, it's quite plain (5)
- 17. Move, like a boat, north - what a bore! (4)
- 18. Acquire knowledge (5)
- 19. Food from heaven (5)
- 20. Was painful (5)
- 21. Acquire knowledge (5)
- 22. Chief, governor (4)
- 23. Studying a bit of office furniture like a lectern (7-4)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 01. It is put on bed to be an antidote to suffering, one hears (11)
- 02. Do up Derby and steeplechase front-runners for this price (4)
- 03. Hold baby up in one's runabout (5)
- 04. Stimulate memory of woman about to give the go-ahead (5)
- 05. A bit to try with the top off is more than enough (5)
- 06. Six-hour periods allotted for paying interest? (7-4)
- 07. They may take a beating, but don't get steamed up (11)
- 08. Current that may give one a hitch below the surface (8)
- 09. Closely study what may exude perspiration (4)
- 10. Stop one doing what one has half made up one's mind to do (5)
- 11. Before sol-fa is scaled, it should do one good (5)
- 12. It may excite us to be surrounded by fish-eggs (5)
- 13. Old gossip who addressed Mum as Sis? (4)
- 14. Principal man gives the girl a ring (4)
- 15. Girl taken in by Mother finds the food heavenly (5)
- 16. Before sol-fa is scaled, it should do one good (5)
- 17. It may excite us to be surrounded by fish-eggs (5)
- 18. When the way one feels has returned, pronounce judgment (4)
- 19. Move, like a boat, north - what a bore! (4)
- 20. Acquire knowledge (5)
- 21. Come to hear of pounds to get by working for it (5)
- 22. Studying a bit of office furniture like a lectern (7-4)
- 23. Stud raised by the man at the top (4)

DOWN

fiscal policy, spending on AI data centers and continued household consumption as reasons for the central bank's forecast for faster growth next year. Policymakers are projecting just one interest-rate cut in 2026 after three straight reductions to end this year.

Part of the reason for some officials' hesitation to lower borrowing costs much more is because inflation remains above their 2 per cent target.

Consumer spending — the main growth engine of the economy — advanced at a 3.5 per cent annualised pace. That reflected solid outlays on services, including health care and international travel. Spending on motor vehicles fell. BLOOMBERG



US ECONOMY. Spending spike REUTERS

anticipated Supreme Court ruling may strike down Trump's sweeping global tariffs.

The Federal Reserve's latest projections echo that sentiment, with Chair Jerome Powell citing supportive



AP's recast of SEZ concept holds promise

POLITICAL ECONOMY. Zones became vehicles for land monetisation rather than industrial upgrading. Andhra Pradesh moots a different governance model

emerge beyond a certain spatial and economic threshold.

FRAGMENTED AUTHORITY

The second failure of Indian SEZs was institutional. Despite the rhetoric of "single-window clearance," SEZ developers and units faced fragmented authority across central ministries, state departments, and local agencies.

Approvals were sequential, not parallel. Powers were dispersed. Accountability was diffused. Empirically, this showed up in long gestation periods, repeated deadline extensions, and a striking fact.

By the mid-2010s, less than 40 per cent of notified SEZ land was actually

utilised, with utilisation falling over

time. Land governance compounded the problem. SEZ rules imposed rigid contiguity and minimum-area requirements, even for services-oriented zones where vertical development would have been more efficient. Exit and repurposing were difficult. Vacant land became speculative ballast rather than productive capital.

Andhra Pradesh's proposed architecture directly targets these coordination failures. Each zone will have a dedicated CEO with delegated financial and administrative powers, including land allocation and project

Shenzhen Special Economic Zone was competitive, not because of tax exemptions alone. It worked because it operated as an integrated urban-industrial system

clearances, supported by zonal committees of regional ministers and legislators. A Chief Minister-chairing state steering committee provides vertical integration.

It is an attempt to collapse fragmented authority into a single decision locus per zone, something SEZs conspicuously lacked. If implemented credibly, it could reduce transaction costs, accelerate project timelines, and, crucially, make land a flexible input rather than a sunk political asset.

Equally important is policy credibility. Indian SEZs suffered from repeated rule changes, tax withdrawals (MAT, DDT), shifting interpretations of domestic tariff area sales, and inconsistencies between trade, tax, and industrial policies. Andhra Pradesh's collaboration with NITI Aayog and the Government of Singapore on zone-specific vision plans functions as a non-fiscal commitment device.

Perhaps the deepest failure of Indian SEZs was political-economic. Zones became vehicles for land monetisation rather than industrial upgrading. Developers internalised land rents, while the costs of infrastructure and adjustment were socialised. Once land was acquired and incentives captured, there was little pressure to generate spillovers into surrounding regions.

This is why empirical studies consistently find weak or non-existent SEZ spillovers in India, in contrast to East Asian cases where local governments competed on performance and were rewarded for growth outcomes.

AP MODEL

Andhra Pradesh's model alters this incentive structure in two ways. First,

zones are embedded within the State's ordinary political geography, not carved out as exceptional jurisdictions. Under-performance cannot be hidden behind a legal fence. Second, zonal outcomes become politically attributable to identifiable authorities: zonal CEOs, regional ministers, and ultimately the Chief Minister.

This raises the reputational and political cost of failure. It does not eliminate rent-seeking risks, but it changes the calculus, i.e., extracting rents without delivering growth becomes electorally and administratively visible.

India has not failed to replicate Shenzhen because it lacks ambition or capital. It has failed because it attempted to copy the instrument (zones) without replicating the underlying governance logic: scale, administrative authority, credible commitment, and performance-linked accountability.

Andhra Pradesh's experiment is not a Shenzhen replica. It cannot reproduce China's cadre promotion system or its unitary state capacity. What it does test, however, is whether India can approximate the functional equivalents of those mechanisms within a democratic, federal system.

If this works, then Andhra Pradesh may demonstrate that zoning can work without fiscal exceptionalism. If not, it will confirm that India's binding constraint lies deeper, in land markets, bureaucratic incentives, and political risk tolerance.

Either way, this is a rare case where zoning is being used not as a tax instrument, but as a governance experiment. That alone makes it worth watching closely.

Sinha writes on macroeconomic and geopolitical issues

US economy expands at fastest pace in years

Molly Smith

The US economy expanded in the third quarter at the fastest pace in two years, bolstered by resilient consumer and business spending and calmer trade policies.

Inflation-adjusted gross domestic product, which measures the value of goods and services produced in the US, increased at a 4.3 per cent annualized pace, a Bureau of Economic Analysis report showed Tuesday. That was higher than all but one estimate in a Bloomberg survey and followed 3.8 per cent growth in the prior period.

The BEA was originally due to publish an advance estimate of GDP on

October 30 but the report was cancelled due to the government shutdown. The agency typically releases three estimates of quarterly growth — fine-tuning its projections as more data comes in — but it will only release two for the period leading up to the longest shutdown on record.

The delayed report card shows the economy maintained momentum through the middle of the year as consumers powered ahead and the most punitive of President Donald Trump's tariffs were rolled back. While the shutdown is expected to weigh on fourth-quarter growth, economists expect a modest rebound in 2026 when households receive tax refunds and an

anticipated Supreme Court ruling may strike down Trump's sweeping global tariffs.

The Federal Reserve's latest projections echo that sentiment, with Chair Jerome Powell citing supportive

- 10. Stop one doing what one has half made up one's mind to do (5)
- 11. Before sol

OPINION

When market infrastructure institutions become the state

The concluding part of a three-part series on the Securities Markets Code turns the spotlight on MIIs, which are no longer operating on the margins of the state. Nor are they quasi-private regulators straddling public and private law



M Sahoo &
V Anantha Nageswaran

The Securities Markets Code, 2025 (Code), quietly reconfigures India's regulatory state. For the first time, a parliamentary statute defines market infrastructure institutions (MIIs) to mean stock exchanges, clearing corporations, depositories, and other notified entities, and vests them with powers that are unmistakably public in character. What had earlier evolved through regulation, practice, and sporadic judicial recognition is now placed on a clear statutory footing. MIIs are no longer merely regulated market utilities; they are statutorily enabled organs of governance.

In their seminal work on regulatory delegation, political scientists Dietmar Braun and Fabrizio Gilardi describe the modern regulatory state as a hierarchy of principals and agents, authority flowing from the people to the legislature, to the executive, to specialised regulators, and further to subordinate bodies. By statutorily empowering MIIs to exercise regulatory, supervisory, and adjudicatory functions, the Code formalises the sixth layer in the chain, as statutory actors, exercising delegated state authority within a legally bounded framework.

This is reflected most starkly in the Code's provision enabling the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) to delegate to MIIs powers relating to the registration of intermediaries and investors. In exercising such delegated authority, MIIs must follow due process identical to Sebi's, adhering to fairness, confidentiality, and natural justice, including reasoned orders and the right of hearing. MIIs may also be entrusted with regulating classes of market participants. These are not auxiliary tasks; they are core regulatory functions.

The Code reinforces this transformation by insisting that MIIs be registered, not merely recognised. Recognition implies accreditation; registration confers statutory existence. An MII comes into being only upon registration in the interest of trade and in public interest, and remains subject to statutory conditions relating to governance, supervision, transparency, and even

supersession. This decisively distinguishes MIIs from intermediaries, who serve clients, and from self-regulatory organisations, which represent sectional interests. MIIs do neither: They operate the market itself. They are not private bodies exercising discretion by regulatory tolerance; they are formal components of the state's market governance architecture.

Equally significant is the reconfiguration of membership. While exchanges and clearing corporations have long functioned through members, depositories are, for the first time, statutorily required to have members, namely, depository participants, who were previously treated as agents. Membership under the Code



is no longer just a functional right to access infrastructure. Members may hold shares in the MII and participate in institutional decision-making. Coupled with mandatory dispersed shareholding norms and demutualisation, this elevates members from users of infrastructure to stakeholders in governance, strengthening internal accountability while mitigating the risk of dominance by any single interest.

The public character of MIIs is reinforced through stringent governance requirements. Members of governing boards must meet eligibility and fit-and-proper criteria, and boards must include independent directors. The governing board is expected to act not as a representative forum of sectional interests, but as a fiduciary steward of the market's integrity. Importantly, the Code imposes confidentiality obligations on MIIs and their officers with respect to regulatory data and commercially sensitive information, underscoring their quasi-sovereign role in handling market-critical information.

MIIs are empowered to make bylaws governing their operations, the conduct of members, and even market participants. These bylaws are not private rules. They require public consultation, prior approval by Sebi, publication, and have to be laid before Parliament. The process closely mirrors Sebi's own regulation-making powers. Even Sebi may make or amend the bylaws in specified circumstances. The bylaws thus assume the character of subordinate legislation exercised within a public-law framework. They must promote the objectives of the Code, ensure non-discriminatory access, prevent market abuse, foster transparency, and ensure interoperability across MIIs.

MIIs also perform executive functions. They supervise members, enforce compliance, manage risk, and administer market operations. They have mechanisms to monitor and identify contraventions of the provisions of the Code, rules and regulations, or bylaws. When Sebi delegates registration or related regulatory tasks, MIIs act as the frontline regulators of securities regulation.

The Code vests MIIs with quasi-judicial powers. Contraventions of bylaws are addressed through structured proceedings grounded in natural justice, culminating in reasoned orders that may impose penalties, suspend or expel members, annul transactions, or direct payment of compensation. Sebi has concurrent enforcement powers for non-com-

pliance with MII bylaws. A person aggrieved by an order or decision of an MII may prefer an appeal to the Securities Appellate Tribunal, and civil courts are barred from exercising jurisdiction over matters entrusted to MIIs.

Operational independence is integral to the MII framework. While MIIs remain subject to Sebi's oversight, their day-to-day regulatory, supervisory, and enforcement functions are insulated from ad hoc interference from any authority. The autonomy within a clearly defined statutory framework mirrors the design of modern regulators.

With power comes accountability. The Code subjects MIIs to a transparency and accountability regime: Publication of bylaws and decisions, submission of annual reports, fit-and-proper requirements for directors, and the ultimate sanction of supersession in defined circumstances. Supersession is a sovereign remedy, and its availability leaves no doubt that MIIs are treated as public institutions exercising delegated state power.

Taken together, these provisions complete a long arc of regulatory evolution. MIIs are no longer market utilities operating on the margins of the state. Nor are they quasi-private regulators straddling public and private law. They are statutory institutions exercising quasi-legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial powers within a constitutionally recognisable framework. The Code takes regulatory norms that had evolved piecemeal through circulars, bylaws, regulations, and earlier statutes, confers upon them an explicit state character, and elevates them to a higher statutory pedestal.

This recognition carries consequences. Institutions entrusted with state functions must meet state standards of governance, independence, transparency, and accountability, not as a matter of regulatory grace, but as a matter of constitutional discipline. The Code supplies much of this architecture, but its success will rely on implementation and institutional self-understanding. MIIs must now see themselves not merely as service providers to the market or platforms for commercial activity, but as public institutions exercising delegated sovereign authority in trust for investors and the market as a whole. Courts, regulators, and policymakers, in turn, must hold them to that standard. If this culture shift accompanies the shift in law, the Code will have achieved more than regulatory reform; it will have constitutionalised the infrastructure of India's securities markets.

M Sahoo is a former whole-time member of Sebi. V Anantha Nageswaran is chief economic advisor, Government of India. The views are personal

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FDC

FDC LIMITED

Corporate Identification Number (CIN): L24239MH1940PLC003176
Registered Office: B-8, MIDC Industrial Estate, Waluj - 431136,
District - Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, Maharashtra, India. Tel: 0240-2554407
Email: investors@fdclimited.com Website: www.fdclimited.com

NOTICE OF POSTAL BALLOT AND REMOTE E-VOTING INFORMATION

NOTICE is hereby given that pursuant to the provisions of Section 108 and 110 of the Companies Act, 2013 ("the Act"), and other applicable provisions of the Act read with Rule 20 and 22 of the Companies (Management and Administration) Rules, 2014 ("the Rules"), Regulation 44 of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Listing Obligations and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2015 ("SEBI Listing Regulations"), Secretarial Standard on General Meetings ("SS-2") issued by the Institute of Company Secretaries of India and other applicable laws, rules and regulations (including any statutory modifications), clarification(s), substitution(s) or re-enactments(s) thereof for the time being in force), guidelines prescribed by the Ministry of Corporate Affairs ("MCA"), Government of India, for conducting Postal Ballot process through remote electronic voting ("Remote e-voting") and other applicable provisions of the Act, Rules, Circulars and Notifications issued thereunder (including any statutory modifications or re-enactment thereof for the time being in force and as amended from time to time), approval of the Members of FDC Limited ("the Company") is sought on the Special Resolution to be passed for shifting of the Registered office from "B-8, M.I.D.C. Industrial Area, Waluj - 431 130, Chhatrapati Sambhaji Nagar, Maharashtra, India" to "FDC House, C-11 & 12, Dala Industrial Estate, Oshiwara Village, Off New Link Road, Andheri - West, Mumbai - 400053 Maharashtra, India" by way of Postal Ballot through remote e-voting. The instructions regarding Remote e-voting and other relevant information are provided in the notes to the Notice.

In accordance with MCA Circulars the Notice of Postal Ballot along with Explanatory Statement ("Postal Ballot Notice") has been sent via electronic mode only, on Wednesday, December 24, 2025, to all those Members whose names appear in the Register of Members/ list of Beneficial Owners as on Friday, December 19, 2025 ("Cut Off Date") and whose e-mail address are registered with the Depositories / their depository participant / the Company's Registrar and Share Transfer Agents of the Company, MUFG Intime India Private Limited, (formerly known as Link Intime India Private Limited). Further, physical copy of the Postal Ballot is not being sent to members. The members are requested to provide their assent or dissent through Remote e-voting only.

The Postal Ballot Notice can also be accessed on the website of the company at www.fdclimited.com Website of the stock Exchanges i.e. BSE Limited ("BSE") at www.bseindia.com and the National Stock Exchange of India Limited ("NSE") at www.nseindia.com and on the website of National Securities Depository Limited ("NSDL") at www.evoting.nsdl.com.

The Company has engaged the service of NSDL for providing e-voting facility. The members can vote only through the Remote E-voting process.

The members may refer to the detailed Procedure and instruction for Remote e-voting provided as part of Postal Ballot Notice. The e-voting period is as follows:

Commencement of Remote E-voting	Monday, December 29, 2025 from 09:00 A.M. (IST)
Conclusion of Remote E-voting	Tuesday, January 27, 2026 at 05:00 P.M. (IST)

The members are requested to note that Remote e-voting shall not be allowed beyond 5:00 p.m. (IST) on Tuesday, January 27, 2026 and the facility shall be disabled by NSDL thereafter. Once the vote on a Resolution is cast by member, the member shall not be able to change it subsequently.

The members whose names appear in the Register of Members / List of Beneficial Owners as on the cut-off date i.e. on Friday, December 19, 2025 shall only be considered eligible to cast their votes to the proposed resolution by Postal Ballot. The voting rights of the Members shall be in proportion to their share of the paid-up equity share capital of the Company as on the cut-off date i.e. on Friday, December 19, 2025. A person who is not a member of the company as on cut-off date i.e. on Friday, December 19, 2025 should treat the postal ballot notice for information purpose only.

The members who have not yet registered their email addresses are requested to register the same in respect of shares held in demat mode with their DPs and in respect of shares held in physical mode, by writing to M/S MUFG Intime India Private Limited (Formerly known as M/S Link Intime India Private Limited) at C-101, Embassy 247, L.B.S. Marg, Vikhroli (West), Mumbai - 400 083 or email at rmt.helpdesk@in.mmps.mufg.com

Instruction on the process of Remote e-voting, including the manner in which members holding shares in physical mode or who have not registered their email address are provided as part of the Postal Ballot Notice.

The Board of Directors of the Company by resolution dated December 19, 2025 has appointed Mr. Sanjay Dholakia, (Membership No. 2655 & C.P. No. 1798), Proprietor - M/S. Sanjay Dholakia & Associates, Practicing Company Secretaries as the Scrutinizer in accordance with the provisions of the Act and the Rules for conducting the Postal Ballot process in a fair and transparent manner.

The Scrutinizer will submit his report to the Chairperson or any other person authorised by him, after the completion of scrutiny and the result of the voting by Postal Ballot through the Remote e-voting process will be announced by the chairperson or any other person authorised by him, on or before Tuesday, January 29, 2026 and will also be displayed on the Website of the Company at www.fdclimited.com and e-voting Website of NSDL i.e. at www.evoting.nsdl.com besides being communicated to stock Exchanges.

In case the Members have any queries or issues regarding Remote e-voting, they may refer the Frequently Asked Questions ("FAQs") and Remote e-voting manual available at www.evoting.nsdl.com or call on the toll-free number: 022 - 4886 7000 or send a request at evoting@nsdl.com to get your grievances on e-voting addressed.

By Order of Board of Directors,
For FDC Limited

Sd/-
Varsharani Katre
Company Secretary & Legal Head

Place: Mumbai
Date: December 24, 2025



(Please scan this QR code to view the draft prospectus)



AUREATE
TRADDE

AUREATE TRADDE LIMITED
(formerly known as Aureate Tradde Private Limited)
CIN: U52609MH2018PLC312471

THIS IS A PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT FOR INFORMATION PURPOSES ONLY AND IS NOT A PROSPECTUS ANNOUNCEMENT AND DOES NOT CONSTITUTE AN INVITATION OR OFFER TO ACQUIRE, PURCHASE OR SUBSCRIBE TO SECURITIES, NOT FOR RELEASE, PUBLICATION OR DISTRIBUTION DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY OUTSIDE INDIA. THERE WILL BE NO PUBLIC OFFERING OF EQUITY SHARES IN THE UNITED STATES. INITIAL PUBLIC OFFERING OF EQUITY SHARES ON THE SME PLATFORM OF BSE LIMITED ("BSE SME")

Our Company was originally incorporated as a Private Limited Company under the name of "MM9 Polytride Private Limited" under the provisions of the Companies Act, 2013 vide fresh Certificate of Incorporation issued by Central Registration Centre dated on August 03, 2019. Subsequently, the name of our Company was changed to "Aureate Tradde Private Limited" pursuant to the resolution passed by the shareholders at Extra-Ordinary General Meeting held on June 05, 2023 vide fresh Certificate of Incorporation issued by RoC Mumbai dated July 14, 2023. Further, pursuant to the resolution passed by the shareholders at Extra-Ordinary General Meeting held on February 10, 2025, the Company was converted into a Public Limited Company, and its name was changed from "Aureate Tradde Private Limited" to "Aureate Tradde Limited" vide a fresh Certificate of Incorporation consequent to the conversion was issued by the Central Processing Centre dated April 22, 2025. The Corporate Identification Number (CIN) of our Company is U52609MH2018PLC312471. For details of incorporation, change of registered office of our Company, please refer to the section title "History and Corporate Structure" on page no. 166 of this Draft Prospectus

Registered Office: 404, Floor 4, Plot No. 208, Regent Chambers, Jamnalal Bajaj Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai City, Maharashtra- 400021

Telephone: +91-7208027910; Website: www.aureatetradde.in E-mail: compliance@aureatetradde.in

Contact Person: Ms. Sakshi Sareen, Company Secretary and Compliance Officer

OUR PROMOTER: MRS. KALASH KEVIN SHAH AND MR. PUNIT DEVENDRABHAI SHAH

DETAILS OF THE ISSUE

INITIAL PUBLIC ISSUE OF UPTO 38,98,000 EQUITY SHARES OF FACE VALUE OF ₹10/- EACH OF AUREATE TRADDE LIMITED ("ATL" OR THE "COMPANY" OR THE "ISSUER") FOR CASH AT A PRICE OF ₹ [] PER EQUITY SHARE INCLUDING A SHARE PREMIUM OF ₹ [] PER EQUITY SHARE (THE "ISSUE PRICE") AGGREGATING TO ₹ [] LAKHS ("THE ISSUE"), COMPRISING OF FRESH ISSUE OF 38,98,000 EQUITY SHARES AGGREGATING TO ₹ [] LAKHS (THE "FRESH ISSUE") AGGREGATING TO ₹ [] LAKHS, OUT OF WHICH UPTO 1,96,000 EQUITY SHARES OF FACE VALUE OF ₹10/- EACH FOR CASH AT A PRICE OF ₹ [] PER EQUITY SHARE INCLUDING A SHARE PREMIUM OF ₹ [] PER EQUITY SHARE AGGREGATING TO ₹ [] LAKHS WILL BE RESERVED FOR SUBSCRIPTION BY MARKET MAKER TO THE ISSUE (THE "MARKET MAKER RESERVATION PORTION"). THE PUBLIC ISSUE LESS THE MARKET MAKER RESERVATION PORTION i.e. NET ISSUE OF 37,02,000 EQUITY SHARES OF FACE VALUE OF ₹10/- EACH AT A ISSUE PRICE OF ₹ [] PER EQUITY SHARE INCLUDING A SHARE PREMIUM OF ₹ [] PER EQUITY SHARE AGGREGATING TO ₹ [] LAKHS IS HEREIN AFTER REFERRED TO AS THE "NET ISSUE". THE PUBLIC ISSUE AND THE NET ISSUE WILL CONSTITUTE 30.02 % AND 28.51 % RESPECTIVELY OF THE POST ISSUE PAID UP EQUITY SHARE CAPITAL OF OUR COMPANY. THE FACE VALUE OF OUR EQUITY SHARES IS ₹ 10/- EACH. PLEASE REFER TO SECTION TITLED "TERMS OF THE ISSUE" ON PAGE NO. 234 OF THIS DRAFT PROSPECTUS.

In terms of Rule 19(2)(b)(i) of the SCR, this issue is being made for at least 25% of the post-issue paid-up Equity Share capital of our Company. This issue is being made through Fixed Price process in accordance and compliance with Regulation 229(2) of Chapter IX and other applicable provisions of SEBI ICDR Regulations, wherein a minimum 50% of the Net Issue is allocated for Individual Investors and the balance shall be offered to individual investors who applies for minimum application size and other investors including body corporates or institutions. Provided that the unsubscribed portion in either categories may be allocated to applicants in the other category. For further details please refer the section titled "Issue Structure" beginning on page no. 243 of this Draft Prospectus.

In terms of the SEBI Circular No. CIR/CFD/POLICYCELL/11/2015, dated November 10, 2015 and the all potential investors shall participate in the issue only through an Application Supported by Blocked Amount ("ASBA") process providing details about the bank account which will be blocked by the Self-Certified Syndicate Banks ("SCSBs") for the same. Further pursuant to SEBI circular bearing no. SEBI/HO/CFD/DIL2/CIR/P/2019/76 dated June 28, 2019, for implementation of Phased II for UPI facility, which is effective from July 01, 2019, all potential Bidders (except Anchor Investors) are required to mandatorily utilize the Application Supported by Blocked Amount ("ASBA") process providing details of their respective ASBA accounts or UPI ID (in case of II), in which the corresponding Application Amounts will be blocked by the SCSBs or under the UPI Mechanism, as applicable. For details, please refer chapter titled "Issue Procedure" beginning on Page no. 246 of this Draft Prospectus. A copy of the Prospectus will be filed with the Registrar of Companies as required under Section 26 and Section 28 of the Companies Act, 2013.

THE ISSUE PRICE IS ₹ [] TIMES OF THE FACE VALUE OF EQUITY SHARES

This public announcement is being made in compliance with the provisions of Regulation 247(2) of the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Issue of Capital and Disclosure Requirements) Regulations, 2018 ("SEBI ICDR Regulations") to inform the public that our Company is proposing, subject to applicable statutory and regulatory requirements, receipt of requisite approvals, market conditions and other considerations, to undertake initial public offering of its Equity Shares pursuant to the Issue and has filed the Draft Prospectus dated December 23, 2025 which has been filed with the SME Platform of BSE Limited ("BSE SME" or "BSE"). In relation to above, the Draft Prospectus filed with BSE shall be made available to the public for comments, if any, for a period of at least 21 days, from the date mentioned below by hosting it on the respective websites of the Stock Exchange i.e., BSE at www.bseindia.com, website of the Company at www.aureatetradde.in and the website of the Lead Manager to the issue at www.corporatemakers.in. Our Company hereby invites the members of the public to give comments on the Draft Prospectus filed with BSE with respect to disclosures made in the Draft Prospectus. The members of the public are requested to send a copy of their comments to BSE and/or to the Company Secretary and Compliance Officer i.e. compliance@aureatetradde.in of our Company and/or the Lead Manager of the issue at their respective addresses mentioned herein below in relation to the issue on or before 5:00 pm. on the 21st day i.e. 21 days from the date of filing of Issue Document with SME Platform of BSE Limited ("BSE SME").

OUR VIEW



Isro should keep ground talent strapped in nicely

India's space agency has shown its skill with heavy-duty satellite launches. Skillset retention, a must for our strategic autonomy, may be its next big challenge as private poachers emerge

Kudos to Indian Space Research Organisation (Isro) on its launch of a satellite weighing more than six tonnes. Isro used its most capable launch vehicle, GSLV Mark 3, now renamed Launch Vehicle Mark 3, for the task. It was a telecom orbiter, designed to facilitate connectivity, for an American firm taken on as a client. Such commercial launches are just one aspect of India's space success driven by a government-funded programme run by Isro that has scientific and strategic aims as well. Its placing of such a heavy satellite in low earth orbit (LEO) affirms Isro's global role as a low-cost competitor for high-end services. Competition within the country, however, is set to multiply. In 2020, India opened its space sector to private investment. Since then, some 400 domestic startups have come up for assorted space activities, ranging from rockets and satellites to space propulsion systems and aides for navigation. As this could catapult the market ahead, it is welcome. Yet, we can also expect startups to start poaching talent from Isro, with engineers and scientists who have done pioneering work as prime targets. Without an innovative talent retention policy, our space agency risks losing valuable human resources.

One response could be to treat talent development as a key part of our public space programme. We could look at it as a positive externality created by the state to foster the rise of a thriving market in India for space services. From this perspective, there is no particular need to retain trained talent at Isro. Rather, it could hire young engineers in droves to train for the private sector's eventual benefit on the logic that the latter's emergence will serve the country well through competitive efficiency.

This would be fine for junior-level talent. But Isro needs expertise and leadership for itself. To secure itself on this front, it must revamp its remuneration structure. Right now, pay scales for Isro scientists are mapped to civil-service salaries, with two classes paid higher than the Union cabinet secretary. Still, their compensation is puny compared to what stock options awarded by businesses to star performers could work out to. Since such employees do not wield power or shape policy that can transform millions of lives, factors that remunerate our civil-service officers beyond their pay packets, they may well be open to moving jobs. Stories of startup founders, funders and key employees encashing their shares through initial public offerings to get fabulously rich would not be lost on our space scientists, even if their focus is mostly not on this planet.

Isro is both a research and development organization seeking to advance space science and technology. At the same time, its satellite launch business is a commercial venture that faces rising competition, even as Elon Musk's StarLink satellites in LEO evoke both imitation and hostility; after all, they have given Ukraine's soldiers a tactical advantage in battle that Russia seems keen to wipe out by developing anti-satellite tech. Even our orbiters need to devise protection: apart from monitors, defensive gear and threat-evasive manoeuvrability, we need a new pact among space powers against all forms of space warfare. Faced with new challenges, our space agency must do its utmost to keep its top talent in place. Given its critical relevance to India's strategic autonomy, nobody can grudge bumped-up pay scales for vital roles at Isro. The same logic, of course, applies to public-sector defence enterprises as well.

VIKRAM KOPPIKAR



is an independent privacy lawyer.

When Henry Ford was asked what colour options his pathbreaking Model T would come in, he famously replied, 'Any colour, so long as it's black.' For years, Big Tech in India operated on much the same philosophy. Services were 'free,' but consumers paid with their personal data with little room to ask what would be done with it. Sensitive data taken from India would end up in America.

That era is being brought to an end. Not only does India have a Digital Personal Data Protection law whose rules are scheduled to kick in, the National Company Law Appellate Tribunal's (NCLAT) recent ruling on Meta and WhatsApp makes it clear that Big Tech can no longer hide behind complex privacy policies to collect data that exceeds what is 'necessary' to provide services. The NCLAT's December 2025 clarification has hammered this home, ensuring that opt-out choices and detailed transparency must apply to the use of such data for all non-WhatsApp purposes, advertising included.

By affirming that privacy can be a market-competition concern if a major platform's users are deprived of choice on sharing data, the tribunal has relieved Big Tech of a long-running illusion: that user consent equates to *carte blanche* for data extraction.

This case began in 2021, when WhatsApp users in India were given an ultimatum: to accept new privacy terms that required data sharing with Meta's other platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, or lose access to the app. It was a classic 'take-it-or-leave-it' proposition. Europeans facing a similar Hobson's choice were shielded by the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), so WhatsApp was forced to provide them with options to rectify, erase or object to parting with such data processing rights. But Indian users were denied the same when WhatsApp rolled out its revised terms.

Enter the Competition Commission of India (CCI), which launched a rare *suo motu* probe. The agency argued that coercive data-sharing was not just a privacy breach, but an abuse of dominance under the Competition Act of 2002. Meta fought back aggressively, claiming that the CCI had no business getting into privacy territory. The courts disagreed, ruling that competition law could indeed examine data practices

that distort markets. The ruling effectively allowed India's antitrust agency to investigate the 'competitive harm' of Meta's data practices even if it overlapped with privacy concerns. In late 2024, the CCI levied a ₹213 crore penalty on Meta and ordered a five-year freeze on cross-platform data sharing. On appeal, the NCLAT upheld the penalty, but replaced the freeze with a mandatory opt-out mechanism that granted Indian users the right to refuse data sharing without losing access to the platform.

A comparison with Europe's experience is instructive. When WhatsApp rolled out its controversial policy there, the GDPR was already in force. European users thus had enforceable rights—to rectify, erase or object to data sharing—that Indians lacked. Earlier, Germany's Federal Cartel Office had drawn upon the GDPR in its 2019 case against Facebook, concluding that data exploitation by a dominant platform can constitute anti-competitive behaviour. India had no such luxury, since the

country's own data protection framework was still in gestation. That vacuum led the CCI to improvise, treating excessive data extraction as an 'unfair condition' under competition law—a legal first for India.

The implications are profound. By affirming the CCI's penalty, the NCLAT has redefined privacy as a 'non-price' dimension of competition. In a digital economy where users exchange data instead of currency, a loss of privacy is effectively a decline in service quality.

This means that Big Tech can no longer hide behind sprawling privacy policies written in opaque legalese that few platform users can decipher. The NCLAT's subsequent clarification this month made it explicit: companies must provide opt-out options and transparency across all non-essential uses, which includes the use of data for advertising purposes.

Come 2026, India's soon-to-be-operational Data Protection Authority (DPA)

under the 2023 personal data protection law will inherit the privacy mantle from courts and other regulators. The success of this ecosystem will depend on how smoothly the DPA and CCI coordinate their oversight. The two must function less as rival regulators and more as a relay team. The DPA must ensure that companies acquire valid consent from people whose data it is, as also its lawful processing, while the CCI should monitor digital spaces to check if data dominance is turning into market distortion.

A cooperative model exists in the UK's Digital Regulation Cooperation Forum, which we could learn from. Without it, India risks a patchwork of enforcement where privacy rights and competition remedies trip over each other.

The end of data surrender: Henry Ford's assembly line may have revolutionized automobile making, but his 'one colour fits all' dictum soon collided with consumer choice. Likewise, Big Tech's 'trade your data or lose access' approach has hit its limit. The NCLAT verdict restores the power balance. Even before India's DPA takes its full shape, users have been awarded a real choice in how their information is shared. In a country where personal data has long been treated as a down-payment for connectivity, this shift is nothing short of revolutionary.

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE

A life of consequence isn't hard to lead: Do good and love truly

Status, time or place need not constrain us from leading meaningful lives and making a difference



ANURAG BEHAR

is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

tect your own? Fated to fail, he still tried. But then he could see himself as a speck in the storm of history and laugh at the speck's audacity to try changing its course.

He was equally amused by the memory of smoking 60 *bidis* each of those 14 days as he waited with other members of the delegation for an audience with Independent India's first home minister. My Dada was amused by most things. He was a chain smoker of *bidis*—till one day in 1950. That day, he had asked my father, then an 11-year-old boy, to buy him some *bidis*. My father returned, holding the *bidis* between two sticks. Dada asked him why he was holding them between sticks. *"Bidis are dirty,"* his son replied. "Ah, so you feel so," he said. "Okay, get me a handful of peppermint," he told his son. With peppermints in his hand, he threw away the *bidis*, popping one into his mouth whenever he had the urge to smoke. He never touched a *bidi* again, nor tobacco in any other form, and that was that.

In 1977, a consequential year for many reasons, he came to stay with us in Delhi during the vacation period of the court in Sarangarh where he practised as a lawyer. We lived in multi-storeyed sticks in Moti Bagh. Every morning, he would have lunch at 10am and go and sit at the Moti Bagh traffic signal under a tree on the pavement. I was 9 years old then and went with him a couple of times, but ran back home bored. What was he doing there for two hours everyday, just sitting and watching the traffic and pedestrians and vendors? As I grew older, it dawned on me that what I saw as traffic, he had the sight to see as the ebb and flow of life.

He failed Class 7 and dropped out of school. He was not doing much in life in the early 1930s, when a petty criminal asked him if he would argue his case in court. "But I am not a lawyer," my Dada said. "And I don't have any money," the alleged chicken-thief said. So, my Dada went to court and argued. He won the case. By the early 1940s, he became the

go-to lawyer in the court of Sarangarh. His gift of penetrating logic was intertwined with deep scholarship of the law. He was an autodidact, teaching himself law and Indian philosophy. It must have been his lawyerly abilities that prompted the king to send him to argue with that other lawyer—Sardar Patel.

Clients would decide what they could pay—that was his professional principle. So, he was always flooded with cases of the poor and forever short on money. In the early 1950s, the Madhya Pradesh government gave him a special licence to practise law, despite his having no law degree. It was a mere formality to acknowledge what was going on anyhow, but it was necessary as newly independent India was setting up its systems. He practised law till he died at the age of 95. In his last two decades, the court of Sarangarh would rise when my Dada, a lawyer, entered.

Together we would be walking side-by-side down the slope of Char Imli in Bhopal, and he would suddenly swivel his slightly built frame to place himself right in front of me. He felt that the abstruse difference between Sankara's and Madhava's philosophy that he was trying to explain could not be done without looking me in the eye; the eyes of an 11-year-old. But that is the way he treated me—as his equal. That is how he treated everyone—from Panchoo the *dhaba* cook and Ibrahim the mechanic to the beggar at a railway station. He dealt directly with each human—not their caste, creed, age, gender or status.

He wrote a postcard everyday from the early 1970s till the mid-1990s, when intercity calling became affordable and his house got a phone. Usually with just a single handwritten line, those yellow cards would arrive unfailingly in the mail. Everyday for 25 years.

I, an obsessive hoarder of memories, have not a single of those postcards. But his gaze has etched this into me—no time, place or status can stop us from leading a consequential life, so long as we try to do good and love truly.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Every successful launch is the outcome of thousands of small decisions taken right.

S. SOMANATH

THEIR VIEW

WhatsApp: Antitrust oversight led to a win for privacy

VIKRAM KOPPIKAR



is an independent privacy lawyer.

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This means that Big Tech can no longer hide behind sprawling privacy policies written in opaque legalese that few platform users can decipher. The NCLAT's subsequent clarification this month made it explicit: companies must provide opt-out options and transparency across all non-essential uses, which includes the use of data for advertising purposes.

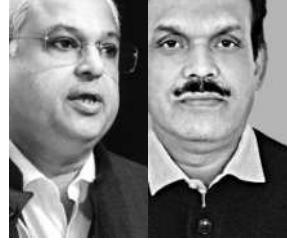
Come 2026, India's soon-to-be-operational Data Protection Authority (DPA)



MY VIEW | STAT-CRAFT

Let's map India better: The case for a household income survey

We can't afford data blindspots and need a system that's both credible and enduring to track what households actually earn

**SAURABH GARG & RAJESH SHUKLA**

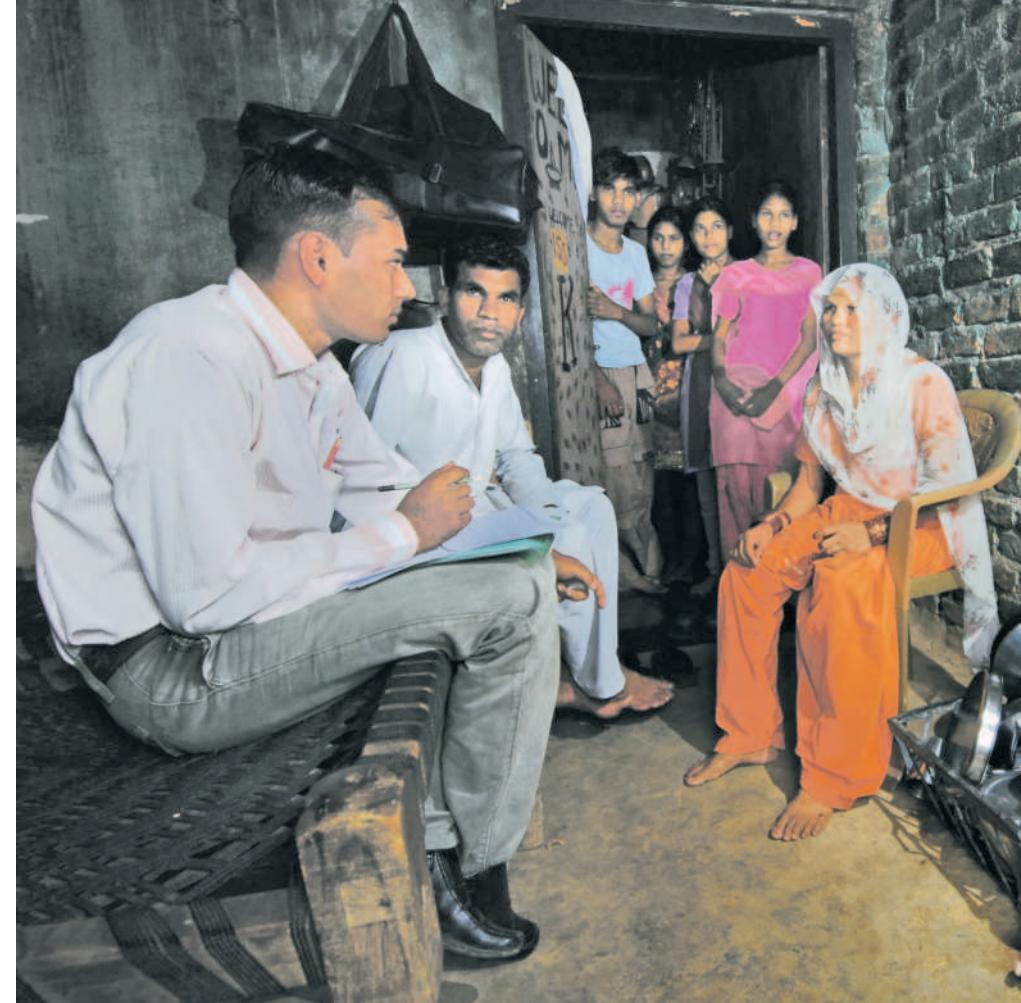
are, respectively, secretary, ministry of statistics and programme implementation; and managing director and CEO, PRICE.

For decades, India has relied on its household consumption expenditure as the primary measure of welfare, poverty and inequality. While it is still important, it could be supplemented with new approaches that capture certain aspects of a rapidly transforming economy driven by technology and services in which households may have increasingly diversified sources of income. Accurate, disaggregated and timely information on household income can help answer key policy questions, such as the reach of welfare transfers, burden of taxation, drivers of inequality and the vulnerability of different groups. Access to such data can enable governments to navigate policy decisions with clarity, grounding debates in evidence and driving more effective outcomes.

India's attempts to measure income are not new. In the early 1980s, the National Sample Survey Organization experimented with income modules, but these efforts were eventually discontinued on account of a few conceptual and operational challenges. Yet, our economy has since changed fundamentally and so have the tools available for measurement. A renewed effort through the upcoming Household Income Survey 2026 (HIS) reflects both the evolution of India's statistical needs and the readiness of our system to take on this complex task. To ensure conceptual and methodological integrity, the ministry of statistics and programme implementation (MoSPI) constituted a technical expert group (TEG) comprising economists, survey methodologists, statisticians and practitioners with long experience in income measurement and related fields. The group has been guiding the National Statistics Office (NSO) on the sampling design, questionnaire, architecture, operational protocols and piloting strategy to ensure that HIS 2026 benefits from both global best practices and India's own learning curve.

Progress over the past year has been significant. The sampling design has been finalized, the core questionnaire has undergone iterative refinement and field protocols have been tested through structured pilots that have yielded encouraging results. The NSO's training and capacity building exercises are underway, aided by the digitalization of field processes and stronger supervisory systems. With full-scale fieldwork scheduled to begin shortly, HIS 2026 is on track and the first set of national findings is expected by September 2027, a timeline that will allow thorough processing, validation and dissemination of microdata.

Reliable income data is indispensable because it captures the actual flow of resources available to households. It is income, not consumption, that enables families to save, invest in education, purchase insurance, withstand volatility and plan for the future. Consumption often masks inequality



because high-income households save more while low-income households consume nearly all that they earn. Regular measurements of income and savings can, therefore, help policymakers accurately gauge financial fragility and design interventions that address the roots of economic insecurity.

Surveys like NCAER's NSHIE 2005 and PRICE's ICE 360 also reflect past efforts in India to collect income data, including in highly informal contexts. Through a combination of source-specific questions, valuation of in-kind receipts probing for irregular flows and cross-checks with expenditure and savings, these surveys have produced credible estimates that have been used in academic and research circles. But such efforts, being outside the official system, were sporadic and lacked the institutional continuity needed for long-term comparability. HIS 2026 now offers us an opportunity to embed this capacity firmly within the national statistical architecture.

International experience strengthens the case for such a survey further. Countries such as Brazil, Indonesia and South Africa have institutionalized regular income surveys enabling real-time monitoring of inequality, labour market dynamics and welfare outcomes. Their examples show that consistency, periodicity and transparency are essential for building trust in official data. For India, HIS 2026 can play a similar role by complementing the estimates derived from tax and national accounts, providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of household income. An income survey can thus supplement administrative data to capture the full diversity of households and ensure inclusive representation, particularly in a country with a large informal sector.

Designing and implementing HIS 2026 will demand careful attention at every step, from stratified sampling that captures both the bottom and top of the distribution and source-specific modules that reduce under-reporting to valuation protocols for in-kind and home-produced income and recall periods aligned with the nature of each income flow. Enumerators will require strong training and continuous supervision, while the survey will need robust internal consistency checks. Public confidence in the survey will depend on transparent dissemination, timely release of anonymized microdata, detailed documentation and a commitment to methodological clarity. Anonymity safeguards, a hallmark of MoSPI's data operations for the past seven decades, help create an environment where citizens can share information openly, contributing to the quality and reliability of survey data.

HIS 2026 represents a unique convergence of institutional readiness, technological maturity and policy urgency. India's statistical system today has the digital tools, analytical capabilities and professional standards to execute a survey of this scale and complexity. Not-for-profit institutions like NCAER and PRICE contribute methodological experimentation and field-tested insights.

Together, they can help India build data infrastructure that improves policymaking and strengthens public accountability. A nation that aspires to be a global economic leader cannot afford statistical blind spots. Income, the most crucial determinant of household well-being, should be captured better. HIS 2026 offers India a historic chance to count what truly matters and do it well. For a country that's reshaping its aspirations, a credible and enduring system of income measurement is not just a technical advancement, it is a democratic imperative.

These are the authors' personal views.

LAURA RIES & M. MUNNEER



are, respectively, a global positioning strategist and bestselling author; and co-founder of the Medici Institute for Innovation. X: @MunneerMuh

What is Santa's secret? How did Santa become one of the world's most powerful brands? Not the cookies. Not the sleigh. Nor the flying reindeer with suspiciously high fuel efficiency. It's not even the free toys delivered with a logistical precision that would make Amazon sweat. Santa's real superpower is positioning.

But this wasn't always the case. For centuries, Santa was a walking, jingling, wildly inconsistent brand failure. Every country had its own prototype. Every illustrator had a different artistic conception. You had Dutch bishops, British fatherly figures, American elves, Norse legends and the occasional bearded fellow who looked like he escaped from a forest cult. Sometimes stern, sometimes cuddly, sometimes the old man in charge of children's behaviour. Tall in one story, pint-sized in another. Skinny enough to slip under a door or plump enough to get stuck in one. Wardrobe? From green robes to brown furs, even blue suits—everything except 'corporate consistency red.' Santa

was not a brand, but a shared myth with more identity issues than a Bollywood hero with amnesia.

Most people credit Coca-Cola for fixing Santa's brand problem, but that's only half the story. Coca-Cola gave Santa his visual form as we now know it, but it was Dr. Seuss who gave him his strategic enemy.

Let's start with Coca-Cola. In 1931, it commissioned illustrator Haddon Sundblom to create a Santa for a holiday campaign. Sundblom came up with brand magic. He gave the world the Santa we recognize today: red suit, white trim, round belly, rosy cheeks and twinkling eyes. A loveable and huggable uncle from the North Pole. And here's the kicker: Coca-Cola never tried to update him. No 'Smart Santa' or 'casual Friday Santa.' No 'athleisure Santa' for millennials. No focus group was held to test if Gen-Z would connect better with a lavender Santa who skateboards. Santa was Santa—and it worked.

Recognizability alone, though, doesn't build meaning. For that, you need contrast. You need a villain. An opposite. Enter Dr. Seuss. In 1957, Dr. Seuss gifted Santa what Coca-Cola couldn't: a strategic enemy in the Grinch. Suddenly, Santa had clarity and purpose. Something to push against. A brand is sharpest when defined not by what it claims

to be, but by what it refuses to be. Kids don't need a deck or a brand manual to get Santa's essence—the story does it for them. A green Grinch versus red Santa. Bitter versus joyful. Lonely versus convivial. So while Santa symbolized abundance, generosity, warmth and cheer, the Grinch embodied the opposite.

Most brands get this backwards. They brag about being 'faster,' 'better,' 'more innovative,' etc., which sounds like empty corporate blah-blah to consumers. Positioning isn't about being better. It's about being different in a way that's meaningful.

The Grinch helped Santa do that. We know how the story ends: the Grinch eventually melts, returns the gifts and becomes a Santa fanboy. A happy ending for everyone. But here's the deeper branding insight: Santa never wants the Grinch to disappear forever. He needs him. The Grinch must resurface to remind us what Santa stands for.

What does all this have to do with India? More than it may seem at first glance.

Brands, in their quest to target 'everyone,' often end up standing for nothing. It's why half the ads in India feature the same celebrity doing the same thing. But brands that break out choose a Grinch.

Amul's strategic enemy? Synthetic and bland stuff. Fevicol's? Everything that falls

apart: weak bonds, quick fixes, unreliable joints. Its ads are basically a 40-year war against instability. JumboKing? Its strategic enemy is sit-down dining. While McDonald's and Burger King built large restaurants for customers to linger, JumboKing created 'on-the-go' burgers. Railway station kiosks with no seating. Just grab-and-go counters for Mumbai's commuters. Tanishq? Its positioning pushes against

the idea of jewellery as stiff, ceremonial, kept-in-a-locker wealth. It champions emotional modernity. And then there's India's legendary Dabbawala brand. Its visual cue? An unmistakable white cap. Strategic enemy? Delivery chaos. Opposition so sharp that it became a Harvard case study.

Your brand needs a Grinch too. Not a competitor you claim to beat, nor a villain you manufacture out of thin air, but a real idea or force that your consumer is already fighting—something that lets your brand become the hero.

What is your brand battling? Complexity? Waste? Boredom? Overwork? Obsession with discounts (an Indian Grinch)? Fake news? Poor quality? 'Chalta hai' attitudes?

Once you identify your Grinch, two things happen: your message becomes sharper and your consumer instantly knows which side you're on.

But don't forget visual cues. Santa doesn't just behave differently from the Grinch—he looks different. Your brand needs a visual cue so recognisable that even a distracted, multitasking, *Bigg Boss*-watching Indian consumer registers it in a blink.

Think of Asian Paints' Gattu, Tinder's flame, Royal Enfield's rugged helmet aesthetic and Paper Boat's nostalgia-driven doodles. Combine a strategic enemy with a visual hammer to create brand superglue.

Santa's success isn't magic. It's two simple things: He looks unforgettable and stands against something even more unforgettable. So, to sharpen your positioning, find your Grinch. As for the visual hammer, keep at it.

THEIR VIEW

Santa's secret: Why every brand needs its own Grinch

LAURA RIES & M. MUNNEER



are, respectively, a global positioning strategist and bestselling author; and co-founder of the Medici Institute for Innovation. X: @MunneerMuh

MINT CURATOR

Some childlike wonder could help the grown-up world too

Time spent with kids can remind us why hope is always valuable

**ABBY McCLOSKEY**

is a columnist, podcast host and consultant.



The rise of AI gives us something to ponder beyond the obvious.

ISTOCKPHOTO

I got my son an Elf on the Shelf [an elf doll that accompanies a Christmas book of the same name] this year. Do I regret it? Absolutely. But it reminded me of something this holiday season, something too easy to forget in our modern age.

For an otherwise bright child, my son is convinced that the elf [named Tinsel] is real in the sense that he moves himself around the house at night and ends up in all sorts of compromising positions by morning. The elf can even help with various tasks during the wee morning hours. (Unfortunately, I got blank stares when I asked Tinsel to write this column.)

My son believes that the elf is, in a word, enchanted. I never knew this about my child before getting the elf. I wonder how many other things he believes to be enchanted too.

It's what so many of us crave this darkest time of year. The presents, the twinkle lights, the feasts, the songs and the long evenings around fireplaces with loved ones. The hope is that it will all add up to more than the sum of parts. And maybe if the parts are big enough, we might well summon the Christmas spirit.

Not so long ago, humans believed that everything was enchanted. Not in a temporary or seasonal way, but in a the-whole-Earth-is-filled-with-it way. The story of a guiding star, a host of angels and a virgin birth? That fit right in. Everyday magic was the way of the world until the latest 1% of history, depending on how you measure it.

Things seemingly stopped becoming enchanted sometime around the Enlightenment, according to scholar Charles Taylor. That's when the West moved into its modern and materialist age and when the things that could be measured, bought and logically understood were of value.

No more rain dances or praying to divinities for battle success, or superstitions, save hotels lacking a 13th floor or a few people in the woods of Wisconsin.

Our whole lives—and those of our parents and their parents and the ones before them—have been lived in this secular period. It has been correlated with swells of human progress and flourishing, science and technology, medicine and political freedom. But we seem to have lost some of the magic along the way, or maybe got too distracted to notice it.

I cannot even say that most of us miss the magic, that's how far removed we are from it in 2025 CE.

But maybe, just maybe, we are closer to such enchantment than it feels. I'm not talking about an altar call. Nor eschewing

the creators of artificial intelligence give it a 10% chance of wiping out all of humanity. [That is a very high probability of an existentially catastrophic outcome caused by AI].

Or read the many works of the late philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who passed away earlier this year and who suggests that we are living in a time in which virtue has become "fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance arrived." Like a snowglobe, broken into pieces. Humanity loses something when things become flat and rational only.

Are we too grown-up today to believe that there could be a realm of things we might not understand? For that to spark a chill of fear, or some humility? And maybe—if we can get past that terror of the cosmos being far more than we could possibly imagine, let alone control—might there actually be more room for hope?

Sometimes, childlike wonder points to something we adults no longer allow ourselves to see.

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS
WISHES ITS READERS
A MERRY
CHRISTMASHappening
today

THE NAVI Mumbai International Airport will start commercial operations. The first flight will depart from Bengaluru and is scheduled to land at 8 am at the Navi Mumbai International Airport, formally marking the inauguration of Phase 1 operations at the greenfield airport. Phase 1 of NMIA can handle about 20 million passengers.

PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi is scheduled to inaugurate the Rashtriya Prerna Sthal in Lucknow that will host, among others, statues of BJP ideologues Syama Prasad Mookerjee, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya and former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. He will also address a public gathering.

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New ISRO milestone

The Indian Space Research Organisation launched its heaviest rocket, LVM3-M6, from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota, Andhra Pradesh, on Wednesday. The LVM3-M6, nicknamed 'Bahubali', successfully placed the 6,100-kg BlueBird Block-2 satellite, a US communication satellite, into orbit. [ANI REPORT, PAGE 8](#)

India Gate link as Cabinet okays 3 new Delhi Metro corridors

Express News Service
New Delhi, December 24

THE UNION Cabinet on Wednesday approved three new corridors of the Delhi Metro network, including one that will provide connectivity from the new Central government offices at Kartavya Bhawan — and transport visitors to India Gate and the National War Memorial in the heart of the capital.

The Cabinet, at a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, approved the three corridors at a cost of Rs 12,014.91 crore, of which the Union and Delhi governments will contribute Rs 1,759 crore each. The remaining amount,

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

E. EXPLAINED

Relief for Delhi

The Cabinet decision comes against the backdrop of an alarming decline in air quality in Delhi, with public transport and last-mile connectivity identified as key solutions. The Central Vista corridor will cater to about 60,000 office-goers and nearly two lakh visitors daily.

WHAT THE NEW METRO CORRIDORS MEAN FOR THE CAPITAL [PAGE 4](#)

Outrage over Sengar: CBI to oppose bail, woman says 'wanted to commit suicide'

Sakshi Chand, Asad Rehman & Sohini Ghosh
New Delhi, December 24

WITH OUTRAGE growing over the Delhi High Court's decision to suspend the life sentence of former BJP MLA Kuldeep Sengar in the 2017 Unnao rape of a minor, the CBI on Wednesday evening said it will "file a special leave petition before the Supreme Court at the earliest". The CBI's decision came on a day the survivor met Leader of Opposition Rahul Gandhi and Congress leader Sonia Gandhi, seeking their assistance in her fight against Sengar.

"CBI has studied the orders of the Division Bench of the Delhi High Court in the Unnao rape case and has decided to file an SLP before the Hon'ble



The woman was removed from India Gate when she protested against the court order on Tuesday. [ANI](#)

Supreme Court at the earliest against the orders of the High Court granting bail to the accused K D Sengar by suspension of the sentence," the CBI spokesperson said.

"The accused filed an ap-

peal, and the bail petition was vehemently opposed by the CBI as well as the family of the victim before the Delhi HC. The CBI has filed timely replies and written arguments in this matter. The family of the victim

has also opposed the petition, citing safety and threats. CBI will immediately challenge this order," the spokesperson said.

It is learnt that during her meeting with the Gandhis, the survivor and her family requested the aid of a top lawyer to fight against Sengar in the Supreme Court and to relocate to a Congress-ruled state as they feared for their lives.

Speaking to *The Indian Express* in the evening, the survivor said the development "will only make things worse for victims who decide to take on the mighty".

"I was in the court during the announcement, and it was a setback. I wanted to commit suicide then and there, but did not because of my children and

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

'Our home burnt, jumped into river to escape': In Karbi Anglong, anger against 'settlers'

Sukrita Baruah
West Karbi Anglong, December 24

BENEATH A pile of charred debris of what used to be Mahima Dey's house near the Kheroni daily market, the embers are still alive. The market was busy with activity on Wednesday morning, though not in the traditional sense. Bihari and Bengali residents packed what remained of their ransacked and battered shops and homes into trucks, fleeing the area after



Security personnel in the area on Wednesday. [EXPRESS](#)

• BORN WITH PARAPARESIS, BECAUSE OF WHICH HE COULDN'T WALK, 17-YEAR-OLD STARTED THE SPORT JUST TWO YEARS AGO

From Jharkhand village to Dubai podium: Journey of an Adivasi para archer

Shubham Tigga
Ranchi, December 24

JHONGO PAHAN (17) comes from the land of the well-known Adivasi scholar and hockey champion Jaipal Singh Munda, but it's a different sport where he's winning laurels. The teenager, who lives deep inside the forests in Khunti district's Silda village, has claimed a silver medal in the 50-metre archery at the Asian Youth Para Games 2025, held in Dubai earlier this month.

According to his parents, Jhongo was born with paraparesis, because of which he couldn't walk. Family members describe him as an introverted, underconfident boy who avoided socialising because of the "natural discrimination" he faced because he would crawl to get around.

Jhongo's journey as an athlete began relatively late — just two years ago, in fact. His coaches, Md Danish Ansari and Ashish Kumar, identified his potential during their voluntary initiat-

ive to find athletes from marginalised communities and train them in archery.

"Our objective was to identify those who are marginalised within the marginalised and train them through archery. Hockey has gained popularity because of Adivasis, but one must not forget that archery also runs in their blood," said Kumar.

Kumar and his senior coach, Danish Ansari, began scouting for children, particularly Adivasis, who rarely get opportunities to showcase their skills. During this search, they



Jhongo Pahan won the silver at the Asian Youth Para Games 2025

reached the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Residential School, where they met Jhongo and several other children. Opened in 2022, the residential school provides free education and skill training to children who are orphans, survivors of human trafficking, affected by left-wing extremism, or are differently abled.

"We saw a boy who didn't let his legs define him," Kumar said. "In the hostel, if a heavy bench needed to be moved, the 'abled' children would hesitate, but Jhongo would finish the task before anyone asked. We

knew then that this boy had the grit of a champion."

Jhongo said he had never been to Ranchi and had never travelled by train until 2023, when he boarded for the first time to go to Patiala for his maiden National Para-Archery Championship. Though he did not win a medal, he said the experience marked the beginning of his journey as an athlete.

"This January, I won a silver medal at the 6th National Para-Archery Championship in Jaipur. In October, I went to Sonipat for trials, became part of the Indian Archery Association,

and was selected for an international tournament," he said.

Jhongo, who showed steady improvement, initially trained with a wooden or bamboo Indian-round bow costing around ₹7,000–8,000. Ahead of the Asian Youth Para Games in Dubai, where he was in the under-21 recurve mixed team, coach Danish Ansari gave him his own recurve bow, the standard equipment required for international competitions, so that Jhongo could practice. After his success in Dubai, Jhongo said he was happy that

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Supreme Court should review its Aravalli verdict

THE THREATS to the Aravallis are well documented. On more than one occasion in the past 30 years, the Supreme Court has ruled against violations of environmental norms in the mountain range. Last year, the Court found that the inconsistency in criteria used to define the hills was one of the major reasons for illegal quarrying in the Aravallis. It asked the Union environment ministry to establish a committee to frame a scientifically grounded definition of the mountain range. The panel submitted its report in October, and the apex court gave its imprimatur about a month later. However, the new criteria to define the Aravalli hills — only landforms at an elevation of 100 metres or more should be considered as part of the mountain system — has invited controversy. Fears of the destruction of the country's oldest mountain range have triggered protests in several parts of Rajasthan.

The yardstick now accepted by the Court goes against the red flags raised by expert agencies, including — as pointed out by a report in this newspaper — its own amicus curiae and the CEC, the panel that advises the SC on environment-related matters and monitors the compliance of its orders. The environment ministry's agency, the Forest Survey of India, had told the ministry that the 100-metre height filter would exclude 91.3 per cent of 12,081 Aravalli hills 20 metres or higher, spread across 15 districts in Rajasthan. The FSI's internal assessment also shows that if all 1,18,575 Aravalli hills are considered, over 99 per cent will not meet the new criteria.

Several reports — including a survey by SC's CEC in 2018 — have underlined that the Aravallis have lost a fourth of their hills. The SC's past rulings have pointed out that the destruction of the hills could lead to the Thar desert expanding towards the Indo-Gangetic plains and worsen air pollution in Delhi-NCR. However, its acceptance of a definition that effectively reduces a range stretching over more than 650 km to a few scattered hills does not square with the SC's formidable jurisprudence on not just the Aravallis but on environmental matters at large. From the verdict in the MC Mehta case (1996), which emphasised strict enforcement of the polluter pays principle, to the landmark judgment last year, which recognises that people have a right to be protected against the destruction of nature, the Court has been a steadfast supporter of ecological concerns. In the wake of the impasse over what constitutes the Aravallis, the SC should continue to do what its own experts have emphasised — shield the mountain range.

Literature loses its master of silence, stillness

IN THE introduction to Vinod Kumar Shukla's *Treasure of Piggy Banks*, poet and translator Arvind Krishna Mehrotra sums up the oeuvre of the poet and writer from Chhattisgarh: "A line of Shukla is like a line of Shukla. It 'mirrors nothing' but itself. Reading him can be disorienting, even vertiginous, like seeing *OpArt*." Shukla, who died on December 23 at the age of 88, occupied a singular place in Hindi — and Indian — literature, a writer whose work stood slightly apart from its moment, quietly undoing expectations about narrative and form, about what and whom great literature must speak for.

There is an anecdote about Shukla that appears in the introduction to a collection of his short stories translated into English, *Blue is like Blue* (2019). At the Jaipur Literature Festival one year, he was bemused to see a serpentine queue of readers waiting for J M Coetzee to sign their books. Shukla did not know who Coetzee was, but more importantly, he could not understand the spectacle around writing. He wrote from the margins of experience, where life unfolded quietly and meaning arrived without announcement. His novels and poems — among them *Naukar Ki Kameez*, *Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rahti Thi* and *Kavita Se Lambi Kavita* — inhabited modest rooms and ordinary jobs, attentive to the textures of routine and the inner lives of those whom history tends to pass at a distance. What distinguished him was not only style but temperament. Shukla resisted the pressure to perform or persuade. His words ambled rather than marched; his sentences carried a faintly surreal charge even when they emerged organically from the everyday.

Meditated by translations and a growing interest in voices outside the familiar circuits of global literature, Shukla's wider recognition — the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature and the Jnanpith Award — arrived when his work had already settled into an assured quiet. Yet, it is difficult to imagine that the wider recognition altered his perception of what truly mattered. Shukla made a moral and aesthetic principle of noticing, of trusting stillness and ellipses as forms of truth. His allegiance lay with the act of writing itself and with the delicate, untold stories it could conjure up. In this, he leaves behind an example: That fidelity to one's own rhythm can be an act of startling originality.

So who moved my cheese?

A LMOST IMMEDIATELY after it was published in the journal *Neurology*, a research paper invited the ire of naysayers. It made a broad claim: High-fat-content cheese — cheddar, gouda, brie, and the oh so smelly and delicious blues, from the underrated Stilton (yes, the English can make a decent cheese) to the mighty gorgonzola, which carries an ecosystem of microorganisms in every bite — reduces the risk of dementia. Its findings were based on analysing the eating habits of around 28,000 adults in Sweden. But even before turophiles could savour the moment as they would the softness of a camembert, there were caveats galore: Cheese alone isn't a shield against dementia; the jury is still out on saturated fats in general; a balanced diet and exercise are key, and so on.

Cheese has been unfairly maligned. A growing body of research shows that it is sugar and not fat that is the main culprit for many lifestyle diseases, from obesity and hypertension to diabetes. In India, despite the prevalence of milk, cheese never quite took off — barring in some communities — because of the interdiction on fermenting/curdling "pure" milk. That said, the love of cheese has little to do with how healthy it is.

Plato, in his avuncular wisdom, had divided things that are "good" into three types: Things that are good in themselves and for their consequences (justice, health); good only in their consequences (medicine), and good in themselves (joy, pleasure). Lovers of cheese know that appreciating the sharpness, bitterness, tartness or stench of what is essentially milk gone off is like joy and pleasure — to be enjoyed in the moment, in full. No amount of research can turn it into medicine.

The Editorial Page

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2025

• WORDLY WISE
 Every green tree is far more glorious
 than if it were made of gold and silver.
 — Martin Luther

When Vinod Kumar Shukla opened a window in my classroom

CALL comes from Bihar. The author Vinod Kumar Shukla is telling an anecdote. We — my students and I — are watching Achal Mishra's documentary about him, *Chaur Phool Hain Aur Duniya Hai*. The story about the caller from Bihar is told in voiceover. On screen, we see Shukla, now in his late 80s, walking outside his house, as birds flit around and the sun casts lozenges of golden light upon his slender frame and white hair. The remarkable play of light and shade lifts the mundane space and turns it into a magic portal: It is reminiscent of Shukla's own writing.

The story continues in Shukla's inimitable voice: "Curious, I ask, 'Bhai, why have you called me?' The caller replies, 'Sir, who could I have asked, who would have told me if you were still alive... So, I dialled your number directly. You answered the telephone yourself and now I've got my answer!' We hear laughter in the background. There is laughter in my classroom, too. It's a very Shuklaesque story, they can now recognise it as such.

It is a morning in September before the airspols, and life feels promising. My class of about a hundred 18-19-year-olds have put away their laptops and phones and they are puzzling over a little novel in Hindi, where nothing really happens, the reading of which has occasioned this viewing. Shukla's *Deewar Mein Ek Khidki Rahti Thi* (1997) went on to win the Sahitya Akademi Award. We have been reading the English translation by Satti Khanna, *A Window Lived in the Wall* (Eka, 2019), as part of our "Great Books" course.

The students are all going to major in different things — Mathematics and Sociology, Biology and Computer Science and International Relations. Many will study Economics and Finance, the glamour of which gives them goosebumps already. This is not a traditional literature classroom and that is what makes it so electric. The students come from diverse backgrounds, and their mother tongues range, proverbially, from Kashmiri to Tamil and from Marathi to Meitei, with Amharic and Isindebele and English thrown in for good measure. It is the year 2025 and our classroom is in Sonipat, where agricultural fields have given way to an education city. It is the year 2025 and AI has changed the way the world reads and writes.

Yet, here we are, reading a novel about Raghuvir Prasad, a young lecturer of Mathematics at a small college — also surrounded by agricultural fields — in a town in central India. He lives in a single room, on his salary of 800 rupees, of which he

needs to send a portion to home. The jitney that takes Raghuvir to work is in great demand and often so crowded that it is impossible to get in. One day, he takes a lift from a local sadhu-mahout and ends up returning from college on an elephant. So, it comes to be that when his bride Sonsi catches her first glimpse of him, she sees him returning from college like a king, atop an elephant.

Every obituary of Shukla will note that he was a genius; every obituary will point out how he



DEVAPRIYA ROY

lived and wrote in the same city for most of his adult life, never leaving it to sample the world — that his extraordinary genius was in turning the hyper-local into the universal. Like the sari Sonsi wore one evening when Raghuvir was tutoring students under the streetlights — a "yellow sari with a shiny thread running through its weave" — everything we know about human life is woven into his writing, like that shiny thread.

But the point of our class is for them to discover these things for themselves. It is my own worry, perhaps, as a writer and a teacher, about the way the perceptions of reading and writing have changed, and are reframing the world I know. The peculiar pleasure of reading a novel is to arrest time and alter space: It is to allow another's perception of life to, for a while, provide the lens through which we view our own. Great books transform us: I want to scream from the rooftops.

A great conversation with AI can do that too. It can transform, I hear the answer echoing back at me. "These are early days: One day, AI may produce great novels too."

Raghuvir and Sonsi, in the first throes of love, climb out of their window to a world that is lush and green, with meadows and ponds and a teashop with a magic brew. Visitors, however, can't seem to find any of the landmarks of Raghuvir and Sonsi's private geography. My students, in the beginning, are a little grumpy. They are like Raghuvir and Sonsi's visitors, shut

out from the magical world of the couple. I decide to show them the documentary.

In the past, I had always put text above author. This time, I thought it might be interesting to see how the class might respond to the author. Shukla has said elsewhere how *Window* is a deeply autobiographical novel. Would they glimpse Raghuvir Prasad in this 80-something-year-old? Or, was it simply the kind of melodrama my class of humanities-adjacent-s like to wallow in?

Eventually, something gives. Everyone gets obsessed with *Window*. We read other writers — great writers — but we keep asking each other what it is about the Shukla book that keeps calling us back. It becomes a fever infecting the whole class; a weird, cool thing. "It's the slowness," Shreya says; "It's the window," Leonah says; "It's the language," Anirudh says; "It's like this Kashmirei folktale," Munazah says; "It's the elephant," Kasvee says. Then, very apologetically, lowering her voice, she asks me, "Professor, I don't fully get magic realism. Is the elephant real?"

When the news of Shukla's passing reached me, I was looking through some of their writings. Great authors grow old, I had said to them in class, hoping to highlight the humanity of art. Great authors die, I now said to myself. Like the *zari* in Sonsi's sari, that knowledge is woven into the fabric of their work. In certain light, we catch the gold twinkling. It is something AI can only pretend to know.

Roy is an author and assistant professor of writing at Ashoka University, Haryana

Christianity is not a colonial legacy but an Indian tradition



SAVIO FERNANDES

CHRISTIANITY HAS been part of India's spiritual and cultural landscape for over two millennia. Through tradition, via customs, art and historical records, it has been affirmed that Saint Thomas the Apostle brought the message of Christ to the Malabar Coast in the 1st century AD.

The Acts of Thomas describe his journey via the Parthian Empire and a sea route to "India". Early Church theologians and writers of the third and fourth centuries, such as Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Ambrose of Milan, mention Thomas preaching in India. Gregory of Nazianzus states in his Oration: "Even those Kingdoms which were shut out by rugged mountains became accessible to them, as India to Thomas..."

Ambrose of Milan spoke about Christianity in India in his commentary on the Book of Psalms, where he mentions that the Apostle Thomas carried the gospel to the Indian people.

Persian crosses still standing at St Thomas Mount, Chennai, and Syriac inscriptions from the sixth to ninth centuries confirm an ancient Christian presence in India. Today, Saint Thomas Christians maintain unique rites and claim apostolic origins. Christianity in India is thus not a colonial legacy but an indigenous tradition as ancient as other great spiritual paths that shape our nation's moral fabric.

Since Independence, Christian institutions have played a transformative role in India's development.

Approximately 55,000 Christian educational institutions have produced generations of outstanding citizens: Political leaders, civil servants, industrialists, scientists, professionals, entrepreneurs, and creative personalities. Parents of non-Christian backgrounds chose these Christian institutions for their academic reputation, values, and all-round development of their children from theatre to sports.

Over 4,000 Christian hospitals and healthcare centres are operating in India. From large missionary hospitals in cities to small dispensaries in villages, the Christian commitment to serve the sick and suffering remains unwavering. During national crises

— natural disasters, epidemics, or the pandemic — Christian doctors, nurses, and volunteers have consistently been offering care and compassion where it was most needed.

Equally significant is the Church's outreach to society's most neglected: The poor, Dalits, tribals, migrants, and the disabled. Through self-help groups, literacy programmes, skill development, women's empowerment, and rehabilitation centres, Christians uphold the dignity of every human and build bridges across caste and class. Their tireless work continues to break barriers of discrimination and uplift the marginalised.

Over the past few decades, various attempts have been made to malign this selfless service by linking it to forced conversions. This malicious campaign is now being exacerbated in the era of social media. Nothing could be further from the truth. This was affirmed in a landmark Supreme Court judgment on October 17. In response to FIRs filed under the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021, a bench comprising Justices J B Pardiwala and Manoj Misra quashed multiple cases from Fatehpur district that alleged "mass religious conversions" of Hindus to Christianity. The Court observed that criminal law must not be used to harass innocent citizens. Justice Pardiwala noted legal infirmities, procedural lapses, and lack of credible evidence, ruling that continuing such prosecutions would be a "travesty of justice" as stated in the judgment.

Cabinets, at the Centre and in states, have had ministers who are alumni from Christian institutions from across India. They stand testimony that conversion is not the aim of these institutions. India's greatness lies in its unity amid diversity. The Christian community's service exemplifies this ideal of educating the mind, healing the body, and nurturing the spirit. In doing so, Christians in India remain steadfast partners in the mission of nation-building and a more humane, just, inclusive, and compassionate India.

The writer is Auxiliary Bishop, Archdiocese of Bombay

For society's sake, we must ask if God exists



GAUHAR RAZA

THE DEBATE between Javed Akhtar and Mufti Shamil Nadwi on the question of God's existence has sparked a national debate. One can divide the social media reactions into three broad categories: Some stand firmly with scientific rationality and oppose faith-based arguments, some support Nadwi's faith-based arguments and others have rejected the entire effort as useless or ill-timed.

I was aware of the discussion, which lasted almost one-and-a-half hours. Some who were approached to moderate the debate, including Yogendra Yadav, refused. Thankfully, Saurabh Dwivedi agreed and proved to be the best choice. However I was surprised by Yadav's article in *The Indian Express* ('A public debate on "Does God exist?" takes us away from real issues of religion, religiosity', December 23). He thought the debate was "pointless" and "irrelevant". He concedes, however, that it was an "unusually civil" debate. In my opinion, in this age of cacophony, this is a good enough reason. It was a demonstration of how diametrically opposite views should be expressed and listened to, with civility and restraint, without accusing, abusing or physically threatening each other.

I hold Yadav in high regard. He has a keen eye for detail, but perhaps he didn't have the opportunity to review the social media comments that followed the debate. Many have accused Akhtar of not saying anything new, but the same applies to Nadwi, who repeated what has been said for centuries. The debate has certainly once again put scientific rationality on the national agenda, and Akhtar's outstanding personality played a major role. Akhtar has always taken the bull by the horns, and he did it again, which gave the younger generation the courage and opportunity to broaden the debate — thousands of rationalists have expressed their views fearlessly. The debate has generated unprecedented interest about the dichotomy between faith and belief, and how faith in supernatural power is used to justify social evil.

Science does not care if God exists or not, but it has serious social implications. In the public arena, "God" is not a relic of a bygone age; it is a living reality. Over centuries, Charvak philosophy has not even touched public discourse or social structures. Let us not forget that the "real issues about religions and religiosity" rest on the bedrock of faith in supernatural power, which shapes our destiny. Many rationalists and agnostics have been hesitant to challenge the foundations of faith-based arguments.

Let us also not forget that in times when science and scientific rationality are under intense attack, baba-s are given a free hand to invent and serve superstitions to the public in the name of supernatural power; the rights of women, Dalits and Adivasis are trampled in the name of God; secular books and literature, along with Darwinism, are removed from the school syllabus. In such times, it is our duty to discuss, "Does God exist?" If we do not confront this question head-on, it will blunt the edge of every struggle to save democracy. Gods will keep us divided.

The writer is former chief scientist, CSIR

40 YEARS AGO

December 25, 1985



Mahanta ministry sworn in

A new chapter in the political history of Assam began when Prafulla Mahanta, still a student, along with 20 of his council of ministers, was sworn in as Chief Minister at a public function at the Nehru Stadium in Guwahati. Nearly one-and-a-half lakh people cheered as Mahanta, 32, took the oath of office and secrecy administered by the Governor, Bhishma Narain Singh.

Yaqub on India-Pak ties

The Pakistan Foreign Minister, Yaqub Khan, on Tuesday said his country wanted to develop its relations with India on the basis of strict adherence to the principle of non-interference in each other's internal affairs and settlement of disputes through peaceful means as reflected in the Simla agree-

ment of 1972. Initiating the foreign policy debate in the joint session of Parliament, Yaqub Khan said that during the last eight years, Pakistan's efforts at normalising relations with India had made "significant and encouraging progress".

Cops caught on disco duty

The police jeep was parked outside a notorious "discotheque" near the red light area at G B Road in New Delhi. Police officers were inside the so-called disco, watching the proceedings, well-known in the area for their obscenity. The Lieutenant Governor, H L Kapoor, made a surprise visit to the red light area, and saw the police jeep parked there. The driver reportedly said the policemen were inside. Kapoor has ordered the Commissioner of Police now to take "appropriate action" against the cops at the disco for

obscene dances. The L-G also said the discotheque was unauthorised. He has ordered action against the owners of the discotheque, apart from the policemen engaging in unauthorised pleasures.

Rajneesh aides denied visas



The Ideas Page

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2025

The twilight of deliberation: When Parliament becomes a rubber stamp



THAROORTHINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

THE WINTER air in New Delhi is not just thick with smog; it is increasingly heavy with the malodorous scent of a decaying parliamentary culture. The recently concluded Winter Session of Parliament has not merely been a display of legislative efficiency, as the treasury benches claim, but a dismantling masterclass in the systematic dismantling of our deliberative democracy. With the passage of high-stakes legislation — most notably the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, the SHANTI (Nuclear Energy) Bill, and the VIKSIT Bharat-G RAM G Bill (the purported successor to the landmark MGNREGA) — the government has once again demonstrated its preference for the blunt instrument of a legislative majority over the fine-tuned machinery of parliamentary consultation.

The ruling dispensation defends these blitzkrieg tactics under the noble-sounding tagline of a "productive session". But at what cost does this productivity come? When the velocity of governance outpaces the capacity for scrutiny, the result is not progress, but a precarious descent into an executive autocracy. Today the hallowed halls of Sansad Bhavan are treated less as a forum for the people's representatives and more as a convenient processing plant for the cabinet's decisions.

The numbers tell a story that no amount of ministerial rhetoric can mask. In 2024-2025, we saw the surreal spectacle of eight out of 10 introduced bills sailing through both Houses with perfunctory ease. Two of the most transformative pieces of legislation in recent memory — the Insurance Amendment Bill, which permits 100 per cent Foreign Direct Investment, and the SHANTI Bill, which privatises our civil nuclear energy sector with scarcely any burden of liabilities — were passed amid the din of protests and the hol-



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

low silence of Opposition walkouts.

Even more galling was the bulldozing of the G RAM G Bill. To replace a 20-year-old lifeline like the MGNREGA — a scheme that has proved transformative for two decades, and which saved millions from destitution during the pandemic — with a completely new framework, and to do so in the Rajya Sabha past the stroke of midnight, is an affront to the very spirit of Parliament. Despite the Opposition's repeated and reasoned pleas to refer these complex bills to standing committees, our requests were summarily rejected. This is no longer an aberration; it is a decade-long pattern of legislative fast-tracking that treats examination as extraneous and conflates nuance with nuisance.

To the uninitiated, committee consideration might sound like a dry, bureaucratic hurdle. In reality, it is the heartbeat of a functional democracy. It is in these committees, away from the performative histrionics of televised sessions, that bills are dissected by experts, questioned by multi-party representatives, and refined into workable law. Data from PRS Legislative Research offers a grim epitaph for this practice. In the

If we see massive protests against the G RAM G Bill in the coming weeks and months, the blame will lie squarely at the feet of those who refused to let MPs shape it in the committee room

15th Lok Sabha (under UPA-II), 71 per cent of bills were referred to committees for detailed vetting. Under the current regime's 17th Lok Sabha, that figure plummeted to a meagre 16 per cent.

When we bypass the "second look" that committees provide, we invite disaster. We have seen this movie before. The ill-fated farm laws were rushed through Parliament without committee scrutiny, only to be repealed a year later after prolonged protests on the streets. Lawmaking without deliberation is like building a dam without studying environmental impact; it may look impressive on inauguration day, but it is destined to crack under the tidal pressure of reality.

The decline in committee referrals is exacerbated by the shrinking clock on the floor of the House. In the 17th Lok Sabha, nearly 35 per cent of bills were passed with less than 60 minutes of discussion. Imagine: Laws that will govern the lives of 1.4 billion people for decades are "debated" for less time than it takes to watch an episode of "The B***ds of Bollywood".

The most egregious tool in this arsenal of silence is the "guillotine", the practice of passing massive tranches of financial legislation and chunks of the entire

Union budget without any discussion worth the name. When we saw this in 2018 and 2023, it signalled a fundamental breakdown. When the power of the purse (the primary check a legislature holds over an executive) is surrendered so meekly, the legislature effectively becomes a glorified notice board for government intentions and a rubber stamp for its wishes.

What is lost in this rush? It is the voice of the stakeholder. On these bills, MPs never heard from insurance employees' unions, who fear the volatility of 100 per cent FDI; nuclear safety experts, who have legitimate concerns about private liability in the SHANTI Bill; or MGNREGA workers, who are being forced into a new G RAM G framework they neither understand nor helped shape. By shutting the doors of the committee rooms to their testimony, the government is essentially telling the Indian citizen: "We know what is best for you; your input is an unnecessary delay".

For a democracy to be truly robust, it must protect the "Three Ds": Debate, Dissent and Deliberation. Without these, the sanctity of Parliament is hollowed out from within. Debate on the merits of proposals, and deliberation over the Opposition's counter-suggestions, are the lifeblood of parliamentary systems. A regime that relies on its numerical majority to stifle dissent is not a strong government; it is an insecure one, afraid of scrutiny.

If the government continues to treat the Opposition as an irrelevant vestige, it leaves many with no choice but to take the argument from the floor of the House to the dust of the streets. If we see massive protests against the G RAM G Bill in the coming weeks and months, the blame will lie squarely at the feet of those who refused to let MPs shape it in the committee room.

It is ironic that while we celebrate the "Mother of Democracy", we are presiding over her slow strangulation. It is not the democratic system that has failed the Indian people; it is the rulers who have failed the system. We must not forget that in a true democracy, the minority must have its say, even if the majority ultimately has its way.

The writer is Member of Parliament for Thiruvananthapuram, Lok Sabha and Chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs

A breach of contract between poorest citizen and the republic



ADHIR RANJAN CHOWDHURY

ON THE eve of MGNREGA's second decade, India has chosen a path that betrays the very ethos the Act once enshrined. The Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeeyika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025 (VB-G RAM G) does far more than merely dropping Mahatma Gandhi's name. It signals a deliberate retreat from a rights-based, demand-driven commitment to rural livelihood security toward a discretionary, capped, fiscally managed programme that treats employment as a policy choice, not a legally enforceable obligation.

The renaming of an Act that had become shorthand for the promise of dignity to the poor is not a cosmetic tweak. It is a declaration of political priority: Narratives of ideology and national branding over substantive protection for the rural poor.

Instituted in 2005 and renamed in 2009 to include Gandhi's name, the MGNREGA was unique in guaranteeing 100 days of wage employment per financial year to rural households willing to do unskilled manual work. In the fiscal year 2024-25, the scheme's total expenditure reached approximately Rs 1,25,219 crore, albeit with a negative net balance of nearly Rs 30,000 crore owing to delayed clearances and wage/material liabilities. Even so, the programme was responsive to demand, ending the year with a 2.1 per cent increase in work demand and payments.

MGNREGA's genius lay in its entitlement structure: Demand-driven work that the state was legally bound to provide. The implicit contract was between the poorest citizen and the republic — a pact of economic inclusion backed by law. The shift proposed in VB-G RAM G upends this arrangement by enabling annual normative allocations, effectively capping the states' ability to meet work demand beyond predetermined budgets.

However, even under the current framework, the scheme was failing to deliver its statutory promise. Government data shows that the average number of workdays provided per household barely reached half the guaranteed 100 days in recent years. This shortfall was a symptom of underfunding and administrative bottlenecks — not necessarily a charter to abolish or dilute the guarantee. It was a call for strengthening the law, not repealing its identity or rights-based foundation. Among the most significant structural changes in the VB-G RAM G is the shift from unconditional, demand-driven obligation to budget-capped provisioning, with the states bearing a 40 per cent share of expenditure. This marks a dramatic reversal from the earlier fully centrally funded model, with significant fiscal consequences for poorer states already grappling with limited resources. Telangana's own estimates suggest that the new funding regime may cost the state Rs 1,000-1,500 crore yearly just to maintain employment levels; similar strains are foreseeable in Bihar, Odisha, and other agrarian economies. Moreover, the shifting of costs to states — some of which are governed by opposition parties — introduces a partisan dimension, threatening uneven implementation.

The danger of capped budgets is not theoretical. Even under the old dispensation, funding gaps and wage delays were common. Analysts have long warned that with fixed allocations, rural employment generation would shrink further, enhancing economic vulnerability and driving distress migration to urban centres. By putting cash in the hands of women, Dalits, and landless labourers, MGNREGA weakened feudal patronage, expanded their bargaining power, and shifted power relations within villages.

Further, removing Gandhi's name from a scheme that historically empowered rural workers symbolises a deeper erosion: A retreat from the idea that the state exists to secure the dignity of labour. Gandhi's philosophy — of trusteeship, community self-reliance, and ethical governance — lent ideological coherence to the programme. Its removal signals that certain narratives of nationhood and historical memory are being supplanted by others. While proponents of VB-G RAM G claim that extending guaranteed workdays to 125 days will benefit rural families, such promises ring hollow without commensurate funding and implementation capacity. A scheme can "guarantee" more days on paper but deliver fewer in practice if budgets are constrained and administrative burdens intensified.

In the history of Indian social policy, such a moment demands not obeisance to political branding, but critical resistance grounded in economic evidence and moral clarity. MGNREGA, for all its flaws and implementation challenges, was a testament to the promise of democracy as distributive justice. To defang it is to betray that promise.

The writer was Lok Sabha MP for five consecutive terms



ILLUSTRATION: MITHUN CHAKRABORTY
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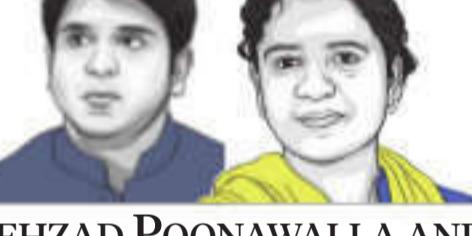
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Claims about destruction of Aravalli hills alarmist



SHEHZAD POONAWALLA AND VIJETA RATTANI

THE ARAVALLI range is among India's oldest geological formations, stretching from Delhi through Haryana, Rajasthan, and into Gujarat. The hills safeguard biodiversity, recharge water, and shield Delhi-NCR's green lungs from desertification. Emphasising that uncontrolled mining in the Aravallis poses a "great threat to the ecology of the nation", the Supreme Court has directed uniform criteria, including the policy-level definition of the Aravalli hills and range based on the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change proposal. This ruling has sparked debate and "Save Aravalli" campaigns. The government has emphasised that the ruling makes mining leases permissible in only 0.19 per cent of the total area of the Aravallis.

"Activists" and propagandists have failed to understand the judgment. First, they claim that only landforms with an elevation of 100 m or more above the local relief would be classified as an "Aravalli hill". Incorrect. The Court has standardised the definition of regulated mining (followed by Rajasthan since 2006) which identified all landforms rising 100 m above local relief as hills, and based on that, prohibited mining on both the hills and their supporting slopes. On social media, "activists" have misinterpreted the 100 m range as the top 100 m. In fact, all landforms enclosed within

The judgment makes protection more precise, enforceable and science-based. By focusing on surveillance with drones, CCTVs, weighbridges, and task forces, it ensures strong enforcement

the lowest-binding contour encircling hills of height 100 m or more are excluded for the purposes of grant of mining leases. Similarly, the Aravallis have been explained as all landforms within 500 m of two adjoining hills of height 100 m or more, so intervening valleys, slopes, and smaller hillocks are protected. The Court has ordered the marking of the Aravalli hills and range on the Survey of India before any mining activity, even in clearly identified areas, and ordered the range's explicit protection. The ruling has not just standardised the definition but improved it with a view towards increasing the protected area.

Second, there are claims that 90 per cent of the Aravallis would be opened for mining. But mining and construction activity continues to require statutory environmental clearances, regulatory approvals and compliance with existing safeguards. This plan would identify permissible areas for mining, ecologically sensitive areas, and core areas only after a thorough analysis of the cumu-

lative environmental impacts, and include post-mining restoration and rehabilitation measures. In any case, mining is prohibited in protected areas, eco-sensitive zones, tiger reserves, wetlands, and CAMPA plantation sites. The SC ruling does not override, suspend or abrogate any law related to the environment and forests including the Environment (Protection) Act,

1986 Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.

Third, there are claims of the government prioritising development over environmental protection. Incorrect. The judgment makes protection more precise, enforceable and science-based. By focusing on surveillance with drones, CCTVs, weighbridges, and task forces, it ensures strong enforcement.

In 2002, the Ashok Gehlot-led Congress government in Rajasthan filed a petition to allow mining under strict environmental rules and monitoring, after the SC's stay on illegal mining and widespread protests. However, it was alleged that no clearances were obtained and environmental rules were flouted for illegal mining and rampant corruption. Later during his tenure, an expert committee recommended a "100-metre" definition of the Aravalli hills, citing the need to balance livelihoods and development. However, the definition was twisted to exclude large tracts of land, enabling illicit mining and construction in ecologically sensitive zones. It is ironic, then, that Congress is presenting itself as the defender of the Aravallis.

Under the NDA government, environmental conservation is a critical part of the agenda. The new ruling will ensure that the Aravallis continue to serve as a natural heritage and ecological shield for India.

Poonawalla is national spokesperson, BJP and Rattani works on environment and climate



ALAKA SAHANI

WHEN I met the widely admired Iranian director Jafar Panahi at a reception ahead of the screening of his latest feature, *It Was Just An Accident*, at the Toronto International Film Festival in September, he made a startling admission: That upon revisiting the film, he had found himself unhappy with certain things in it. This, incidentally, is a critically acclaimed film that won the Palme d'Or at the 2025 Cannes International Film Festival. He may have said it in jest or out of a sense of humility, but upon reflection, such a statement from the contemporary master should not have been surprising.

Jai Prakash Acharya, New Delhi

Framing revenge as dilemma, not spectacle



ALAKA SAHANI

Basking in accolades has never been Panahi's style. Notwithstanding his years of hardship — including being banned from filmmaking and serving two prison terms — he has always been uncompromising in his vision. Under Iran's strict censorship laws, he's long battled to retain his authentic cinematic voice, evading state authority by filming clandestinely. He famously shot *Taxi* in his own vehicle in 2015 and with *It Was Just An Accident*, he refused to comply with the rule of getting the government's approval for a script before filming.

It Was Just An Accident, which draws from Panahi's experience of being imprisoned and interrogated while blindfolded, was shot in Tehran discreetly with a small crew, non-professional actors and a modest budget. The film opens with a man who is travelling at night with his

pregnant wife and daughter and faces car trouble. As he looks for a mechanic, the sound his prosthetic leg makes as he shuffles around, and his voice, trigger in the protagonist Vahid memories of being tortured in prison.

Later, a disturbed Vahid kidnaps the man, blindfolds and locks him in his van. He suspects that this man is his tormentor from jail, but he is not entirely sure. Soon,

Notwithstanding his years of hardship — including being banned from filmmaking and serving two prison terms — Jafar Panahi has always been uncompromising in his vision

other former prisoners, who were subjected to inhuman treatment by the same man, come together. Panahi never resorts to showing violence on screen, but the stories they recount of their torture are harrowing.

What makes the movie a masterpiece is Panahi's subversion of the revenge story.

"Art in its nature does not allow one to write a prescription, a formula that fits all. And we're not able to say that everyone has to act in a certain way," Panahi said this year during a special virtual interaction. At a time when other films have embraced violence and spectacle, *It Was Just An Accident* shows another way.

The traumatised group of former prisoners in the film is confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to exact revenge against their tormentor. The film offers no easy answers or catharsis; Pan-

ahi's characters grapple with a moral dilemma, debating whether they should continue with the cycle of violence. His choices show how Panahi, who calls himself "a socially engaged filmmaker", hews close to "a sense of realism and to real life" while being resolutely humane.

This is an approach with universal resonance; *It Was Just An Accident* recently secured four Golden Globe nominations for Best Motion Picture (Drama), Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Non-English Language Film. It is also a frontrunner in the Best Picture and Best International Feature Film categories at the Oscars. It is not by accident that many are calling the movie Panahi's "bravest" work yet.

The writer is associate editor, The Indian Express. alaka.sahani@expressindia.com

• LAW

Amid AI content boom, how courts are enforcing personality rights

Amaa Sheikh

New Delhi, December 24

THE DELHI High Court Monday restrained the unauthorised commercial use of actor R Madhavan's image and likeness, ordering the takedown of obscene and AI-generated material circulating online. Madhavan is the latest in a line of celebrities, from Aishwarya Rai Bachchan to Abhishek Bachchan to NTR Jr, seeking judicial intervention over the misuse of their names and images on social media platforms amid the boom in AI content.

Courts, too, are no longer waiting to merely recognise personality rights after misuse has occurred. They are issuing urgent and preventive orders such as blocking links, authorising future URLs to be disabled and directing platforms to comply almost immediately.

Also notable is the enforcement of these rights as mechanisms of real-time content control, calibrated to the speed at which impersonation, scam advertising and AI-generated misuse now spreads online. This shift is best understood as a judicial response to a regulatory vacuum, one created by technology moving faster than legislation.

REGULATORY GAP

- India has no clear consent framework for digital likeness, no statutory protection against AI impersonation, and no settled rules on how personal data is used in training AI models.
- Cases reach courts at the end of the AI pipeline, when content is already circulating.
- So, courts are using personality rights to stop visible harm in the absence of regulation on how the technology works.

Copyright Act of 1957, the Trademarks Act of 1999 and Article 21 of the Constitution, where they are located within the right to life.

These protections, while fragmented, are neither automatic nor absolute. Courts generally require proof of reputation, goodwill and unauthorised commercial use. Balancing the right to free speech is also a key judicial consideration.

Scope of redressal

The Delhi High Court has emerged as the primary forum for these disputes. Its jurisdiction allows it to oversee many cases involving national or global platforms, search engines, social media companies, and e-commerce marketplaces whose operations transcend state boundaries.

However, the lack of statutes to protect personality rights ensures that any issue related to them will secure a common law remedy, according to Rahul Bajaj, partner at Zen Axis Law Associates. Early cases involving unauthorised merchandise laid the groundwork, but the volume of Delhi High Court orders reflects institutional expertise rather than legislative clarity. "The Delhi High Court has a sophisticated IP division. That's why people keep coming here," Bajaj said.

The IT Rules 2021 lay out distinct takedown pathways depending on the source and nature of the complaint. Where content is flagged through a court or government order, intermediaries are mandated to act within 36 hours. A faster, privacy-centred route is underpinned for cases involving impersonation or intimate harm, requiring removal within 24 hours. All other violations flow through the grievance mechanism, with longer timelines. Once the court passes an order, the platforms decide as to how broadly such orders will be complied with. At present, there is no compliance log and no systematic review of over removal.

NLSIU professor Dr Arul George Scaria added that while the trend originated at the Delhi High Court, it is no longer confined to that court. "Because these are platform-based disputes, where content can be accessed from anywhere, other High Courts, including the Bombay High Court, are also granting similar remedies," he said. "These are stopgap measures. We do not yet know how sustainable this approach is."



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• PERSONAL FINANCE

Behind stuck refunds, I-T messages: Ineligible claims, suspect donations

Aanchal Magazine

New Delhi, December 24

INELIGIBLE DEDUCTION claims, exemptions, and a significant gap between disclosures in income tax (IT) returns and information received from reporting entities — these are some reasons cited by the IT Department for the spurt of text messages and emails sent to taxpayers this month.

A part of the Department's NUDGE (Non-Intrusive Usage of Data to Guide and Enable) campaign that asks taxpayers to file revised returns by December 31, these messages have invited the ire of taxpayers on social media, with many stating that their refunds have been stuck for over six months.

An income tax refund is issued if taxes paid exceed the actual amount due after taking deductions and exemptions into consideration. It usually takes 4-5 weeks for refunds to be credited to a taxpayer's account.

Given that the filing deadline for individuals, who account for nearly 95% of all returns filed, was September 16, most refunds should have been released by October-end.

Why the delay?

As per the IT Department, certain taxpayers have been identified through the "risk management framework" for claiming "ineligible refunds" through deductions or exemptions to which they are not entitled. This, the Department said, has resulted in "understatement of income".

Key mismatches flagged include: (1) "bogus" donations to registered unrecognised political parties (RUPPs), with incorrect PANs of donees in some cases; (2) mismatch between tax deducted at source (TDS) and Annual Information Statement (AIS) reflecting higher income; (3) large deductions or ineligible claims; (4) non-disclosure of foreign assets or income.

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Sources said data analytics flagged over two lakh taxpayers who claimed suspicious deductions worth nearly Rs 5,500 crore under Section 80GGC, routed through suspicious or non-existent RUPPs and charitable organisations.

Several taxpayers had also received emails from the Department asking them to file their foreign income and asset details correctly and revise their returns by December 31. Non-disclosure of foreign income can attract penalties under The Black Money (Undisclosed Foreign Income and Assets) and Imposition of Tax, 2015.

Messages trigger panic

Some taxpayers have claimed they received messages despite not having claimed deductions or exemptions. Others said they had not received any communication despite refunds being held back.

Although many had already been com-

plaining about liquidity issues arising out of returns being held back, it is this series of messages from the IT Department that has triggered panic. The concern is that discrepancies have been flagged with just 10 days remaining for the revised return filing deadline of December 31.

On Monday night, many taxpayers with stuck refunds said they received an SMS from the IT Department without any accompanying email with further details. Most taxpayers were clueless about responding to such communication without being made aware of the specific discrepancy in their tax returns. Many approached the Department through helpline numbers.

Old tax regime under scanner

At the heart of this issue is the sheer quantum of deductions being claimed, which are allowed primarily in the old tax regime. Increasingly, tax authorities have

been considering an end-date for the old tax regime, which would significantly simplify the returns process. Taxpayers, on the other hand, say that salaried individuals do not have much scope to evade taxes, and that measures should be taken to widen the taxpayer base instead.

The IT Department said the NUDGE campaign used advanced data analytics. Telling it as an initiative with a "trust-first approach", it said the taxpayers are being given an opportunity to review their ITRs and "voluntarily correct" any ineligible claims, wherever required. Taxpayers whose deduction or exemption claims are genuine and correctly made in accordance with law are not required to take any further action, it said.

While high-value refunds are under the scanner, sources said they have started issuing refunds, which are likely to reflect over the next 10 days. Moreover, taxpayers who

don't meet the December 31 deadline may still file an updated return from 1 January 2026, the Department said, subject to payment of additional tax liability.

A revised return can be filed three months before the end of the assessment year, that is, December 31. An updated return (ITR-U) can be filed within 48 months from the end of the assessment year (increased from 24 months in the Finance Act, 2025). An updated return can be filed even if the return was not previously filed. If the updated return is filed during 24-36 months from the end of the relevant AY, additional tax payable is 60% of the total tax and interest on additional income. For ITR-U filed 36-48 months after the AY, 70% additional tax is payable of the aggregate tax and interest.

Taxpayers are now demanding an extension of the December 31 filing deadline for revised returns. So far, over 15 lakh income tax returns have been revised for AY 2025-26.

• ENVIRONMENT

The great wall in the North: Why the Aravallis matter



NIKHIL GHANEKAR

THE NEW definition of the Aravallis, proposed by the Centre on October 13 and accepted by the Supreme Court on November 20, effectively excludes almost 90% of the range from protections against mining and other development activities, as per an internal assessment of the Forest Survey of India.

Critics fear that this definition, under which the Aravallis comprise any landform at an elevation of 100 metres or more above the local relief, would be a hammer blow for an already degraded hill range that provides diverse ecological and environmental services to northern and northwestern India.

The Centre on Wednesday wrote to states, directing them to comply with the directions of the Supreme Court and ensure that no new mining leases are to be granted in the Aravallis till a management plan for sustainable mining is finalised.

Sand barrier

At over a billion years old, the Aravallis are one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, formed during the Precambrian Era due to the collision of tectonic plates of the earth's crust. The 700-odd-km range stretches across four states (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi) and 37 districts, with 560 km lying in Rajasthan.

The present-day range, however, is much eroded compared to what the Aravallis were at their birth. Their degradation is due to both natural factors and human activities.

Yet, the Aravallis provide priceless ecological services. If the Western Ghats are considered the water tower and climate regulator of peninsular India, the Aravalli range is an ecological shield for the plains of Northwest and North India.

The range acts as a shield for the northern plains against the incursion of sand from the Thar desert in the west. This also protects air quality in the North. Any rising incursion of sand would be disastrous for the Delhi-NCR Region, which is already struggling to contain local sources of pollution.

Moreover, the hills also bring in a healthy amount of rainfall, which is essential for agriculture and drinking water needs of settlements that are located around them. As per studies, deforestation, quarrying and erosion has already led to 12 major gaps in the Aravallis. These gaps extend from Magra hills in Ajmer district to Khetri-Madhgarh hills in



An aerial view of some hills in the Aravalli range surrounded by dense settlements in Haryana. TASHI TOBYAL

• Four states, 37 districts: A vast span

- The Aravalli range stretches across four states — Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi. It spans 37 districts.
- Out of the 700-km odd spread of the range, 560 km is in Rajasthan alone.
- Human activity, specifically deforestation, quarrying and

- erosion, have created 12 major gaps in the range, causing incursion of sand towards the plains in Delhi and UP.
- The range is home to 22 wildlife sanctuaries. The highest, 16, are located in Rajasthan. Three of the 16 are tiger reserves — Ranthambore, Sariska and Mukundra.

and Jaisamand, the action plan adds.

Ecologist and curator of the Aravali Biodiversity Park, Gurgaon, Vijay Dhasmana said that rocks in Aravallis are highly fractured, weathered and porous, allowing rainwater to percolate deep into the ground instead of running off the surface. "This vast but invisible reserve is crucial for the water security of rapidly growing towns and cities such as Faridabad, Gurugram, and Sohna. Any disruption to this recharge system, through mining, construction, or deforestation, poses a direct and serious threat to regional water availability," Dhasmana said.

On the biodiversity and wildlife front, the ranges provide a unique dry, deciduous, and semi-arid landscape for a host of flora and fauna to flourish. The range is home to 22 wildlife sanctuaries, including 16 in Rajasthan, three of which — Ranthambore, Sariska, and Mukundra — are tiger reserves.

Key species found in this landscape in-

Range anxiety

The Aravalli range faces increasing threats from deforestation, mining, grazing, encroachment.

- It is repository of metals and minerals, including critical minerals.

Akash-NG is primarily designed for the IAF with an aim of intercepting high-maneuvering aerial threats that have low radar cross section (RCS), which is the electromagnetic signature of an airborne object.

The Akash-NG system has been developed with better deployability compared to other similar systems with a canisterised launcher. As they are canisterised, the missiles are stored and operated from specially designed sealed containers. The controlled internal environment of the canister not only simplifies transportation and storage but also significantly enhances the missile's shelf life and operational readiness.

The evolution

The initial version of Akash has an operational range of between 27 km and 30 km, and a flight altitude of around 18 km. However, Akash-NG has a range of up to 70 km. The latest version has a sleeker and lighter profile, improved effectiveness against low electromagnetic signature threats, and a smaller ground system footprint.

It comprises an indigenously developed radio frequency seeker, launcher, multi-function radar, and command, control and communication system.

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The maiden test of Akash-NG was conducted on January 25, 2021, from the Integrated Test Range off the coast of Odisha. On January 12, 2024, a successful flight test was conducted against a high-speed unmanned aerial target at low altitudes, paving the way for its user trials. User evaluation trials of Akash-NG on Tuesday met the provisional staff qualitative requirements and neutralised different types of aerial threats.

User evaluation trials

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• DEFENCE

Better range, sleeker profile: Latest version of Akash missile

Sushant Kulkarni

Pune, December 24

THE DEFENCE Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) on Tuesday completed the user evaluation trials (UET) of Akash-New Generation, also called Akash-NG, missile system, paving the way for its induction into the Indian Air Force (IAF). During the trials, the missiles successfully intercepted aerial targets at different ranges and altitudes.

The beginning

The DRDO began the development of Akash — a short-to-medium range surface-to-air missile — in the late 1980s as part of the Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme led by Dr APJ Abdul Kalam. Following the development trials in the 1990s and early 2000s, extensive user trials of the missile were conducted by the IAF and the Indian Army.

Akash is primarily designed to provide air defence cover to the vulnerable areas and critical installations. The weapon system can simultaneously engage multiple



The user evaluation trials of the Akash-NG missile on Tuesday. PTI

targets in group mode or in autonomous mode. It features built-in electronic counter-countermeasures (ECCM), meaning it has onboard mechanisms that can counter electronic systems that deceive detection systems.

Akash was inducted into the IAF in 2014 and into the Indian Army the next year. Both the IAF and the Indian Army currently operate multiple squadrons and

A big leap

- The initial version of Akash has a range of 27-30 km.
- Akash-NG has a range of up to 70 km

groups of missiles, respectively. The DRDO has said the Akash missile has 96% indigenous components.

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• PERSONAL FINANCE

Behind stuck refunds, I-T messages: Ineligible claims, suspect donations



THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2025



INDIA'S GROWTH

Vice president CP Radhakrishnan

Over the past decade, India has witnessed remarkable economic transformation and renewed national confidence. Bharat has emerged as the fourth largest economy in the world and is also the fastest-growing major economy

China's trade challenge

Beijing's WTO move less about tariffs, more about India's rise as a manufacturing competitor

CHINA'S RECENT DECISION to take India to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) over its industrial policy marks a subtle but significant shift in the political economy of global manufacturing. For the first time, Beijing's actions suggest it sees India not merely as a vast consumption market, but also as a potential structural competitor in global production—particularly in electronics. Over the past few months, China has filed multiple disputes at the WTO challenging India's production-linked incentive (PLI) schemes and tariff regime. One case, initiated in October, targets incentives for electric vehicles, advanced chemistry cells, and auto components. Another, filed this month, questions India's tariffs on information and communication technology products and subsidies for solar photovoltaic manufacturing. Beijing has also revived a long-pending appeal against India's mobile phone import duties first imposed in 2018. Formally, the complaints hinge on alleged violations of tariff bindings and prohibitions on import-substitution subsidies. But the concentration on specific sectors—and the timing—point to a broader strategic intent.

China is not a habitual litigant at the WTO. Despite persistent criticism of its own use of subsidies, preferential access to land and energy, and export-linked support, Beijing has generally avoided formal disputes that might invite reciprocal scrutiny. Its choice to move now signals that it perceives a material competitive risk emerging from India's industrial policy push. Electronics manufacturing lies at the heart of this response. For nearly three decades, China has dominated global electronics production with few credible challengers. India's PLI-backed expansion is the first serious attempt to contest that position at scale. The numbers explain why this has caught Beijing's attention. Smartphone production has risen from roughly \$3 billion in FY15 to an estimated \$71 billion by FY26. Mobile phone exports have jumped from about \$2 billion in FY16 to nearly \$28 billion. A decade ago, India imported close to 80% of its mobile phones from China; today, it meets almost all domestic demand through local manufacturing. A central driver of this transformation has been Apple. Nearly one-third of global iPhone production has shifted to India.

Over the past year, China has sought to slow this momentum through indirect means rather than overt trade action. Chinese engineers were withdrawn from Indian contract manufacturing facilities, including those operated by Foxconn. Exports of critical capital equipment were restricted, affecting electronics, solar and other manufacturing segments. Controls were also imposed on rare earth supplies. The timing is telling. These measures coincide with the approaching sunset of the flagship smartphone PLI scheme in March 2026. They also align with China's broader commercial strategy. Chinese smartphone brands dominate India's domestic market but export virtually nothing from India. The revived appeal on import duties appears aimed at ensuring that whatever limited supply-chain localisation exists through these firms is pulled back to China, even as they retain access to Indian consumers.

The broader implication is clear: China now views India as a manufacturing competitor in sectors mattering to global trade flows. The appropriate response is not to dilute ambition or retreat under pressure, but to consolidate gains—by extending effective incentive frameworks, improving execution and using the WTO process to manage external friction. The PLI architecture needs to be extended and deepened to preserve momentum and convert external pressure into durable competitive advantage. From that prism, Beijing's litigation is less about legal minutiae and more about signalling.

Positive climate news you may have missed this year

FOR THE PAST few years, I've been compiling year-end lists of the more neglected good and bad climate stories to give an idea of the immense amount of change as the world transitions to new sources of energy amid a gathering environmental crisis. Here's my selection of major developments over the past 12 months.

Some grids almost decarbonised: In some parts of the world, decarbonising electricity is approaching its endgame. Roughly three-quarters of power generation in the UK and Europe this year came from non-fossil sources, putting them in about the same place as Brazil and Canada, whose vast hydroelectric resources traditionally gave them some of the cleanest grids. With more renewables added each year, current projects under construction and in late-stage development should put Europe's grid between 80% to 90% clean energy, the level at which further advances will start to get far more difficult without massive battery usage, new flexible technologies, or both. That means a looming slowdown in renewable deployment, something that many will regard as some sort of failure. In fact, it's a testament to the monumental achievement so far, and an example the rest of the world should now emulate.

We may have passed peak cement: As much as 8% of the world's emissions come from the production of cement—but the collapse of China's real estate boom is turning that tide. The country's output through October was the lowest since 2009, suggesting that the full-year total will be in the region of 1.7 billion metric tonnes. With the sluggish 1-2% pace of growth forecast in the rest of the world, that suggests global consumption will be the lowest since 2012.

There may be further to fall. China still consumes 1.2 tons of cement per capita, about four times the rate of the rest of the world—but construction starts, a leading indicator for demand, are collapsing even faster, with commercial groundbreaking at its weakest since 2005.

EVs going global: If you were looking only at the parlous state of electric vehicle sales in some developed markets—the US, say, or Japan or Italy—you might think the entire technology is faltering. Far from it. Plug-in cars have been comprising more than half of all sales in China and just under a third in Europe in recent months.

EVs have had a sales share of more than 20% in recent months in Turkey, Thailand, and Vietnam. Markets as diverse as Nepal, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates are adopting EVs far faster than many developed countries.

I did a similar here's-what-you-missed exercise last year. Here's my attempt at an unbiased assessment:

A new dawn for solar: China's solar industry has endured a season in hell. We argued that rising sales and thinner spending would restore profitability. China's big six solar players have indeed cut capital expenditures to about half of last year's level, but new rules at home and ongoing trade protectionism elsewhere mean BloombergNEF expects installation this year to rise only about 16%. Far from returning to the black, losses are deepening, with little sign of relief in sight.

Charging up the grid: A key element of electricity bill increases after Russia's invasion of Ukraine was the pivotal role played by surging gas in setting the cost of power across the entire market. We argued that the rise of lithium-ion was likely to shave these peaks by giving batteries a bigger role and flattening the extreme spikes seen in previous years. That seems to be playing out in some places: Wholesale prices in Australia's main grid fell about 8% from a year earlier in the September quarter, thanks in part to reduced volatility and batteries undercutting gas.

Energy transition never did run smooth—but I've noticed over the past few years that events in retrospect look much better than the depressing prospect you get from a cursory look at the news. Let's hope that pattern plays out in 2026, too.

● DRAGON ASCENDING
A TRILLION-DOLLAR SURPLUS INDICATES THE SUPERPOWER'S GRIP ON THE WORLD'S TRADE REINS

China's geo-economic tactics

CHINA'S \$1 TRILLION trade surplus is not just a statistic. It is an affirmation of its ability to control global trade in a strategic fashion of its choice.

Notwithstanding the brushes it had with the US during 2025, the year ended on a high note for China. The trillion-dollar surplus coupled with renewed access to Nvidia's H200 chips mark the end to a year that saw the US and China scaling new highs of tariffs. At one stage, Chinese exports to the US and US exports to China were grappling with prospects of facing nearly 150% effective tariffs. From there, the year is ending on a much sober note, with most Chinese exports to the US now facing effective tariffs below 50% and US exports to China being taxed at just above 30%. These tariffs are a result of the November truce between Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping.

China's trade surplus of \$1 trillion was for up to November. The eventual full-year surplus will be larger. A simple learning from this huge surplus is that the rest of the world, like in the past several years, continues to buy much more from China than selling to it. The reorientation in global trade driven by US tariffs has not adversely affected China's capacities in this regard, at least not yet. China continues to produce almost all of what the world needs and can sell it at competitive prices. This economic efficiency has prevailed in spite of the efforts to decouple and diversify from it. While most major economies have introduced industrial policies for increasing local production to reduce sourcing from China, the results are yet to be visible.

It is noteworthy that China hasn't been rushing into free trade agreements

(FTAs) for avoiding high US tariffs. Having absorbed exports of \$525 billion, the US is still the largest export market for China. Russia and Germany are among the other \$100 billion plus export markets for India, and none of them have FTAs with China. The US, India and Germany have also applied various tariffs on Chinese exports. But if Chinese exports have prevailed nonetheless, then it points to a certain indispensability that many of them have achieved.

This indispensability and the fact that many new restrictive efforts haven't been able to thwart Chinese exports has an uncomfortable implication—China can heavily 'influence' industrial supply chains and global trade as it can control the flows of goods and services. The control imparts it a powerful and decisive geo-economic advantage. The strength of the advantage is evident from the outcomes of its recent trade brush with the US.

Unilateral US trade actions against China weren't able to achieve much. The truce struck since November has brought in a fragile equilibrium positioned on higher, but 'agreed' upon tariffs by both sides. The US decision to allow Nvidia to sell advanced H200 chips to China further shows China's

AMITENDU PALIT

Senior research fellow and research lead (trade and economics), Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore



geo-economic edge in being one of the largest consumers of chips, a fact that has incentivised the US government to allow sale of the chips under a revenue-sharing arrangement with Nvidia.

Going forward, China is likely to use its geo-economic advantage as a global consumer more effectively. Power competition with the US will turn demand to be domestic market-driven on both sides. The US has been using tariffs as a strategic tool for controlling access to its domestic market and extracting strategic concessions from other trade partners.

China too played the 'market' card by stopping purchase of US corn, soybeans, and wheat leading to weak prospects for US agricultural exports. It has agreed to resume buying only after the truce in November. China's geo-economic advantage therefore is not just in controlling producer supply chains: it is also in its ability to influence global exports by limiting their consumption.

China is aware of the global efforts to reduce sourcing dependency on it. It is also aware that in foreseeable future, these efforts will start producing results impacting its control over global supply chains. For China, therefore, it does not make strategic sense to keep producing

all that the world requires. It will specialise in producing what the world will find difficult to make locally. Electric vehicles, artificial intelligence-led machine applications, green products, legacy chips, rare earth elements, air-crafts, drones, and industrial robots are some of the areas where it will heavily focus. By pushing scale in these industries, it will, in turn, become the largest consumer of intermediate products used by these industries. This will ensure its control over the strategic supply chains as several intermediate exporters from other countries will suffer if they cannot sell to China.

The trillion-dollar surplus is not a flash in the pan. It marks China's capacity to exert geo-economic influence over the world. As it strengthens state-driven industrial policies for expanding the influence, larger surpluses can result in future.

What might change the scenario? The most critical variable is the Chinese state's ability to keep funding strategic economic specialisation the way it has for decades. If that ability reduces, then the specialisation efforts might be stunted, compromising China's geo-economic influence. Till now, notwithstanding cynical perspectives on China's domestic debt and its impact on industrial funding, funds for critical sectors have not reduced. The large language models developed by DeepSeek demonstrate scale-intensive use of state funds even in areas of non-traditional expertise. A lot of domestic economic upsets are necessary to make the Chinese state less capable of funding its strategic economic expansion. Till then, trillion-dollar-plus trade surpluses are likely to repeat as China's geo-economic capacities keep expanding.

Views are personal

The IndiGo fiasco and surge pricing



ROHIT KUMAR SINGH

Former secretary, ministry of consumer affairs

Surge pricing should not be banned, it should be disciplined. Regulation must not freeze markets, but it must civilise them

At the Delhi airport last week, a middle-aged professional, stranded after his IndiGo flight was cancelled late evening, refreshed his booking app repeatedly. In the span of 20 minutes, the fare on an alternative carrier for the same route jumped three times—each time by several thousand rupees. The aircraft had not changed, the distance had not changed, and the cost of fuel had not changed. Only its desperation had. That moment captures the real policy dilemma behind surge pricing in crisis situations.

Recent cancellations of many IndiGo flights was not merely an operational failure. It became a stress test for India's consumer protection framework in a high-concentration, algorithm-driven market. Surge pricing is an easy villain. It is also a misunderstood one.

India does not prohibit dynamic pricing. Nor should it. Dynamic pricing in itself is simply a way of allocating scarce capacity and signalling demand. The Consumer Protection Act, 2019 (CPA) does not outlaw surge pricing. What it prohibits are unfair trade practices—pricing that exploits information asymmetry or manipulates consumer choice.

Section 2(47) of the CPA defines unfair trade practices in broad, technology-neutral terms, while Section 49 empowers the Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA) to intervene against unfair pricing methods, including those driven by digital or algorithmic systems. The laws deliberately principle-based—a recognition that business models and technologies evolve faster than statute books. The challenge exposed by the IndiGo episode is therefore not the absence of law, but the absence of contextual application.

Each aviation disruption renews calls for hard fare caps. Political economy makes this almost inevitable, as the

inconvenience and public outrage push the government to "do something"—most visible being a blunt price ceiling.

Yet, blanket caps are economically unsound. They discourage rapid supply restoration as airlines may prefer to hold back marginal capacity rather than sell it at a price that does not justify the operational strain. They incentivise inventory withdrawal, especially on thinner routes. They also push pricing opacity underground. Over time, the apparent consumer win of visible fare control is offset by hidden costs and reduced reliability.

More fundamentally, hard caps treat normal peak demand and crisis demand as identical, ignoring a crucial legal and ethical distinction—consumer vulnerability. In festivals or holiday peaks, consumers broadly plan in advance and choose whether to travel at all. In genuine crises—mass cancellations, sudden airspace closures, extreme weather, medical emergencies—consumers are not exercising free choice. Regulation must recognise this difference and design for it.

India's aviation ecosystem already acknowledges exceptional circumstances. The Directorate General of Civil Aviation's Civil Aviation Requirements (CARs) lay down obligations for refunds, rebooking, meals, hotels, and passenger care in the event of cancellations and delays. These provisions are well-known and, at least in principle, enforceable. Yet pricing behaviour during such disruptions remains largely unregulated.

This is the missing link. A disruption that triggers special duties on service quality should also trigger special duties on pricing conduct. During objectively iden-

tifiable disruption events like several cancelled flights or severe weather, a temporary pricing framework should apply.

One option is to use pre-defined surge multipliers rather than open-ended repricing. Fares on affected sectors during the disruption window could be allowed to move within a certain multiple of the recent average fare for that route and time bracket. Another is to mandate price-stability windows once disruption thresholds are crossed: for a defined period, the fare cannot change more often than, say, once every 30 or 60 minutes.

Transparency can be improved by requiring disclosure of recent average fares for the same sector and time of day, enabling passengers to see how far the current fare deviates from normal. A further tool is to restrict ultra-high-frequency algorithmic repricing during crisis periods, forcing a slower, more accountable cadence of fare changes. Such measures preserve market signals while preventing panic-driven exploitation.

Airline fares today are set less by human revenue managers than by algorithms reacting in milliseconds to real-time data on bookings, competitors, holidays, events and even macro indicators. During the IndiGo crisis, fares reportedly changed multiple times within short intervals on key routes. To consumers, this feels predatory—even when the underlying system is simply following rules.

Regulation must therefore shift from suspicion to algorithmic accountability.

The CPA's unfair trade practice provisions apply equally to digital systems as to human actors. Airlines should be required to maintain auditable pricing records during

disruption windows—data inputs received, active rule sets, constraints in place, and prices generated time-wise. These records should be subject to post-event scrutiny with the ability to order remedies and penalties where patterns suggest exploitative conduct. This aligns with global regulatory trends that focus on outcome fairness rather than source-code disclosure.

Pricing regulation without strict enforcement of service standards is cosmetic. If airlines know that failure to honour rebooking commitments, refund timelines or passenger care duties will attract prompt and visible consequences, their incentives change. Consumer confidence will return only when passengers see that service failure sits at the centre of regulatory attention.

The way ahead is straightforward. The government should notify a Crisis Pricing Protocol under the CPA, operationalised jointly by the CCPA and DGCA. The protocol should do four things—define disruption thresholds clearly, so that airlines and passengers know when the market has entered a special regime; activate temporary pricing guardrails—surge bands, stability windows and transparency obligations; during that regime, with violations treated as potential unfair trade practices; mandate algorithmic auditability; and link pricing behaviour to strict enforcement of passenger service obligations under DGCA CARs, ensuring that those who profit from distress also bear heightened duties of care.

This approach preserves market efficiency in normal times while protecting consumers at moments of maximum vulnerability. Surge pricing should not be banned, it should be disciplined. Regulation must not freeze markets, but it must civilise them.

to encourage medium and heavy vehicle operators to pivot to EVs. Polluting factories must be located 500-600 km away from the capital, and a complete ban on stubble burning on bordering states would help in sustaining the air quality.

—RV Baskaran, Pune

● Write to us at feletters@expressindia.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fixing Delhi's air

Apropos of 'How to fix Delhi's air pollution disaster' (FE, December 24), air quality in Delhi is plummeting every day. Experts, environmentalists, the state, and the Centre speak and discuss threadbare measures during these periods and go out of sight in warmer months. India was serious

about its worsening air quality and with systematic plans. India must be serious enough too in taking mitigative steps, a few of which may take a little longer to derive benefits. This will involve both short-term and long-term measures, but every stakeholder involved must be meticulous and consistent. Short-term measures will help temporarily,

and will include mandating work-from-home and online classes, enforcing a strict ban on construction activities, evacuating the debris and other waste materials, duly adhering to dust control measures, and re-introducing the odd-even scheme. Long-term measures such as leveraging Vehicle Scrappage Policy

Santa Economy Gets Less Ho Ho Ho

US slows as Asia spreads festive cheer

Festival sales are projected to cross \$1 tn in the US this year, but growth is slowing, which makes Christmas a little less merry for Asian exporters. Americans are still buying expensive gifts in the shadow of a possible trade war with China, but they have started to pull back on holidays and dining out. Consumer sentiment remains strong, but is turning cautious in the EU and Britain as well. Inflation expectations are high as uncertainty over US tariffs drags on. Christmas sales are being driven by promotions across the board, and brands are absorbing higher input costs to remain competitive.

This season could be an inflection point for retailers because the well-heeled are keeping the Yuletide spirit alive for them. Impulse shopping is down at bargain supermarket chains. Online marketplaces are offering deals on essentials. There is also a rise in deferred payment purchases. The main body of consumers is pulling back and has to be lured with heavy discounts. The Santa effect is in play as shoppers spend in bursts to stretch their budgets. But it may not work for too long as consumer anxiety overtakes producers' ability to mark down prices. The trigger would be signs of fragility in the US job market.

Parts of the world like Asia, where Christmas sales don't matter as much, are reporting stable consumer sentiment as inflation eases. Some of the global uncertainty is rubbing off on them, but they remain cautiously optimistic. The Santa effect is being cast wider as retailers target younger demographics and rising purchasing power. Asian consumers prioritise value over exuberance, and this makes for an interesting marketplace for brands. Lifestyle choices are undergoing rapid changes in China and India, markets that require customised marketing. Festival shopping patterns differ in these countries, and one-size-fits-all strategies may not capitalise on domestic consumer confidence. These markets are spreading the Christmas cheer over many more months for global brands.

Make Chocolate Premium Again

This Christmas season could come with a bitter aftertaste. Chocolates are paying the price of cocoa's wild, wild ride, thanks to poor harvests in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, the world's leading producers. After soaring to record highs above \$12,000 a tonne last year, cocoa futures tumbled more than 50% in 2025 as tentative signs of crop recovery emerged. Yet, despite this late reprieve, chocolate lovers may not see prices drop at their local stores.

Manufacturers, wary of volatile cocoa markets, have locked in costs at higher levels, and some are adjusting ingredient mixes to reduce reliance on the bean. The result? The real deal — rich, cocoa-heavy chocolate — risks becoming a luxury indulgence rather than a festive staple. Earlier this year, McVitie's Club and Penguin bars in Britain were stripped of their 'chocolate' label after cocoa content was cut, now sold as 'chocolate-flavoured' instead. Nestlé has relabelled its not-so-chocolatey Toffee Crisps and Blue Ribbons. Meanwhile, startups like Italy's Foreverland are experimenting with carob, pumpkin seeds and chickpeas to create chocolate-like products for confectionery, ice cream and baked goods. Cocoa-free, or fermentation-based, masses are increasingly used in coatings, fillings and bakery to substitute part of the cocoa content — often quietly. Even if cocoa prices soften next year, choc prices may not: many manufacturers have already locked in higher raw material costs.

For consumers, clear labelling is no longer optional, it's essential. It's the only way to distinguish festive compromise from genuine indulgence. If you want that classic cocoa richness in your truffle, or choco Santas, be prepared to pay extra for the real taste. Christmas, after all, is no time for imitation cheer.



JUST IN JEST

To dodge the shambolic present in your biz, look back and forward

NY Resolution No. 8: Pitch Past & Present

Lads and ladies, especially peeps of commerce, let's toast to No. 8 on the much-loved HETLoR — 2025 Honest ET List of Resolutions — the most bulletproof of all New Year resolutions: always hark back to the glorious past while simultaneously pitching a glorious future. That way, the present — this quarter, and probably the next many — is a swamp of losses, broken supply chains, and PowerPoint decks that look like crumpled Post-its in the bin.

Consider the genius of nostalgia. When your balance sheet resembles a standard north Indian railway station during the festival season, simply invoke a golden age, any golden age, the more distant the better. Instantly, shareholders are lulled into a warm bath of retro reassurance of mythological proportions. Then pivot — hard — into the future. Announce that by 2030, your company will colonise Mars, reinvent sambar and monetise the concept of 'vibes'. Investors adore a visionary who can lose money today but guarantee utopia tomorrow. The present, meanwhile, is treated like a suspicious relative at a wedding: acknowledged briefly, then ignored. This is the brilliance of the resolution — it's a two-pronged strategy of temporal misdirection. Past glory, future grandeur; present irrelevance. So, as the champagne corks fly, remember: business failure is not a tragedy, it's a narrative opportunity. Merry Christmas!



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CHAPATI 2025 reforms form the base for a superstructure to emerge in late 2020s-early 2030s

A Sixer to Set the Boundary



Ashok Malik

India's economic policymakers are in the final days of a gritty, combative year. There have been achievements — relatively high GDP growth rates — but demonstrable challenges too. The sanctions onslaught by the Trump regime, investment wariness, and hesitation as to the depth of the recent consumption spurt are all concerns. Global conditions matter. Even if India does its utmost, there will be factors beyond its influence.

Yet, India must persevere. This year, amid tariff and trade wars, the Modi government has pushed ahead with reforms and correctives that suggest political resolve. This has taken the form of legislation as well as policy action. While the steps cover many areas, there are two cross-cutting themes: making life simpler for stakeholders; harmonising several moving parts for an optimum manufacturing environment.

The latter objective requires elucidation. Make in India has been an obsession with Modi since he took office. Manufacturing supply chains are about the toughest needle to move. Even so, Modi and his team have persisted. They have looked to not just increase the share of manufacturing in GDP — and admittedly that specific metric is still a work in progress — but a transformed character of manufacturing. Green and energy transition-related manufacture, as well as that related to electronics and mobile phones, and military hardware have been prioritised.

India's defence manufacturing upgrade began in good earnest 11 years ago. Results — including an export increment — have become apparent only in the past 2-odd yrs. It would be realistic to consider this gestation period



while studying the possible velocity of the 2025 reforms.

Reformist measures this year can be classified into six buckets:

► **Rationalising taxation**

GST's simplification to broadly a 2-slab structure — 5% and 18% — acted as an immediate Diwali consumption stimulus. Going forward, its true test will lie in how optimistic smaller businesses feel in navigating the GST matrix and taking investment bets.

In parallel, I-T cuts for middle-class individuals and replacement of I-Tax Act of 1961 with a new law minus thousands of complexities were welcome moves. Gradually, step by step, India is moving down the path of a modern economy that depends on indirect taxes amid rising consumption, rather than frontloading and cost-inefficient tax extraction.

► **Consolidation of 29 disparate laws into 4 labour codes**

The codes give employees security and fair wages. They give employers flexibility without there will no appreciable job creation in the first place. They also incentivise female participation in the workforce. India needs all three. It can't pick and choose. The codes are an attempt to ensure it doesn't need to.

► **Maritime economy**

This, including, but not limited to, incubating a serious ship-building industry, emerged as a clear focus in 2025. Parliament's monsoon session approved 5

landmark Bills: Bills of Lading 2025, Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill 2025, Coastal Shipping Bill 2025, Merchant Shipping Bill 2025, and Indian Ports Bill 2025. Overhaul of India's ports, coastal shipping and logistics-related regulatory architecture — by superseding even a pre-WW1 law — was direly needed.

► **MSMEs encouraged to be ambitious**

Definition of small enterprises was expanded to a turnover of ₹100 cr, and of medium enterprises to ₹500 cr. Both represented a doubling. This is a relief for MSMEs that remain artificially stunted due to fear of losing category fiscal benefits. Indian entrepreneurship and job creation will inevitably gain.

► **Nuclear**

Sustainable Harnessing and Advance of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act was long over. It reversed a unique piece of self-harm in the shape of India's unviable nuclear liability law of 2010. The outcome of concerted action by a stubborn BJP (then in opposition) and Manmohan Singh's in-house opponents in Congress, that 2010 law prevented any meaningful nuclear commerce and energy accretion.

With small modular reactors (SMRs)

as an emergent reality, and with nuclear power now intrinsic to sustainable climate practices, SHANTI could be a force multiplier. The new Act allows private and international investment in designated nuclear energy projects. Since the insurance sector's support is so vital to this endeavour — as, indeed, to many other economic and developmental goals — the recent law permitting 100% FDI in insurance is notable. Both these laws will help attract investment.

Additionally, SHANTI will integrate India still further with global nuclear (especially SMR) manufacturing supply chains.

► **Trade**

An enlightened approach to external commerce coalesced into trade deals with Britain and New Zealand. In early 2026, there is a likelihood of similar agreements with the EU and Canada, and presumably an imaginative relook at economic engagement with Southeast Asia.

Somewhat relatedly, QCOs, intended as a tool of last resort to protect against shoddy, underpriced imports, had become an epidemic in recent years. This protectionist charade ended up hurting manufacture in India itself.

In late 2025, major corrections were taken by rescinding QCOs for textiles intermediates, plastics and chemicals, and various types of components. QCOs might still be needed in the future. But exacting due diligence is now a systemic mandate. This will support India's manufacturing aspirations as well as its credibility as a trading partner.

None of this means 2026 will be a cakewalk — not for India, not for the world economy. However, GoI reforms of 2025 have created the base for a superstructure to emerge in the late 2020s-early 2030s. The rest is destiny.

The writer is partner, The Asia Group (TAG), and chair of its India practice

fog, the most convenient natural alibi — misses the larger truth. The real failure lies in institutional silos. Trains do not kill elephants; siloed government departments do.

Here's an example: Barikola Jhongi village is tucked amid forests in Jharkhand's Hazaribagh district, a site that became popular after two hathi passes. Here, grass-covered wildlife overbridges for elephants were built in 2015. A decade later, villagers say the giants have long deserted the corridor. The bridges now serve a humble purpose: guiding cows, goats and sheep to pasture. A railway engineer accompanying an ET team in August acknowledged the truth: elephants have chosen other routes to cross the newly laid railway line.

Yet, earlier this year, the railways sanctioned 11 more hathi passes at a cost of ₹24 cr along a 55-km stretch in Odisha under the Chakradharpur division alone — a major railway hub headquartered in south Jharkhand. Officials insist the new structures will attract elephant herds, citing a fresh budgetary innovation: plantations of jackfruit and banana trees to entice jumbos.

In the wake of the Assam tragedy, the Chakradharpur railway division announced the cancellation of eight trains between December 22-24, citing heightened elephant movement. Typically,

the forest department issues advisories on the presence of jumbos, prompting the railways to impose temporary speed restrictions. For example, trains are often directed to not exceed 40 kmph during night hours on elephant corridors along the Jharkhand-Odisha border.

With the rapid expansion of expressways and railway lines — and an unrelenting push to run trains faster — wildlife habitats, including critical elephant corridors, are set to shrink even further in the years ahead. To be fair, GoI has begun adopting select mitigation measures: seismic sensor-based elephant intrusion detection systems, along with ramps, level crossings, fences, barricades, underpasses and overpasses.

Yet, the heart of the problem lies elsewhere. At Rail Bhawan, performance is still measured largely by speed and punctuality — not by how many elephants are saved. For the environment ministry, the emphasis appears to be on generating an ever-growing list of

recommendations. Its March 2025 report, prepared with the Wildlife Institute of India, for instance, proposed a whopping 705 new structures — including 65 underpasses and 22 overpasses — without grappling with the question of funding.

Compounding this is a persistent coordination deficit on the ground, where the railways, forest departments and local police often operate in silos rather than as a unified response system.

In February, when representatives of 8 technology firms landed in Chakradharpur to demonstrate elephant-detection systems, railway officials had a far more basic requirement: the availability of 2 elephants for the trial.

After failed attempts to source the jumbos from zoos in Jamshedpur and Ranchi, officials had to delay the selection process by 4 mths, exposing once again the costs of departmental silos.

The technology designed to detect elephant movement up to 20 m from railway tracks, is widely seen as a potential tool to reduce train-elephant collisions.

Yet, its rollout has been halting, and its effectiveness remains far from conclusively established.

If silos persist, so will elephant deaths. Coordination isn't optional; it's the last line of defence for jumbos.

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abiding the state to respond to emerging and non-standard employment forms.

► **Contractual to real**

Under EPF Act, liability was tied to basic wage as contractually defined, incentivising artificial salary splitting. Supreme Court in APFC v. G4S Security Services' (2023) reaffirmed the narrow contractual definition under the old law.

The labour codes break from this past. Wages now encompass all remuneration payable. PF wages can no longer be engineered below statutory minimum wages (excluding HRA). Statutory wage norms now override contractual drafting, ending decades of suppressed retirement benefits.

► **50% rule**

To prevent misuse of exclusions, the code introduces a uniform safeguard where excluded components exceed 50% of total remuneration, the excess is added back to wages. This closes the most exploited loophole under the EPF regime without disturbing genuine variable pay or performance-linked incentives.

► **Low-wage earner support**

The code also allows differential contribution rates based on paying capacity, and enables state support for low-wage workers through enhanced interest rates or state-funded contributions.

This redistributive architecture aligns directly with the objective of dignified and adequate social protection.

► **Gig worker schemes**

Special schemes for gig, platform, unorganised and construction workers are intended as supplements, not substitutes. Where an employer-employee relationship exists — or can be deemed to exist — PF-based social insurance remains the normative baseline. Special schemes serve as bridges into, and overlaps upon, that baseline.

► **PF liability**

Allowances have long

formed part of basic wages for PF purposes, a position settled by the court in 'Bridge & Roof Co.' (1963), and reaffirmed in 'Vivekananda Vidya Mandir' (2019). Against this settled law, the 50% rule does not necessarily raise employer liability. In fact, where courts earlier permitted inclusion of up to 100% of allowances, the statutory exclusion of 50% may even reduce exposure.

► **Wage ceilings**

Concerns about sudden liability escalation are further mitigated by wage ceilings under Section 2(89) and Schedule 5. These provisions allow GoI to cap contributory wages and, under the proviso to Section 16(1)(a), even prescribe nil or reduced employee contribution rates for specific classes. This flexibility allows protection of take-home pay for low-wage workers while retaining employer contributions.

► **Compliance rationalisation**

The code reduces labour costs by lowering compliance friction. Multiple statutes with divergent definitions, registrations, returns and inspections are replaced by a single, integrated framework. Digitised registrations, online filings and risk-based inspections cut transaction costs, inspector discretion and informal compliance expenses. For smaller and growing firms, lower compliance costs reduce incentives to remain informal, broadening the contribution base over time.

The code replaces EPF Act's employer-centric logic with a worker-centric framework. While retaining familiar institutional forms, it sheds PF's colonial legacy as a mere savings instrument and repositions it as a tool of social justice.

The writer is former additional central provid



A thought for today

"Bah," said Scrooge,
"Humbug"

CHARLES DICKENS, A Christmas Carol

On A Wing & A Prayer

New airlines, greenlit by GOI, will fly into the same business turbulence as old ones

All perked up that three companies got a green signal to fly passenger planes? It's great news, sure, but it's a long road to seeing those planes fly – NOCs are perhaps the easiest step in the highly complex people-heavy business. Cargo is that much more stable, growing, and the segment that often rescues the sector. Getting planes off the tarmac is a challenge and keeping them airborne is where at least 13 airline companies have crashed in India. These include the most successful ones, Jet Airways and Kingfisher – both brutal stories of businesses that went into a tailspin over a messy hash of financial stress, infra constraints, regulatory weaknesses and abundant mismanagement.

There's something curious about how passenger aviation in India remains stuck in the same morass for decades despite being the world's third largest aviation market in passenger traffic – 241mn flyers in 2024. There's enough analysis of the challenges – high operating costs, fuel & non-fuel, costs of repair and maintenance, shortage of pilots, not enough planes, ageing fleets, leasing itself a tug-of-war. Foreign makers of planes eye the expanding market but are wary of how quickly a robust operation can go turtle. Yet, while there's tomes on *how* any airline business sank, there's nearly not enough on *why* any airline was allowed to reach

that point. Aviation's a mega contributor to the economy. So, every successful operation that's allowed to fail hurts considerably. That aviation had become a duopoly was evident ever since Tatas bought Air India. Why wait for an IndiGo fiasco to move the files for bringing in more companies? New ventures enter a sector that hasn't seen fundamental issues addressed – complexities inherent to the business and, at best, an inattentive regulator.

Running a plane has low-margin profits. Thin balance sheets can falter. Even the big players squeeze passengers, even those who buy so-called 'low-cost' tickets – extra fees for baggage, seat selection and meals etc. Yet, flyers must endure companies cutting corners. Severe safety lapses, fatigued pilots, poor route planning, flight cancellations – flying has become a costly nightmare. Regional players and new routes – short routes between Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities especially – can be a fabulous market in India, and NOCs and GOI support come not a day too soon. But planes can't fly on jugaad and band-aid. Much more needs done to ensure new airlines aren't pies in the sky.

Justice Denied

Three gruesome crimes in UP show how govt, court, society can further victimise the victims

Ten years ago, a mob dragged Mohd Akhlaq out of his Dadri home and lynched him. Justice moves tortuously slowly in India. So, that his killers still haven't been convicted barely raises eyebrows. But even by our shabby standards, it defies belief that the state has now decided to withdraw the charges against all the accused. Supposed reason: inconsistencies in the statements of prosecution witnesses. But surely the solution is to build a stronger case. Law & order would mean diddy squat if the state just looked the other way every time such a challenge came up. The court that rejected this prosecution plea as "baseless" found itself asking incredulously: Have you ever heard of a murder case being withdrawn?

When justice is stained even in cases that proceed under heavy public gaze, it spreads an awful hopelessness through those proceeding under routine light. Delhi high court's decision to suspend the jail term of expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar is another such blemished moment. Supposed reason: "MLA is not a public servant." Recall that this 2017 Unnao case saw real movement only after SC transferred it to Delhi. Only then was Sengar convicted both of raping a minor and conspiring in her father's death. For the survivor and her family to fear that the HC decision will re-draw the wrath of Sengar's henchmen, is logical. It's not unlike how Akhlaq's family were the ones to become *persona non grata* in their village, forced to scatter hither thither "for security reasons".

Consider, finally, a 'successful' case. A special POCSO court has convicted five men for the gruesome gangrape of a mother and daughter; along NH-91 nine years ago. But the family still has to keep shifting homes, because guess how neighbours respond when they find out about the rape case? With contempt and hostility. They, like so many others in India, are victimised because they are victims.

Meri/Teri Chrissmas

The usual festive festering

Bachi Karkaria

O come all ye carols, freshened and updated, O come ye, O co-ome ye, to E-rra-tica! O Come along and sing them.

Out of tune or harmonised O sing them. Or hum-um them, But don't ser-mon-ise.

Hark, the estate agent sings

Promising such wondrous things.

Grecian name and add-ons pl-ush

Commode with Italian flush.

Why not buy two flats as pa-air

Sky villa castles in the air?

The towers are dizz-ily hi-high

Thanks to pumped up F-S-I!

Yes, you can have deluxe gallo-o-ore

If you shell out hundred crore!

Urban plight, hillside blight,

Jangling all the way.

Oh what a pain it is to live

Just anywhere today.

The cities are all jammed up

With traffic morr-till night.

O'er the bumps we go,

Cussing left and right!

Himalayas are no better,

Construction blocks the view.

O what short sight it is to build

On slopes and riverbeds all too.

Oh come all ye faithful,

Spitfully triumphant.

erratica

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A thought for today

"Bah," said Scrooge,
"Humbug"

CHARLES DICKENS, A Christmas Carol

He'll Make America Gasp Again

Don's second coming has been a no-holds-barred demolition job, of laws, norms, alliances & institutions, at breakneck speed. He'll stay unfiltered & unchecked. Next year will see more of an exhausted world adjusting

Seema Sirohi



No one can deny Trump's first year of his second coming was a shocker. Who would have thought he could demolish, destroy and dismantle everything at warp speed?

Expect Project Break-It-Down to continue alongside Project Break-Up – with old friends. Trump will remain a street-fighting man without filters, and, interventions to implant any filter will keep failing. It's natural the new year will bring new insults, new anger and new ways to hate. It's time to buy a hazmat suit if you don't like MAGA in Mar-a-Lago.

Fear and anxiety will thicken the air like winter pollution in Delhi with no escape. The blacklist of countries out to get America will grow. Those without proper papers will flood 'safe' zones like New York, Chicago and the Republic of California. Even those with valid documents will shudder to leave on a jet plane. They don't know if they can come back again. Tickets to and from America will get cheaper.

Non-White immigrants of legal and illegal variety will continue to be blamed – for unemployment, high crime, housing shortage, food prices, antisemitism and disappearing dollars. V-P Vance is already on the job. Culture wars will intensify. No more gigantic Hanuman statues like the one in Texas or mosques sprouting in every neighborhood. Leave your sharia home or go back.

Swallow hard, swat away the butterflies in your stomach and enter 2026 with prior knowledge that nothing is out of bounds and that laws don't (really) apply. The system can pretend it exists – district courts, then appellate and then the Supreme Court – but in reality, it's overwhelmed and Trump-ed. It works in spasms but is quickly set 'right' by the appointed-for-life Supreme Justices placed there by the man in question.

Trump's legacy is meant to haunt America and the world for decades so what's another year? Best get used to it.

A zebra can't change its stripes and all that. He will continue to shatter your most deeply held beliefs in the rudest, boldest, most obnoxious manner.

Ask the Europeans – those lefty sophisticates living on 50 grades of cheese and wine – how life's been with 'daddy' as Nato's top gun christened Trump. They are thinking of Armageddon but don't have the money/men/material/morale to wage one. They won't incite a war they can't fight themselves. True, they were partly put up to playing dangerously in Ukraine by previous

give, and Xi, to take. He sheathed his tariff sword back in Oct and it will likely stay in the scabbard – Xi came to the game with a bigger one. Trump will keep selling soybeans to China to maintain access to rare minerals or his military-industrial complex collapses. Those with a historical bent of mind will remember endless words about US-China competition to save the world from the dragon. Fuhgeddaboutit.

Everyone will be required to play in their zones. If you don't like the referee, too bad. Trump will up the game in his backyard but won't intervene in

other plays unless necessary for survival.

Those in the Western Hemisphere

will sleep badly, suffer

from nightmares and wake up to gunboats crawling their waters. Like the old times.

People in the Eastern Hemisphere will hedge more while trying not to fall on their faces. Trump has made 'strategic autonomy' fashionable and now everyone wants a piece.

Books on India's many versions of it will fly off the shelves as alliance-weary diplomats

try to learn the great rope trick.

Trump may tire of entertaining field marshals in the White House if they don't deliver the goods or not as many as promised, but who's to say. He has an abiding love of uniforms especially when they cover men who genuflect. He might be tempted to dabble in the Kashmir problem, depending

on the shenanigans of Pakistan's many lobbyists.

His ambassador to India, Sergio Gor, will try to convince him otherwise. Meddling in K-land is a non-starter but Trump will see a Nobel peace prize instead. If a 28-point plan planted by Rawalpindi does wiggle its way to the Oval Office, expect India's political establishment to have a fit and order Dhurandhar Part 3.

But it's also possible that a sleep-deprived Trump won't have time to make more peace, with the 2026 midterm elections looming, his popularity falling, his base fracturing and his domestic agenda faltering. Another Great Gatsby-themed party might feel better. Maybe even remodelling another bathroom in the White House? But no matter what happens, he won't forget to blame 'sleepy Joe Biden'. Everything is a 'hoax' after all.

Job Guarantee: Lost In BJP-Cong Alphabet Soup

The MGNREGA vs G RAM G debate is mostly about naming. What's getting lost is that NDA's scheme doesn't address the key weaknesses of UPA's scheme: proliferation of fake job cards and delayed payments

Neeraj Kaushal



MGNREGA – India's employment guarantee scheme – is no more. GOI scrapped it last week and replaced it with another tongue-twister acronym: VB-G RAM G. MGNREGA had many problems and the new scheme has left them largely unaddressed.

MGNREGA penetration was lowest in the poorest states (Bihar and UP) that also generate the most migrants. For an employment guarantee scheme that aimed to reduce migration and guarantee manual work to the poorest, this remained a major flaw. VB-G RAM G makes no attempt to address this. MGNREGA uptake was highly uneven across states and the effect of its withdrawal will also be highly uneven.

Govt claims that the new scheme expands the scope of the guaranteed employment scheme by increasing promised days of manual employment from 100 to 125 days. Yet, because of the cost-sharing formula that requires state govt to bear 40% of the cost, the new scheme will have a shrunken reach if state govt are not able or willing to put in their share. Under MGNREGA, Centre paid for all of the wage cost and 75% of the non-wage cost.

Three types of states would be most affected: the fiscally stressed, the poorest, and those with the highest MGNREGA penetration. Note, financing formula for Northeast and Himalayan states/UT is 90:10 (Centre-state ratio) in effect the same as under MGNREGA.

Based on their debt to GDP ratios, the top three most fiscally stressed states (excluding the Himalayan and Northeast states) are Punjab, West Bengal and Bihar. Punjab meets its labour needs with migrant workers. The salience of a scheme contingent on manual work for a state that meets its own labour needs with migrant workers should be limited. Bengal has been deprived of MGNREGA for the past three years, and the future under the new scheme doesn't look too promising. Bihar will have trouble launching VB-G RAM G, having

rolled out multiple welfare schemes without secured funding during the recent elections.

Based on the multidimensional poverty index, the three poorest states are Bihar, Jharkhand, and UP. Bihar and UP have the lowest MGNREGA employment generation per capita. Jharkhand is slightly better but not much. Only 0.2% of the farmers in Bihar and 4% of the farmers in UP received 100 days of work, says an India Development Review report.

The top three states with the highest penetration of MGNREGA, in terms of person-days MGNREGA employment per capita (or per capita poor) were:



Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Rajasthan as per the Economic Survey 2023-24. Tamil Nadu with 1% of the nation's poor received 15% of the funds and Kerala with 0.1% of the nation's poor received 4% of the funds. These states also generated proportionately more MGNREGA jobs.

Clearly, these states have much better administrative capacity to implement the scheme. They will also have to shell out a larger sum if they wish to keep VB-G RAM G at the same scale as MGNREGA.

NGOs have criticised VB-G RAM G for being supply driven whereas they claim that MGNREGA was demand driven. They imply that employment under MGNREGA

was available on demand, but under the new scheme employment would last only till the funds last or project is finished. This distinction is much exaggerated. The framers of MGNREGA had wanted it to be demand driven. In practice, it has never been so. A study by Azim Premji University showed that 39% of all job card holders interested in working did not get a single day's work during 2020-2021. On average, those who received MGNREGA jobs got just 50 days of work. Social activists argue that the rights-based approach empowers the poor. Yet, if the gap between the so-called 'right' and reality is so high, why make so much of it?

Most studies show that MGNREGA increased income, consumption, and lowered rural poverty. It became an automatic stabiliser during Covid – higher allocation increased incomes and rescued millions from falling into poverty. The biggest weakness of MGNREGA was its implementation. The scheme reeked of political patronage and corruption. Instances of fake job cards, fake enrolment, and fake projects were not uncommon, and village sarpanches extracted their cut from each MGNREGA project. Few capital assets were created.

Experts have criticised VB-G RAM G for imposing a "pause window" of 60 days that states are required to notify in advance. The pause window was not essential given that under MGNREGA most job creation was during April-June, when farmers did not need agriculture workers. Yet, it's important that the guaranteed employment scheme, which creates virtually no productive assets, doesn't pull away workers who are productively employed by farmers.

Opposition parties have spent more time poking holes at the new name and less on its content. Criticising the new programme for its name has been a waste of time, a sign of non-seriousness, and most likely a trap to keep political debate on the name and not the substance. The fact is most recipients did not know that Gandhiji's name was associated with MGNREGA and most would not care what VB-G RAM G means if like its predecessor the scheme also reeks of faked rolls, inflated employment numbers, delayed payments, and corruption.

The writer teaches at Columbia University

Sacredspace



Love is an intangible thing. When you truly love, you learn that what you feel is more significant than anything that you can see. Love has more power than any weapon. It is more life giving than food or medicine.



Editor's TAKE

Aravallis: A hill too far

The Aravallis have withstood eons but may not withstand regulatory myopia. Redrawing definitions should not redraw India's environmental conscience

Albert Einstein once famously said, "Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity; and I'm not sure about the universe." Few lines capture our collective thinking and behaviour more aptly. Have we not inflicted enough environmental damage already that we now seem determined to wound ourselves further by decimating the Aravallis, a landform that has existed for eons, long before the first human ever walked this earth? The Supreme Court approved redefinition of the Aravalli Hills has ignited a serious environmental controversy, with implications that extend far beyond cartographic precision. By adopting a new benchmark that recognises only landforms rising at least 100 metres above their local relief as "Aravalli", the official footprint of one of India's oldest mountain ranges risks being drastically shrunk.

Opening vast tracts to mining, real estate, and infrastructure pressures might well kill the Aravallis. The Aravallis may not be the highest, but they are not just another small hill system. Stretching across Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi, they act as a natural barrier against desertification, regulate groundwater recharge, moderate the local climate, and serve as a biodiversity refuge in arid land. In the Delhi-NCR region especially, they function as a critical green lung, absorbing pollution and checking unrestrained urban sprawl.

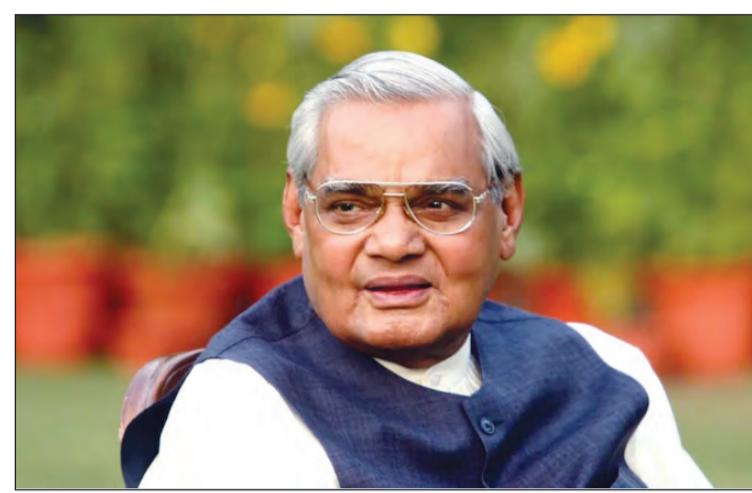
To weaken their protection is to tamper with an already fragile ecological balance. The government has sought to reassure critics, arguing that mining is permitted in only 0.19 per cent of the Aravallis. It has also paused new mining leases pending further study. However, this assurance rings hollow when scrutinised closely. The cited figure is based on the total area of 34 districts loosely associated with the Aravallis, not the actual hill range. As per the Forest Survey of India, the Aravallis cover about 40,483 sq km in Rajasthan alone. By contrast, applying the new 100-metre local relief definition would exclude over 99 per cent of these identified hills, dramatically reducing the officially recognised range. More troubling is the use of "local profile" as the baseline for measuring elevation, rather than sea level. Entire districts with significant ecological and cultural value—such as Sawai Madhopur, Chittorgarh, and Nagaur—have disappeared from the updated list submitted to the court. This raises legitimate concerns that exclusion, rather than inclusion, has become the guiding principle. It is not only about mining alone. While mining remains a visible threat—particularly illegal and incremental expansion—the larger danger lies in what follows de-recognition. Once an area is no longer officially designated as "hill" Aravalli, it becomes more vulnerable to real estate projects, highways, and urban expansion. What should be done? The ongoing court-mandated study must be transparent and scientific and include independent geological and ecological experts. Aravalli conservation requires a holistic approach, factoring in its ecological importance rather than narrow topographical details. The need of the hour is to have an Aravalli protection law to ensure the Aravallis stay the way they are.

Atal Bihari Vajpayee at 101: The making of a Parliamentarian

Revisiting Atal Bihari Vajpayee's early parliamentary years offers instructive insights. Long before he became a consensual prime minister, he was shaped by debate, dissent, and dialogue



UTTAM KUMAR SINHA



Christmas Day this year marks the 101st birth anniversary of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. In contemporary political memory, Vajpayee is recalled primarily as a prime minister, a statesman who reached out to Pakistan, conducted nuclear tests, and led India through a decisive coalition era. Yet, long before he became the face of governance, Vajpayee was first and foremost a parliamentarian. His formative years in the Lok Sabha, beginning with his debut in 1957, shaped not only his own political temperament but also the future trajectory of the All India Bhartiya Jan Sangh (BJS) and, eventually, the Bhartiya Janata Party.

Vajpayee entered Parliament at the young age of 33 as one of the four BJS members elected to the Second Lok Sabha. It was an era when Parliament was adorned by towering figures. The Opposition included seasoned socialists and conservatives who believed deeply in parliamentary debate. For a first-time Member of Parliament (MP) from a marginal party, it was not an easy chamber to navigate. Yet Vajpayee spoke freely and fearlessly from the very beginning.

He blossomed quickly as a keen debater and gifted orator. His interventions were marked by clarity, wit, and a striking confidence that belied his political marginality. He was not overawed by seniority or stature. Instead, he enriched parliamentary proceedings with arguments that demanded attention, even when they provoked disagreement.

As documented, the Second Lok Sabha's (1957-62) speaking record offers a revealing picture of parliamentary engagement. At one extreme was Thakar Dass Bhargava, the outspoken Congressman from Hissar, whose speeches and interventions exceeded 56 hours, closely matching Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. On the Opposition benches, Brij Raj Singh, an independent MP, from Firozabad spoke for over 29 hours, with Vajpayee not far behind.

This was an impressive achievement for a first-time MP from one of the smallest parties in the Lower House. It underlined not only Vajpayee's energy and preparation but also his instinctive understanding of Parliament as the central arena of politics. Being part of a small Opposition had one unexpected advantage. It was easier to get time to speak. Vajpayee made full use of this opportunity and, in doing so, began the slow process of legitimising the Jan Sangh within India's parliamentary system.

CHRISTMAS DAY THIS YEAR MARKS THE 101ST BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF ATAL BIHARI VAJPAYEE. IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL MEMORY, VAJPAYEE IS RECALLED

PRIMARILY AS A PRIME MINISTER, A STATESMAN WHO REACHED OUT TO PAKISTAN, CONDUCTED NUCLEAR TESTS, AND LED INDIA THROUGH A DECISIVE COALITION ERA

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 The Pioneer

ment's leftward economic shift and warned against Soviet-style policies. When the government proposed promoting cooperative farming, Masani attacked it as a step towards collectivisation. Vajpayee supported him vigorously. In a March 1959 debate, Vajpayee argued that such policies "would lead to a weakening of democracy in India," capturing his early scepticism of state overreach.

Parliament also broadened Vajpayee's engagement with the world beyond India. He followed developments in Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and particularly Tibet with growing concern. Along with Masani, he repeatedly pressed Nehru to support the Tibetans against China. This was not only an ideological position but also a strategic one, tied to anxieties about communism and India's border security.

Nowhere was Vajpayee's questioning sharper than in matters of foreign policy and secrecy. On 30 November 1960, during the Lok Sabha debate on the Indus Waters Treaty, he challenged the government's opacity. "Why should they be so shy and so secretive about it?" he asked. Earlier, during discussions on the Indo-Pakistan rail-link agreement signed at Rawalpindi, he had pressed Jagjivan Ram, the railway minister, with a pointed question: "May I know how any agreement can be reached without the details being discussed? ... Are we to understand that Government have formulated their policy without discussing the details?"

His concern extended to India's position in Tibet following the 1954 Sino-Indian Agreement. Indian traders faced restrictions, taxes, and curbs on movement. Raising both economic and security issues, Vajpayee asked whether the government even knew how many traders were crossing through various border passes. "Are we to understand that we do not have our men at the passes?" he demanded, exposing gaps in state capacity and intelligence.

These interventions reveal a Vajpayee already grappling with questions that would shape India's future, from transparency in governance and national security to economic world. They also show a parliamentarian who believed deeply in questioning authority from within the system.

Revisiting Atal Bihari Vajpayee's early parliamentary years offers instructive insights. Long before he became a consensual prime minister, he was shaped by debate, dissent, and dialogue. At a time when Parliament often appears diminished, his example affirms an enduring truth. Democracy is strengthened not by power alone, but by persuasion exercised through words.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

A person dressed as Santa Claus distributes gifts among children on Christmas in Bikaner, Rajasthan.

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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DISABILITY RIGHTS MUST BE PROTECTED WITHOUT COMPROMISE

The Central Administrative Tribunal (CAT) has rightly reinforced disability rights by quashing the transfer of a lecturer with over 70 per cent locomotor disability to an institution lacking even a basic ramp. Its strong observations and clear directions for installing ramps in all schools under the Education Department expose a grim reality: despite progressive laws and Supreme Court mandates, accessibility remains largely ignored.

This case represents not merely an administrative lapse but a profound failure of governance. Transferring a wheelchair-bound teacher to an inaccessible institution violates both logic and humanity. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, along with government memoranda, protects persons with disabilities

from transfers that cause undue hardship. These provisions are mandatory, yet were blatantly disregarded.

The human cost of such insensitivity is immense. Expecting a wheelchair user to depend on inaccessible public transport, particularly in Srinagar's harsh winter conditions, is cruel and inhuman.

Courts have earlier ruled that even parents of disabled children should not be transferred arbitrarily. In this case, the affected person himself is disabled, highlighting official ignorance of disability laws. Parliament enacted disability legislation in 1995 and strengthened it in 2016. Protecting these rights is not optional—it is a constitutional and moral duty.

S PADMANABHAN | KOCHI

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

Governance beyond power and authority

Transparency and accountability are the cornerstones of good governance. However, governance must also be effective, in addition to these essential qualities. People should tangibly benefit from good governance. Against this backdrop, the importance of participatory governance and inclusiveness cannot be overstated. Good governance must be responsive and equitable, apart from adhering to the laws and regulations of the land. It should consistently aim at the welfare of society, even if the final outcome does not entirely align with its original intentions.

Those entrusted with the responsibility of governance must be firmly committed to integrity and public service. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was an exemplary statesman who combined administrative competence with vision. He was also a captivating orator who deeply believed in democratic values and consensus-based politics. In recognition of his contributions, Good Governance Day has been observed on December 25 since 2014, marking his birth anniversary. Power alone is not sufficient; what truly matters is the wisdom and restraint with which it is exercised. Vajpayee's tenure as Prime Minister remains a shining example of sagacious leadership and ethical governance.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Christmas reflections with new beginnings

The Gregorian year 2025 has reached its closing chapter with the arrival of the Christmas festivities. Across the world, people are immersed in the spirit of Christmas and are preparing to welcome the New Year 2026. In this winter milieu, as the world moves towards new beginnings and opens the doors to fresh chapters in life, it is important to cherish this festive week with warmth, gratitude and harmony.

From being enchanted by the charm of Christmas decorations to enjoying its mouth-watering delicacies, the season invites reflection and thankfulness. It is a time to express gratitude to God for guiding us through the year gone by and for the lessons it brought.

Let us immerse ourselves in the joy of Santa Claus, gifts and shared happiness. Let us welcome new beginnings with open hearts and hopeful smiles. This season also reminds us to respect elders, spread love within our communities and strengthen bonds of fraternity and compassion. As we step into the New Year, may curiosity, optimism and renewed enthusiasm guide us forward, helping us build a kinder and more harmonious world. May this Christmas fill our hearts with peace and goodwill. May the coming year usher in hope, unity and renewed purpose for all.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

NTA must end examination chaos

The National Testing Agency's repeated failure to secure major examinations such as NEET and GATE reflects administrative complacency rather than technical helplessness. In an era of advanced digital capabilities, the continued absence of facial recognition and live photo verification systems is indefensible.

However, the adoption of technology must be guided by ethical responsibility. Blind implementation without safeguards would be equally reckless. The NTA must function with transparency and accountability. Any technological intervention should begin with phased pilot testing to identify systemic flaws, algorithmic bias and operational failures before nationwide deployment. Candidate data must be collected only to the minimum extent necessary, protected through strong encryption and deleted promptly after use. Human oversight remains non-negotiable to prevent injustice arising from technological or algorithmic errors.

Further, inclusivity, independent audits and a time-bound grievance redressal mechanism are essential to maintain trust. It is therefore imperative that facial recognition and live photo verification are introduced responsibly to restore credibility to the examination process.

VIJAYKUMAR HK | RAICHUR

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



A season under siege: When festivity gives way to fear

When iconic public celebrations are scaled down or moved behind screens for "safety," it signals more than caution – it raises urgent questions about how fear is reshaping public life, cultural confidence, and the future of liberal democracies themselves

BALBIR
PUNJ

Merry Christmas to all readers! December 25 bursts into life worldwide with vibrant lights illuminating markets, festive decorations adorning public spaces, and cheerful exchanges of gifts. Crowded shopping streets, sumptuous dinners, and midnight Masses create a lively, joyous atmosphere. Today's celebration goes beyond religion, welcoming everyone-believers and non-believers alike – to partake in its universal sense of joy and community.

This isn't a column about theology, doctrine, or asking uncomfortable questions about the origins of the global festival. It's written not because it's Christmas, but because of what's happening deep within France and several other countries of Europe – something that sends an urgent warning to the rest of the world.

Paris – the city long synonymous with champagne-soaked revelry, overflowing crowds, and unapologetic joie de vivre – is retreating behind a screen. This New Year's Eve, the Champs-Élysées will fall silent. The roaring midnight congregation that has defined Parisian celebrations for six decades will be replaced by a pre-recorded broadcast, to be consumed from the safety of living rooms.

The French authorities have decided to cancel the massive open-air concert that once drew nearly a million people last year, opting instead for a televised event. During last year's New Year's Eve celebrations on the Champs-Élysées, nearly a thousand vehicles were set on fire, and 420 people were taken into custody, according to a high police source cited by the media.

This year, authorities are bracing for a repeat of that dark episode. Instead of putting ordinary citizens at risk, they've decided to play it safe and step back, effectively ceding ground to terror rather than fight it head-on.

Germany's second-largest public broadcaster, ZDF, reports that Christmas markets across Germany are being set up and will open for Advent, with police and organisers increasing security measures to make the season as safe as possible. However, some smaller markets are being cancelled because



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The writer is an eminent columnist and the author of 'Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Mayajaal'

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of stricter anti-terror safety requirements.

A New Year's Eve fireworks event in Sydney has been dropped following the deadly alleged terror attack at Bondi Beach, which claimed 15 innocent lives. Waverley Council and event promoter Fuzzy have confirmed that the events planned for Australia's most iconic landmark will no longer go ahead.

Why are Christmas celebrations being curtailed or cancelled in Europe? Who is creating this fear psychosis and forcing civil society into retreat? It's obvious that this is the result of massive unvetted Muslim immigration into Europe,"

Daniel Di Martino, an immigration fellow at the Manhattan Institute, was quoted by the media while commenting on these disturbing developments. The sordid chain of events vividly embodies a profound underlying issue: how liberal societies can become ensnared, ultimately writing their own farewell. It also illustrates how bigoted ideologies exploit the privileges granted by liberalism, gradually gain momentum, and then set their sights on dismantling the very system that once embraced them, all as part of a calculated, strategic plan-spurred by theological

beliefs.

India is no stranger to this grim history. Islam arrived in India initially through traders on the Malabar Coast, followed soon after by Islamic invaders fuelled by religious zeal and the call for jihad. Centuries of bloodshed ensued between these invaders and the local population.

In 1947, the Indian indigenous faith communities tried to achieve peace by ceding a third of their land, but their efforts largely failed. Today, what remains of India continues to be plagued by the two Islamic nations – Pakistan and Bangladesh – born

from that surrender, along with countless supporters within its borders.

Capitulation to terror, as the Indian experience shows, doesn't bring lasting peace; instead, it only fuels the terrorists' hunger for more bloodshed. Sooner or later, France and the rest of Europe would have learnt its lessons, unfortunately the hard way.

As of 2025, Muslims number around six million, roughly nine per cent of the French population. History and contemporary events suggest a recurring pattern: when Muslims enter new lands – as invaders, guests, migrants, or refugees – over

time, a significant section often seeks to reshape the host society. Indigenous cultures, social norms, and civic values come under pressure, and in many instances, there is a deliberate attempt to assert Sharia law as an overriding framework.

Most European countries have faced a sustained wave of Islam-inspired terrorist violence over the past decade. According to a study by the French think tank 'Fondapol', "Between 1979 and April 2024, a total of 66,872 Islamist attacks were reported worldwide, resulting in at least 249,941 deaths."

Britain's Rotherham scandal, globally known as the "grooming gang scandal", continues to resurface as a grim reminder of institutional failure.

France has long faced Islamic terror. In May 2014, Mehdi Nemmouche, a French jihadist returned from Syria, murdered four at Brussels' Jewish Museum. In January 2015, brothers Chérif and Said Kouachi, and Amedy Coulibaly, carried out the Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher attacks in Paris, killing 17.

The deadliest attack was on November 2015 13, when ISIS operatives, including Abdelhamid Abaaoud and Salah Abdeslam, executed coordinated shootings and

bombings across Paris, killing 130. In March 2016, suicide bombers linked to the same network targeted Brussels Airport and Maelbeek Metro, killing 32.

On July 14, 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel carried out the Nice truck massacre, killing 86. Later that month, Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean murdered a priest in Normandy. On October 16, 2020, in Paris, an 18-year-old refugee killed a teacher by slitting his throat.

A few days later, on October 29, 2020, Brahim Aouissaoui stabbed three people to death in Nice's Notre-Dame Basilica and was sentenced to life. The list of such sordid incidents is long.

On December 21, 2024, in Magdeburg, Germany, a 50-year-old Saudi doctor, Taleb Abdul Jawad, deliberately ran his BMW car into crowds engaged in Christmas shopping. The attack killed five people, including a child, and injured nearly 200 others.

In October this year, a British citizen, Jihad Al-Shamie, drove into pedestrians and stabbed a bystander at Heaton Park Synagogue, killing two and injuring several; it was declared a terror incident by authorities.

Two years ago, coordinated attacks were carried out by local Muslim groups on Hindu homes and temples in Leicester and Birmingham in the UK. Between 1997 and 2013, in towns such as Rotherham, Cornwall, and Derbyshire, more than 1,500 minor girls – most of them white – were subjected to organised sexual exploitation. Judicial proceedings reveal that over 80 per cent of those convicted or accused in these cases were Muslims, with an average age ranging between 30 and 40 years.

This pattern is not confined to Europe alone. In the United States too, Islamist terror has emerged both from within and from across borders.

Why are there repeated instances of terror in the name of Islam? Apostists often offer two explanations: first, Muslims lack education; and second, they are cornered into doing so as part of their retaliation against injustices done to them. Neither explanation stands the test of reason and facts.

The reality is clear: violence of this kind is fuelled by a toxic mindset claiming theological sanction. When we try to examine this hate phenomenon honestly, we are often dismissed as Islamophobic. In this charged atmosphere, can any effort to combat terror succeed?

A missed judicial opportunity to uphold Constitutional fairness



KISHLAY
MISHRA

Fairness in governmental action is the minimum expectation of every citizen living in a constitutional democracy. The legitimacy of the State rests not merely on the authority it wields, but on the reasonableness, transparency, and impartiality with which that authority is exercised. Yet this expectation suffers repeated blows when government action appears tailored to benefit an individual through selective policy bending. Such manoeuvres erode rational decision-making, weaken institutional integrity, and undermine both substantive and procedural safeguards embedded in the rule of law.

The order dated December 2, 2025, passed by the Hon'ble Rajasthan High Court in Sunil Samdaria v State of Rajasthan & Anr, represents a troubling instance where constitutional ethics and the rule of law were not adequately defended. Beyond the immediate controversy, the case throws light on a deeper malaise – the growing normalisation of nepotism and arbitrariness in the appointment of law officers. The High Court upheld the appointment of an Additional Advocate General (AAG) for the State of Rajasthan, despite serious allegations of substantive and procedural impropriety surrounding the process.

At the heart of the dispute lies the insertion of Clause 14.8 into the Rajasthan State Litigation Policy, which reads: "Notwithstanding anything contained in the Policy, the authority of the appropriate level shall have power to appoint any counsel to any post after considering his expertise in the respective field."

The writ petitioner sought a writ of quo warranto, alleging that the appointment violated Clause 14.4 of the same policy, which mandates a minimum of ten years' professional experience for appointment as an AAG. The sudden addition of Clause 14.8 effectively neutralised this requirement, functioning as an "escape clause" to bypass an otherwise mandatory condition.

The reasoning adopted by the Hon'ble High Court suffers from infirmities on at least three fundamental grounds.

First, the Court declined to issue a writ of quo warranto on the premise that the office of Additional Advocate General is not a "public office", since it is neither constitutional nor statutory, but merely contractual and distinct from the office of the Advocate General under Article 165 of the Constitution. This reasoning overlooks critical realities. An AAG draws remuneration from the

public exchequer, acts strictly on the instructions of the State Government, and performs functions that are statutory in nature. The appointment circular dated August 23, 2024, expressly directs AAGs to follow Rules 7 to 9 of the Rajasthan Law and Legal Affairs Department Manual, 1999, underscoring the statutory character of their duties. Moreover, the office of the AAG functions in close and intrinsic coordination with the Advocate General, effectively operating as an extension or franchisee of that constitutional office.

The Constitution Bench judgment of the Hon'ble Supreme Court in State of Mysore v CD Govinda Rao (1965) clarified that quo warranto lies against any person holding an independent substantive public office or franchise. The High Court's narrow characterisation of the AAG's office fails to engage with this settled jurisprudence.

Second, the Rajasthan State Litigation Policy itself owes its existence to judicial directions issued by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in State of Rajasthan v. Man Sukh Das (2018), where the Court mandated that such a policy be framed in public interest.

An "order" falls squarely within the definition of "law" under Article 13 of the Constitution. Consequently, the policy is subject to judicial review. There is no blanket immunity for policy decisions. In Tata Cellular v. Union of India (1996), the Supreme Court held that courts may interfere where a policy decision is arbitrary, biased, or tainted by mala fides.

Arbitrariness in the present case becomes evident when events are examined chronologically. Clause 14.8 was inserted on August 23, 2024

and the appointment was made on the very same day. Despite this sequence being specifically highlighted by the petitioner, the High Court's order remains conspicuously silent

on it. Further, the "authority at the appropriate level" under Clause 14.8 refers to the State Level Empowered Committee under Clause 9.1, comprising the Advocate General and senior civil servants heading key departments. Decisions taken by such public authorities are unquestionably amenable to judicial review and must withstand the Wednesbury test of reasonableness.

Third, the insertion of an escape clause to override mandatory eligibility criteria reflects a colourable exercise of power. Clause 14.8 effectively nullifies the ten-year experience requirement under Clause 14.4. More disturbingly, the purported "consideration of expertise" – the sole safeguard accompanying this discretionary power – was allegedly completed on the same day the clause was introduced and the appointment made.

Please read the complete article online at <https://www.dailypioneer.com>

The author is an advocate and writes on law and the legal system

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Aravalli Hills and Ranges: Myths versus facts



TUSHAR
GUPTA

What is the new definition for the Aravalli Hills and Range?

Not one, but two definitions are in play here. One, for the Aravalli Hills, and another for the Aravalli Range. Any landform in the Aravali districts with an elevation of 100 meters or more above the local relief (lowest encircling contour line). Includes the entire enclosed area (hill, slopes, associated features) regardless of gradient. Two or more such hills within 500 meters of proximity (measured from outermost lowest contour points). Includes intervening area between buffers and perpendicular lines, plus features like hillocks/slopes.

How is the area of the 'protected cluster' or the 'range' between two tall hills decided? There is a method to this. It's not random. In GIS terminology, it's often called 'buffer intersection analysis with perpendicular offset' or simply part of a 'buffer and intersect workflow'. It's commonly used for spatial analysis to define connected or enclosed areas between features, such as in ecological corridor mapping, range delineation, buffer zones for environmental protection, or terrain modelling (eg, identifying valleys, ridges, or wildlife habitats between elevated points).

Who gave the new definition-the Government of India or the Supreme Court? In its judgment dated November 20, 2025, the Supreme Court (SC) adopted a uniform definition of the Aravalli Hills and Ranges. Paragraph 50. Point (i). This definition was recommended by a Committee formed pursuant to the SC's order of May 9, 2024, which consisted primarily of Government of India (GOI) officials and was chaired by the Secretary of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC). Although the recommendation originated from this GOI-led Committee, the SC rendered it legally binding by incorporating it into the judgment. 'We accept the recommendations made by the Committee with regard to the definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges given by MoEF&CC.'

Why was there a need for a new definition now?

The judgement primarily addresses the lack of a uniform definition of 'Aravalli Hills and Ranges', which has led to inconsistent conservation efforts, rampant illegal mining, and ecological degradation across Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Gujarat.

The apex court aimed to resolve this by establishing a standardised definition to



enable scientific, sustainable regulation of mining activities, prevent desertification (eastward spread of the Thar Desert), and protect the Aravali's role as a 'green barrier' for biodiversity, climate, and water resources.

This stems from India's obligations under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD, ratified 1996) and national initiatives like the Aravali Green Wall Project. However, the legal pursuit of this definition did not begin yesterday, or in 2014, or in 2004, or even in 1994. The two critical cases emerged from two ongoing PILs – MC Mehta v Union of India (1985, focused on Haryana mining) and TN Godavarman Thirumulpad v Union of India (1995, broader forest conservation, including Rajasthan). Eventually, in May 2024, the court directed the need for a uniform definition of the Aravalli Hills and Ranges.

The committee working on the definition comprised the Secretary, MoEFCC (heading it), and secretaries of the department of forests from the Government of NCT of Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat. Also included were the representatives from the Forest Survey of India (FSI), the Central Empowered Committee (CEC), and the Geological Survey of India (GSI).

On August 12, 2025, the apex court reiterated the need for a uniform definition, citing gaps and practices that had harmful effects on the range.

This is where the consultations went into a hyperdrive mode, for only Rajasthan had a formal definition on Aravalli Hills and Ranges. This opened up the ranges to illegal mining in Haryana and other regions.

Where does the definition come from? It comes from the wonderful state of Rajasthan itself. The state's definition comes from the 2002 committee report and Richard Murphy's (1968) Landform Classification, identifying landforms rising 100 metres above the local relief as hills and prohibits mining on both the hill and its supporting slopes. The state of Rajasthan has been following this definition since January 9, 2006.

What else did the Supreme Court say in its November order?

The apex court has directed the MoEF&CC to prepare a Management Plan for Sustainable

Mining (MPSM) through the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) for the entire Aravallis, as geologically defined between Delhi and Gujarat.

The objective of the MPSM is to identify permissible areas for mining, ecologically sensitive, conservation-critical and restoration-priority areas within the Aravali landscape where mining shall be strictly prohibited or permitted only under exceptional and scientifically justified circumstances (critical, strategic, and atomic minerals exception stands).

A cumulative analysis of environmental impact and the ecological carrying capacity of the region has also been ordered, along with detailed post-mining restoration and rehabilitation measures. Until the MPSM is finalised by the Government, no new mining leases will be granted. Upon the finalisation of the MPSM, mining would be permitted as per the MPSM only in areas where sustainable mining has been permitted. For the ongoing mining operations, strict compliance will have to be ensured as recommended by the government. Thus, they have not been halted. 1.44 lakh square kilometres of Aravallis are now under threat, aren't they, as claimed on social media? No, the judgement doesn't open up the entire range to mining automatically. The 90 per cent derivation is also incorrect, for it factors in the assumed number of hills below the height of a hundred metres, but the judgement comes with additional carriers. For starters,

there is the 500m rule, discussed above. Two, there are several ecologically sensitive zones falling under the protected category across the states. In Rajasthan, there are 20 of them, like the Sariska Tiger Reserve, and several other wildlife sanctuaries. Gujarat and Haryana have a dozen such protected areas. Several iconic buildings and monuments, and other structures of historical importance, also fall within the range. Rajasthan alone has over a hundred such monuments, while the total count exceeds 150. Add to this the reserved and protected forests and the wetlands. You can't mine there. Three, and most importantly, the MPSM ordered by the apex court is to be done on the lines of what was prepared for the Saranda Forest Area of Jharkhand. Therefore, for each of the 37 districts falling in the range, a separate study identifying permissible areas for mining, ecologically sensitive, conservation-critical, and restoration-priority areas is yet to be done. Therefore, the 90% assumption is technically incorrect. To say that all landforms below 100 metres are now automatically open for mining is to ignore the other technicalities within the judgement.

The writer is a Delhi-based journalist and political commentator. He runs his Substack at politypolicy.substack.com, where he writes on policy, economics, finance, and technology.

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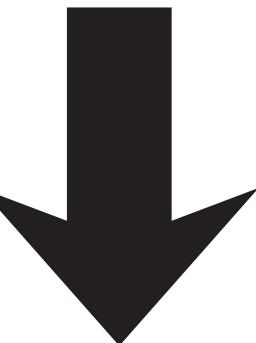
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EDITORIALS

Cook County's inspector general must give taxpayers the straight story on Tyler Technologies fiasco

When Cook County second-in-installment property tax bills finally were mailed in mid-November after months of delay, we thought that would be the end of the debacle that has been the county's technology systems overhaul, contracted out to Texas-based Tyler Technologies.

Oh, silly, naive us.

The Dec. 15 deadline for property owners to pay those bills now has come and gone as well, and taxing bodies throughout the county still haven't received their property tax hauls. Once again, Tyler appears to be at the root of the problem, as the Tribune reported on Monday.

The situation is growing ever more expensive for those governmental units — and, of course, the taxpayers who support them. The delay is forcing school districts throughout the county to borrow to cover ordinary expenses, such as payroll. The Tribune story showed how suburban districts are amassing millions in debt, costing them in some cases hundreds of thousands in interest and even more in lost investment income.

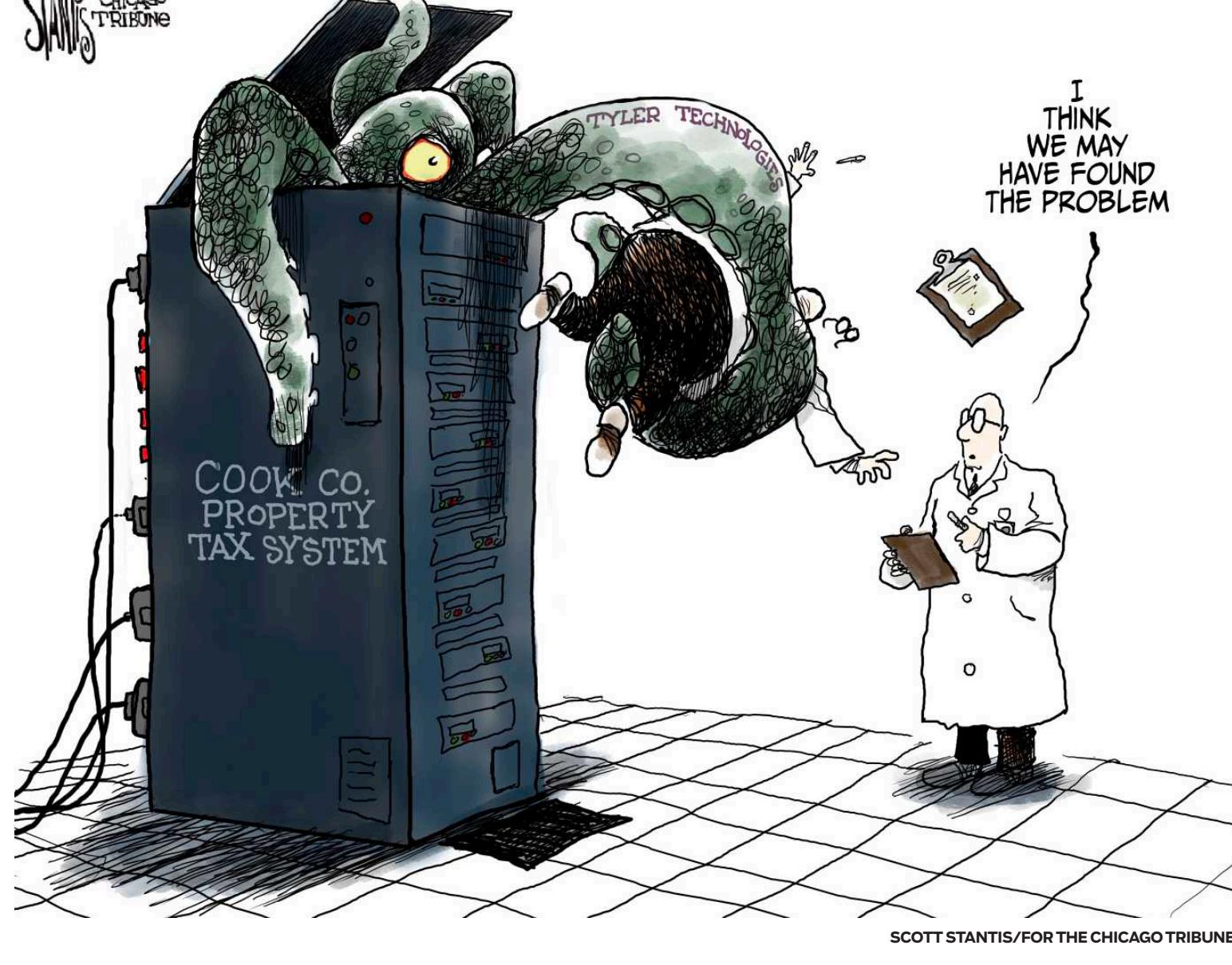
Palatine School District 15, for example, projects the delay will cost it more than \$1 million when all is said and done. That's money that simply is being flushed down the toilet — resources that otherwise could go to augmenting the educations of the students served by those schools.

The situation is far worse at Chicago Public Schools. Given that CPS is the nation's fourth-largest public school district, its costs stemming from the county's failure are downright explosive. From mid-August through the end of this month, it will have cost CPS more than \$33 million (in interest on loans and interest it owes the pension plan for its workers while it delays paying into the fund) because of the lack of property tax revenue. If this awful situation persists into the new year, it will cost CPS an additional \$220,000 every day.

This for a school system that is flirting with insolvency with each passing budget year.

"I'm embarrassed and appalled we're not done yet," Cook County Chief Technology Officer Tom Lynch told Cook County commissioners last week.

But then he went on to echo the refrain we've heard repeatedly from everyone involved in this mess for months on end: "I take accountability for that, as I hope my counterparts do in the property offices. We all have to do this together."



SCOTT STANTIS/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

We're at a point in this saga — we're actually well past that point — where the lack of accountability and attempts to shift the blame are unacceptable. When everyone is theoretically accountable, no one is.

Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle has taken all too little ownership of this fiasco, given that she was the driving force behind contracting with Tyler in the first place — beginning a decade ago — and opted to continue with Tyler in 2020 after initial results were bad. Cook County Treasurer Maria Pappas,

whose office is responsible for compiling the tax bills and distributing the proceeds, mainly has blamed Tyler and Preckwinkle for her office's struggles doing that job. Cook County Assessor Fritz Kaegi largely has blamed Tyler for Chicago property assessments that were delivered late in 2025. Preckwinkle's office has said that Pappas is responsible for the tax distributions to the local governments.

We're at a point in this saga — we're actually well past that point — where the lack of accountability and attempts to shift the blame are unacceptable. When everyone is theoretically accountable, no one is.

We've seen much drama in Chicago in the past few years around Mayor Brandon Johnson and the city's inspector general, Deborah Witzburg, who's leaving that office next year. That's due in no small part to Witzburg's aggressive investigation of some

of the practices of city government.

Cook County has its own inspector general, too. The current holder of that post is Tirrell J. Paxton; he's held the job for a little over a year, succeeding longtime county IG Pat Blanchard, who retired a few years ago.

Now is the time for Cook County's IG to take on its own high-profile mission, as Chicago's IG office has done in recent years. We need the equivalent of a forensic accounting of all the various points in the process at which Tyler went wrong and which county officials were responsible for overseeing the vendor at those points. In short, we need the full story — in all its gory details.

We spoke to Paxton and asked whether his office is conducting such a probe. He told us he's restricted from confirming or denying.

Fair enough. We understand

how such things work. But if Paxton's office isn't on the case, they need to get on it now.

Essentially, Cook County taxpayers have been badly abused by the clear mismanagement exhibited in this project to date. Beyond the tens of millions in financing and similar costs being paid simply to keep schools open over the past several months, the county has authorized more than \$167 million over the last decade for the balky technology overhaul, including more than \$85 million to Tyler itself and tens of millions more to consultants to help oversee Tyler and maintain the county's old computer system in the meantime.

Cook County residents deserve to know how we got here. If the conclusions from auditors who have the power and expertise to get to the truth harm the reputations and future political prospects of current officeholders, so be it.

The bookstore comeback is good news for readers

As winter settles in and daylight fades early, Americans long have turned to books for comfort, curiosity and company. The good news this holiday season is that the bookstores which make that habit possible are rebounding, too.

In the late 1990s, many book lovers often looked with scorn upon the likes of Barnes & Noble and the now-defunct Borders, favoring the dusty shelves of their preferred independent book haunt. Fast-forward to now and bookstores of any kind have been harder to come by in many communities. The old bookstore wars are over. In an age of Amazon dominance, readers

have learned to root for anyone selling physical books, and that enthusiasm appears to be paying off.

Barnes & Noble is leading the charge, opening nearly 70 new stores this year with plans to add another 60 in the new year.

"2025 has been a fantastic year for us," Barnes & Noble CEO James Daunt told CNBC on Dec. 15. To be sure, not all Barnes & Noble locations are built alike, with some maintaining a smaller footprint wedged into strip malls while others maintain the standalone, bulky presence many identify with the brand. Examples of both versions can be found peppered through Chicago and

its suburbs.

Discussing what may be behind this positive news, Daunt said the naysayers might tell you books do really well during a recession. He had a more hopeful perspective, crediting strong releases from the publishing world and a growing thirst for book supply among the public. While COVID was awful in so many ways, it appears pandemic lockdowns had the effect of igniting a love of reading in lots more folks — making it possible for the bookstore ecosystem to grow.

"Once you get into the habit of reading books — and that clearly happened during the pandemic — you retain that habit," Daunt said.

He also noted that tariffs, which have hindered so many other industries, have had "virtually no impact" on books.

These good habits aren't just bolstering big brands like Barnes & Noble, they're leading to a resurgence of independent book sellers, too.

The American Booksellers Association reported that more than 420 new bookstores opened this year, part of a rebirth of bookshops after the initial Amazon/big-box shock that caused so many to go under. We found it interesting to follow the timeline of this evolution by tracking ABA's membership, which peaked in 1995 with 5,500

members across 7,000 stores before dropping as of 2009 to 1,401 members across 1,641 locations. The group's most recent numbers from 2022 — 2,178 members at 2,593 locations — reflect an ecosystem that is rebounding modestly postpandemic.

We couldn't be happier. To read is to learn, to feel, to expand your horizons beyond the tiny corner of the world you occupy. To come to the realization that you are but one small part of a much bigger world without ever leaving your sofa.

And if more people are coming to this realization, all the better for us all.

ON THIS DAY 85 YEARS AGO WAR AND DICTATORSHIP

Reports came from England recently of a failure to distribute available supplies of meats to the neighborhood butcher shops. The result was that families from time to time had to do without. Similarly it was announced that coal shortages were causing a good deal of discomfort. Great quantities of coal had been dug, but transportation was said to be lacking. A shortage of oleomargarine in the shops was also mentioned, altho the supply in the warehouses was reported to be of record size.

The distribution of food and fuel is controlled by the government in Britain as a war measure. Officials in London say the difficulties could not have been foreseen, but every step is now being taken to overcome them. New arrangements, it is said, will be in operation within a short

time. For his part, Lord Woolton, the food minister, has reassured the people that supplies in storage are ample, and that they will be made to reach further by a reduction in the rations. "I have told my colleagues in the government," he said, "that we will deliberately and willingly as a population have a little less to eat." Lord Woolton went on to remind the people that food hoarding is illegal. If he catches any hoarders he will "deal with them ruthlessly, remorselessly, and with intense pleasure."

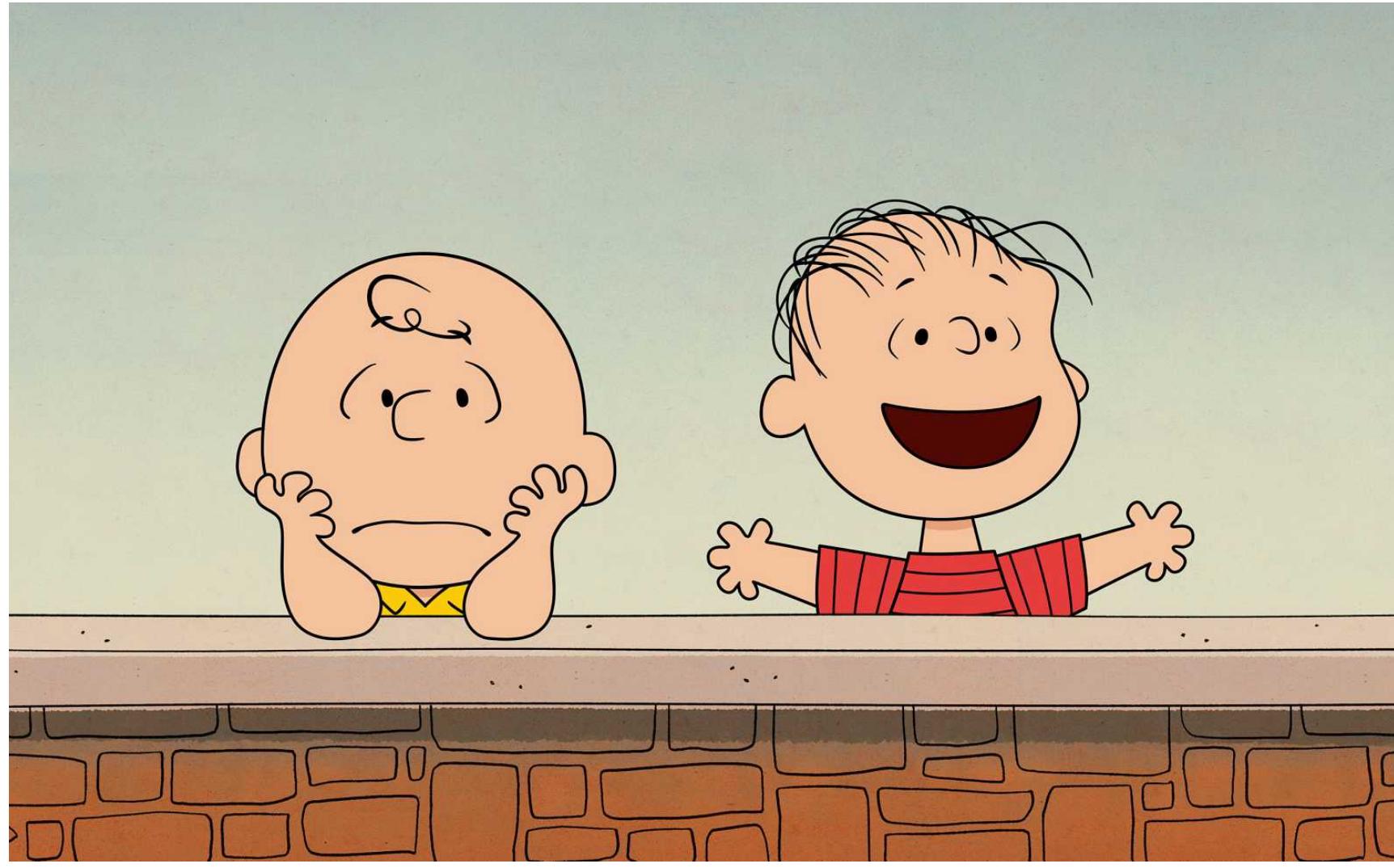
From these circumstances and remarks the American people can draw a valuable lesson. War breeds bureaucratic dictatorship and dictatorship is forever talking about circumstances which could not be foreseen. When things go wrong the answer is never a confession on the

part of the officials concerned that they were stupid or negligent, but always an alibi of some sort, followed by a demand for further sacrifices.

The dictator says nobody could have foreseen the interruptions of supply and he goes on to say that anybody who did foresee the failure and did make provision against bureaucratic incompetence will be severely punished if caught. The contradiction ought to be obvious to any one, but it is the great good fortune of wartime dictators that the people over whom they rule are in an exalted state of mind and anything but critical. They will stand for almost anything. They will cheerfully accept even an unnecessary reduction in their rations.

Tribune editorial board, Dec. 24, 1940

OPINION



A scene with "Peanuts" characters Charlie Brown and Linus from the Apple TV+ show "Who Are You, Charlie Brown?" **APPLE TV+**

Linus Van Pelt's contemplative approach to Christmas

By Colin Fleming

For many years, I've been what I call a Linus Man. Linus, of course, refers to Linus Van Pelt, Charlie Brown's best pal in Charles M. Schulz's "Peanuts" comic strip.

Linus was my guy from the start. I realized that he understood life in ways that we should all aspire to. Linus never fully gets there, and neither do we. But each morning, he stands at that brick wall with his friend Charlie and shares what he learned and what he was trying to, often by asking the right questions.

Questions are wondrous because every question is also a statement. They say, in effect, that such and such may be possible. Or else you wouldn't ask.

Meaning is paramount to Linus. It's meaning that sticks to the heart and soul. And if Linus has to seek that meaning alone, then by all things Great Pumpkin, that's what he does.

He is able to sit down with disappointment, with pain, and realize the

validity — even the comfort — of those feelings. Because without them, we don't understand as much as we ought to. We miss out on joy, for joy requires us to see, and embrace, emotional shadings and notes. Melancholia can be like rain, and rain can be beautiful. And rain is definitely necessary for anything to grow. So it goes with us, as Linus knew better than most.

The bravest thing I've ever seen on television is when Linus steps to the middle of the stage in 1965's "A Charlie Brown Christmas" to share his most intimate thoughts as to what the season of seasons is most about.

First, though, he asks an unseen stagehand for a beam of light, which has long struck me as significant. We carry around such darkness, especially in an age in which we subvert our true selves for what "plays" better in terms of appearances, often losing that true self in the process.

Linus proceeds to orate a bit of the story of Christ's birth, but this isn't about religion. He's speaking of

contemplation, of looking to others and seeing what they need, and of becoming one's better self.

I couldn't believe this was a kid. I knew he wasn't created by a kid, but that didn't matter because Linus is wholly Linus. He is universally personal and personally universal. Child, adult, I was becoming both. When I settle in with some of his wisdom these decades later, when I watch as he delivers television's speech of speeches, I never experience it the same way.

I've tried to be a Linus Man, to varying degrees of success, ever since. I think I've gotten better at it. I make sure not to hurt people, which is also how we hurt ourselves.

Little is harder in our present age than to be alone in a quiet space with our thoughts. How many of us ever try? It's hard to imagine Linus struggling with that activity. In a world where everyone can't wait to tell you how much they love themselves, a Linus person is someone who

knows themselves.

He's a listener. To others and to himself. He understands other people's needs and what must be done to meet them.

I was a Linus Man when I stopped drinking. A Linus Man spreads peace, but not via placation. He doesn't seek to please for the sake of doing so. He isn't obsequious. He doesn't hit the "like" button in life just to hit it. He knows better than that.

Linus is Socrates with a baseball mitt. A believer in the art of being good, the obligation thereof, and sincere pumpkin patches.

Go with Linus to the middle of that stage, which is really the stage of life. Embody what you ought to embody, regardless of what anyone else is doing. Be a Linus person.

Lights, please.

Colin Fleming is the author of "Sam Cooke: Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963," an entry in Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series.

The Walnut Room is giving moms what they want this holiday

By Kerry Lester Kasper

"I have a movie for us to watch tonight," my husband remarked the other day. "It's about a mom, who gets fed up with Christmas, and she leaves her family to become a nun."

"Sold!" I replied enthusiastically. (Spoiler alert: This is not, actually, the plot of "Oh, What Fun," the holiday flick starring Michelle Pfeiffer; that was referring to. Nor am I actually leaving my family to become a nun. Yet.)

But that comment came the same week as an Instagram post of "Micro-feminist things I casually say to dads before the holiday" by the account @theperinatalcollective — parenting mental health therapists Kate Borsato and Melissa Medjuck — was being circulated among my mom friend group.

"You must be exhausted... Christmas season is such a busy season for dads," is one line. "Are you doing matching PJs? Did you coordinate the photo theme?" is another. And my personal favorite: "asking him if he's all set with teacher gifts, neighbor gifts, stocking stuffers and daycare cards."

"Dead on," my running buddy, who'd also just confessed to feelings of overwhelm, responded.

It also came the same week as our family made a visit to the Walnut Room for a holiday lunch.

The legendary old Marshall Field's restaurant, known for its 45-foot holiday tree, Mrs. Hering's pot pie and Frango Mint pie, once again was filled with middle-aged and elderly women posing with their children and grandchildren for photo evidence



The Great Tree at the Marshall Field's Walnut Room is in full view for visitors on the seventh floor of the Macy's State Street department store in Chicago on Nov. 6. **JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

of a continuing tradition.

"We had a nice time," another friend of mine, who also cleared the Walnut Room's lengthy waiting list that week, remarked about her own experience. "But it's mainly about my mom and her memories."

A few years before, my two girls and I had met my husband for a late lunch there, a day he was working downtown. We'd dressed up and spent a little time shopping. He came from a Board of Elections hearing in a suit and tie. And the reaction by the older

women to our family left me with emotions that make me a little teary.

"You all look so nice," one remarked, practically petting us. "You know, this was just how it was years ago."

Marshall Field's officially ended its run as a Chicago store in September 2009 when Macy's converted the flagship State Street location and all of its satellite stores to its name. But Macy's smartly kept the Walnut Room, the seventh-floor wood-paneled dining room that had been a city

icon since 1907.

It's the subject of a recent WTTW-Ch. 11 "Chicago Stories" documentary, which details the rise and fall of the store, which began as a dry goods shop before becoming a national retail powerhouse. The documentary shows the store's iconic green bags, which are featured in movies such as "My Best Friend's Wedding" and "Home Alone"; the history behind the 6,000-square-foot Tiffany dome; and the magic of the store's annual holiday windows displays.

My favorite aunt has saved her long-defunct credit card in a box of keepsakes and recently sent me a screenshot. We recently gifted my frugal, notoriously hard-to-buy-for mother a hunter green T-shirt with the Marshall Field's logo on it. She claims she actually really loves it.

I've been contemplating attempting a re-creation of the Frango pie for this year's Christmas Eve dessert.

"Give the lady what she wants" was Marshall Field's slogan, with a focus on creating a positive, memorable shopping experience for women in particular. Women were — and remain today, despite all of our societal advances — the average household's primary shopper, according to numerous studies. That meant PBS' "American Experience" notes, discarding the typical "buyer beware" approach, and rejecting common rules returning and exchanging items, and instead offering lounges, a nursery and library, and the ability to hold meetings at the store and write letters on complimentary Marshall Field's stationery.

This season, I have realized that what so many of us want is that, back for an afternoon. To sit with our loved ones, not worry about the endless to-do lists. Particularly as so many of us feel simply crushed by Christmas. To have the endless requests and feelings of failure and impossible perfection be suspended because for a little while, wonder and perfection can materialize in a 45-foot tree and slice of mint pie.

Kerry Lester Kasper is a Chicago-based writer.

OPINION

What it was like working for Marshall Field's during the holidays

By Donna Del Giudice

In January 1986, as the Bears were shuffling off to the Super Bowl, I started at Marshall Field's on State Street. I had worked for several years at suburban stores. But being hired by the flagship store was like being called up to the major leagues.

The first two years, I managed customer service: complaints, returns, package tracking and the information desks. My next five years were spent as the manager of the cash and credit office: credit card payments, gift certificate sales, all the cash for the store registers and restaurants, payroll distribution, refunds and travel expenses for the executives.

Before online shopping, people flocked to the Loop at the holidays, and Marshall Field's was the jewel of State Street. To pull off the holidays, the store started long before the first snowfall. We began staffing up in August. In the cash office, I usually had a staff of 28; by late fall, 65. Each year before the rush, I would give my crew a pep talk:

"You are all part of a Chicago and retail tradition. Pageantry, theater, ritual, the Walnut Room tree, decorated windows and Uncle Mistletoe. Crowds like you have never seen. More money going through your hands than you could have imagined. Working here will be both exciting and exhausting, magical, mystical and magnificent. You will never work so hard, be energized and depleted at the same time. Enjoy it all. You will never be part of something like this again."

While my staff worked hard, being part of management was nothing short of brutal. From the day the tree went up, we worked six days a week until inventory in January. If I had a good night's sleep and clean clothes, that was a success.

In customer service, we were drilled on the phrase: "Give the lady what she wants." One day, an older woman called and wanted to know what time the Christmas parade was being broadcast. We told her we didn't sponsor the parade. She said, "Young lady, I bought the TV there; you should be able to tell me." We looked it up.

Cozy Cloud Cottage was right outside of customer service. One Saturday, an elf came in to tell me that one of the Santas was drunk. While my assistant and I were plying him with coffee, human resources was on the phone trying to get a sub. He lost the job.



Freddie Fieldmouse and Uncle Mistletoe were at Marshall Field's on State Street to introduce children to the holiday spirit as stores began to decorate their windows on Nov. 13, 1978. **OVIE CARTER/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

The Frango mints started to arrive in September. We stored cases of them in the cash office to include in gift certificate sales. They sat in my office for four months, and to this day, I cannot stand that mint smell.

The fur department would encourage customers to pick up their furs in storage early in the season. They needed the space to store Frango mints in the cold fur vaults. That's where we also stored the Champagne we drank at closing on Christmas Eve.

Storage space was in high demand. Holiday decorations were brought down to the floors all September and October and stored in any available spaces — stockrooms, offices, unused dressing rooms and closets — until they could be put up on the floors. Behind the scenes, you couldn't turn a corner without bumping into a tree or a life-size nutcracker.

Then there was Mistletoe Bear, a signature toy bear with a new one produced every year. They became a collector's item. People went for them like they were Cabbage Patch dolls, or toilet paper during the pandemic. One evening, I was the acting operations manager and was paged up to toys. There was a long line of angry people waiting to get their bears. The toy manager let me know that there were only a few boxes of bears left. We called up as many security guards as possible to help.

Once she got to the last case, a little old man stepped up. He got the last bear. As the toy manager made the announcement that there were no more bears, the crowd went wild. A security guard and I shoved the poor man into a freight elevator: "It's for your own safety, sir." I think he's still riding that elevator.

When the store was super

crowded, management was sent to the floor for crowd control. We were stationed at the escalators. People would get to the top of an escalator and stop in awe of the decorations. Our job was to keep them moving to avoid pile-ups. "Please keep moving along so the people behind you can also enjoy the decorations," we would say.

Although we had cash office seasonal employees take photographs, we still managed to hire two thieves every year. A mentor of mine told me, "They may think they are an honest person, but they have never been presented with so much temptation." You see, it was the second-largest department store cash office in the country, volume equal to a large suburban bank. The last few days leading up to Christmas, there would be a half million dollars of cash in the office. Marshall Field's did a third of its business in the last eight weeks

of the year. And \$2 million in gift certificate sales in December.

There is an atrium in the State Street store. As many of the staff members as possible moved close to the atrium at 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve. When the closing bell rang, everyone would yell up the atrium. The sound was deafening. The pre-holiday rush was over.

After the most intense management experience one could have, I left in April 1993. Having gone back to college while working, I changed careers. I never worked in retail again. But 30 years later, the memories are vivid like yesterday. I relish the times, the seven holiday seasons. Back then, I had no idea there would be an expiration date on the Marshall Field's experience.

Donna Del Giudice is a lifelong Chicagoan and as a baby boomer remembers fondly visiting Marshall Field's during the holidays.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Control of the rivalry

We didn't just beat the Packers on Saturday night. We stole something from them: control of the rivalry. For the first time in my 19-year life, the idea of a Bears Super Bowl doesn't feel like nostalgia or delusion — it feels possible.

I've been a Chicagoan my entire life, which means I've known one truth: The Packers own us. Year after year, season after season, the rivalry felt less like a competition and more like a sentence: We watch, we hope quietly and we brace for disappointment.

Saturday night, I was at a watch party packed with Bears and Packers fans. The consensus was cautious optimism: the kind we have learned to carry as Bears fans. We knew we could win. We also knew how easily it could fall apart.

At halftime, it felt familiar: losing 6-0 in howling 20 mph winds. We made field goals instead of touchdowns. Even with Jordan Love out, belief felt dangerous.

By the two-minute warning, Packers fans were comfortable again. Up 16-9 with possession, they wore the confidence of decade-long dominance. Bears fans felt that old feeling creep back in — the one that says, this is where it ends. Then something broke the script.

The Bears lined up for an onside kick, a play successful only 8% of this season. Romeo Doubs bobbled it. The Bears recovered the ball, and the house exploded. For the first time all night, hope wasn't theoretical — it was real.

Caleb Williams took over, moving the ball with purpose. On 4th and 4 with 28 seconds left near the goal line, it felt like everything — this game, this season, this rivalry — came down to a single snap. Jahdai Walker shook the defense and came down with the ball, barely inside the end zone. We were going to overtime.

In overtime, the Packers cracked. A botched snap at the Bears' 40 gave Chicago the chance to finish the story. Williams launched a 46-yard throw to DJ Moore, a perfect two-handed dive in the end zone. Game over.

Tom Brady called it a "100% A+ throw." But for Bears fans, it was more than that — it was release. The rivalry shifted. We didn't just win a game; we remembered how to believe.

For the first time in decades, there are two words Chicagoans can discuss without laughing: Super Bowl.

— Jacob Goroff, Chicago

What an embarrassment

As a newspaper reporter on the Bears many years ago and now a fan, I welcomed the hiring of a much-needed team president. But Kevin Warren, once promising in that leadership role, has become embarrassing. He should have realized he would not get the taxpayer money he wanted to help the reported \$8.8 billion franchise build a domed stadium. He even took too long conceding there was the



Chicago Bears fans celebrate as their team goes to overtime against the Green Bay Packers on Saturday at Soldier Field.

BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

only one reasonable stadium site, Bear ownership having already purchased the property in Arlington Heights.

After proposing \$2 billion from the Bears toward the roughly \$5 billion needed for a new stadium and surrounding infrastructure, Warren should be seeking the additional money with appeals to private investors, the ultra-rich and the obligated NFL. He already has wasted a lot of time, money and publicity on an unworkable lakefront project and now has ridiculously brought Indiana into the act. That's his response to the state legislature's denial of a taxpayer bailout.

It's not likely taxpayers in Indiana or any other place want to financially benefit a multibillion-dollar franchise, even one headed for the playoffs. The Bears figure to be stuck in Soldier Field for quite a while, maybe until their lease expires in eight years.

— Ed Stone, Northbrook

No more rip-offs by Bears

I've been an enthusiastic Bears fan for 45 years. I keep up with my team. I attend games occasionally. I watch most games on television. When the Bears are great and win, I'm excited with every play. When the Bears lose, I'm disappointed for an hour or two, and life goes on.

In other words, I'm as loyal and emotionally tied to the Bears as most fans in Chicagoland but certainly not as zealous as the die-hards who live and breathe Bears. My point: If the Bears move to Arlington Heights, fine. If the Bears stay in Chicago, fine. If the Bears move to Indiana, fine.

But please don't let them rip everybody off like the last time.

— Bob Ray, River Forest

Ticket prices keep rising

Bears President and CEO Kevin Warren was hired for one reason and one reason only: to get the Bears a new stadium deal, period.

He's looking foolish with all this posturing about wanting to stay at Soldier Field or moving the team to the suburbs (Arlington Heights) or elsewhere in the vicinity of Chicago and now to Indiana. Who is he kidding? And what an insult it is to Bear fans and the taxpayers of Illinois.

The Bears have billions of dollars; they would own the stadium, and all the revenue from it would go into the team's coffers. For Warren to keep playing this ridiculous game is only ruining his good name and reputation and the Bears'.

I've been a season ticket holder since 1986 and have endured endless years, decades of pathetic teams, coaches and executives. My ticket prices have gone up each and every year, even when the Bears were an embarrassment to football. I live in the western suburbs, and just going to a Bears game today is an all-day event. There is only one way in and one way out of Soldier Field. If they ever move to Indiana, going to a game via Interstate 294, God help us all. No way will keep my tickets; I'm out.

And really, don't continue to insult Bears fans' intelligence. We all know, tax breaks or not, you'll just make up the difference with ticket cost increases.

Just get over yourself and do the Arlington Heights deal and put all this ridiculous time and effort into winning a championship for us Bears fans.

— Ray Calamia, Winfield

Real reward for Bears

The Bears have stunk for years. The McCaskeys want the taxpayers to pay up big time, every time; it's just what they do.

Just watch what happens if the Bears happen to win the Super Bowl this season. Illinois and Chicago will be throwing money, that they do not have, at the Bears for a new stadium to keep them on the lakefront or at least in Chicago. So in a warped way, the Bear's and the McCaskeys are playing with and for other people's money.

The Super Bowl is the secondary prize, while the fleecing of the taxpayers to get their stadium is the real reward.

— Thomas Burgan, Geneva

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Opinion

The New York Times

COLUMNIST | EZRA KLEIN

The Trump Vibe Shift Is Dead

IN JANUARY, I made a prediction: "I suspect we are at or near the peak of Trump vibes." Now, as this long year grinds to its end, I think it can be said more declaratively: The Trump vibe shift is dead. And there are already glimmers of what will follow it.

The Trump vibe shift was American culture and institutions moving toward President Trump and Trumpism with a force unexplained by his narrow electoral victory. It was Mark Zuckerberg donning a chain and saying that the corporate world was too hostile to "masculine energy." It was corporate executives using Trump as an excuse to wrest control of their companies back from their workers. It was the belief that Trump's 2024 coalition — which stretched from Stephen Miller and Laura Loomer to Elon Musk and Marc Andreessen to Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Joe Rogan and Tulsi Gabbard — was the arrival of something new rather than, as many thought in 2016, the final heave of something old.

As 2025 closes, Trump's polling sits in the low 40s, with some surveys showing him tumbling into the 30s. Democrats routed Republicans across the year's elections, winning governorships in New Jersey and Virginia easily and overperforming in virtually every race they contested.

Moderate Republicans broke with Speaker Mike Johnson to bring to the House floor a Democratic bill to extend Affordable Care Act subsidies. Marjorie Taylor Greene is retiring. Elon Musk said he regretted joining the administration to lead the so-called Department of Government Efficiency. Joe Rogan called Trump's immigration policy "insane." The right is at war with itself over the Epstein files and how much antisemitism and anti-Indian racism is too much antisemitism and anti-Indian racism.

A year ago, we kept hearing that Trump was cool now. Is anyone saying that now?

There is much to be said about where and how Trumpism ran aground. But a place to start is here: Trump's electoral victory and his cultural momentum were in conflict. Trump won the 2024 election narrowly: 49.9 percent of the popular vote and an edge in the battleground states so slim that flipping 175,000 votes would have thrown the election to Kamala Harris. Poll after poll showed that the cost of living was what powered Trump's victory.

But Trump's victory provided confidence and cover to chief executives and billionaires and celebrities and institutions whose frustrations and resentments had concentrated across the Biden years. If Trump could take back power, so could they. And they did: Companies gutted diversity, equity and inclusion bureaucracies they never actually wanted; comedians felt freed from the language police; the purity tests of the left gave way to the gleeful cruelty of the right. The force of the cultural correction gave MAGA a momentum that the election results never justified. That created the conditions for overreach.

"There is little in the election results to suggest the public wants a sharp rightward lurch," I wrote then. "But Trump and his team are jacked into the online vibes machine, and they want to meet the moment they sense. I doubt there would have been ideological modesty in any Trump administration, but I am particularly skeptical we will see it in this one."

Now Trumpism is failing both the voters and the vibes. It is failing the voters in the most obvious of ways: Trump ran for office



EVELYN HOCKSTEIN/REUTERS

MAGA's momentum was never justified by 2024's election results.

promising lower prices. But he also ran on policies — tariffs and deportations — that raise prices by driving up the costs of goods and labor. Nor did Trump try to persuade Americans that they should bear higher prices to subsidize domestic manufacturing or raise native-born wages or isolate China.

Instead, Trump lied to his voters. He promised that Americans would pay nothing and gain everything. Then came Liberation Day and the markets began shuddering and the price of coffee began rising and Trump has been caught between his long-held beliefs about trade and his recognition that Americans do not want to pay the costs of his policies. He backs off the tariffs when the pain threatens markets or when China's export restrictions threaten American manufacturers, but he has not simply abandoned the project.

The result has been a tariff regime that has raised prices, confused companies and alienated allies but has accomplished very little. The United States lost manufacturing jobs in 2025. The pivot to isolating China was short-lived — after all the tumult, the added tariff on most Chinese goods is 20 percent

and Trump is now selling advanced Nvidia chips to China. The labor market is weakening. Deficits are rising. Trump may give his economic management an "A-plus-plus-plus-plus-plus," but a recent NPR/PBS/Marist poll found that only 36 percent of Americans approve of how he is running the economy, and Democrats have muscled their way to a four-point edge on the issue.

Then there are the vibes. I'll admit to surprise that Trump's ghoulish response to the killings of Rob and Michele Singer Reiner attracted so much opprobrium on the right. Trump routinely responds to personal tragedy with narcissistic cruelty. There is a sickness in his soul. But that sickness was, we were repeatedly told, what the culture hungered for. I think, here, of New York magazine's cover story, "The Cruel Kids' Table":

This set's most visible political stance is a reaction to what it sees as the left's puritanical obsessions with policing language and talking about identity. A joke about Puerto Ricans or eugenics or sleeping with Nick Fuentes could throw a pack of smokers

outside Butterworth's into a giggle-fest. Recounting her time at one of the balls, a woman tells me she jumped the velvet rope into a V.I.P. section "like a little Mexican." Then she lets out a cackle. This is the posture that has attracted newcomers to the cause.

Offense can be refreshing when injected into conformity. But cruelty as the dominant culture repulses most people. "The immigration thing — the way it looks is horrific," Rogan said in October. "When you're just arresting people in front of their kids — normal, regular people who've been here for 20 years — everybody who has a heart can't get along with that." Nick Fuentes clips might carry a transgressive charge in MAGA group chats. But how many Americans will see themselves reflected in a political movement partly led by a celibate white supremacist who thinks Hitler is cool?

In Trump's first term, there was a constant yearning for a return-to-normalcy candidate. Many Democrats believed that Joe Biden or someone like him would defeat Trump in the polls and restore a more familiar form of political competition. That was enough to win the 2020 election, but not enough to turn the page on Trumpism. Instead, it roared back with even more force in 2024. Normalcy is not enough. The Democratic Party will need to represent something new, as opposed to retrenching to something old.

A year ago, Democrats understood MSNBC and The Washington Post but seemed flummoxed by YouTube and TikTok. But younger and less terminally cautious Democrats — Zohran Mamdani in New York City, James Talarico in Texas, Gavin Newsom in California — are showing that Democrats can win the attention wars.

What's struck me about all of them is the way they embody a vibe different from anything Trumpism offers. The defining expression of Trump's second term — the expression he chose for his official portrait — is a scowl. Mamdani's smile is now its omnipresent opposite, potent enough to reduce Trump to a purring chumminess in the Oval Office.

Talarico's appeal is rooted in his Christianity; the response to him reflects, in part, the yearning for an explicitly moral and spiritual politics in the face of so much callousness and nihilism. Newsom has vaulted himself into 2028 front-runner status by following two seemingly contradictory impulses: He mocks Trump on social media even as he hosts genuine conversations with right-wing figures like Steve Bannon, Michael Savage and Charlie Kirk. It's resistance politics incongruously married to a searching pluralism, and it's kept Newsom atop my social media feeds all year.

Politics, of course, is more than just vibes. In New Jersey, Mikie Sherrill ran on declaring a state of emergency to freeze utility rates. Mamdani ran on free child care and rent freezes. Talarico is taking aim at the rage economy of social media and the corruption of big-money politics. Newsom is embracing abundance and a fight-fire-with-fire approach to redistricting.

Political backlash always seeks the opposing force to the present regime. Closed and cruel are on their way out. What comes next, I suspect, will present itself as open, friendly and assertively moral. But it will also need to credibly offer what Trump and Trumpism have failed to deliver: real solutions to the problems Americans face.

I Asked ChatGPT to Solve an 800-Year-Old Italian Mystery

Elon Danziger

The director of technology at the nonprofit Global Strategies and a former employee at the National Gallery of Art.

FLORENCE, ITALY

ACROSS from the Florence Cathedral in Italy stands a much older church, the Baptistery of San Giovanni. It is a beloved center of religious life, where many Florentines are baptized to this day. Staid columns and lively arches hug its eight sides, half-camouflaged in patterns of green and white marble. Without the baptistery's emulation of the architecture of ancient Rome, it's hard to imagine Florence birthing the architectural Renaissance that changed the face of Europe. Yet for centuries, there has been no compelling solution as to who built it and when and for what reasons. Decades ago, I gave tours of the baptistery and came to revere it, and in the early 2020s I began delving into its origins.

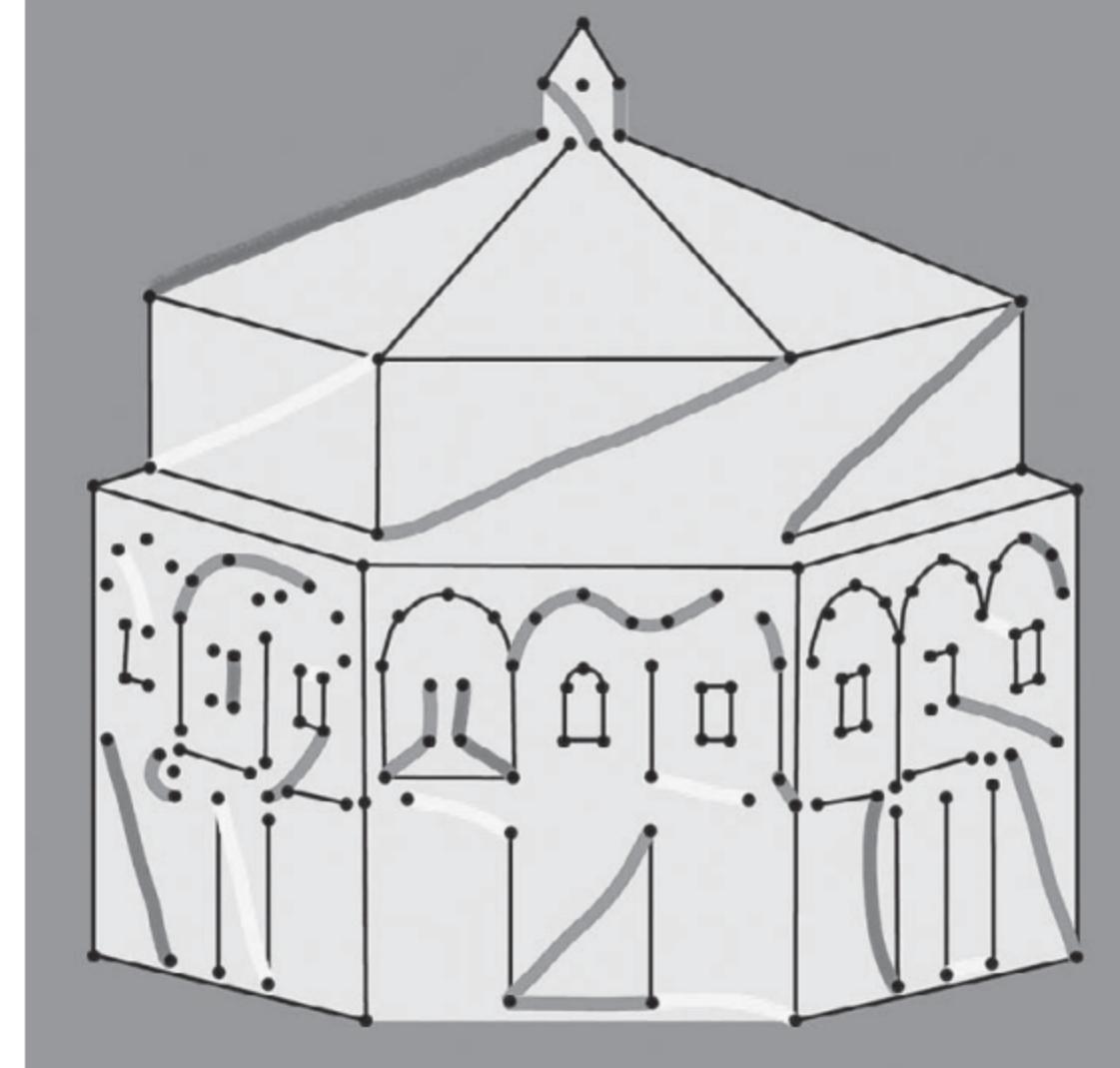
After years of poring over historical documents and reading voraciously, I made an important discovery that was published last year: The baptistery was built not by Florentines but for Florentines — specifically, as part of a collaborative effort led by Pope Gregory VII after his election in 1073. My revelation happened just before the explosion of artificial intelligence into public consciousness, and recently I began to wonder: Could a large language model like ChatGPT, with its vast libraries of knowledge, crack the mystery faster than I did?

So as part of a personal experiment, I tried running three A.I. chatbots — ChatGPT, Claude and Gemini — through different aspects of my investigation. I wanted to see if they could spot the same clues I had found, appreciate their importance and

reach the same conclusions I eventually did. But the chatbots failed. Though they were able to parse dense texts for information relevant to the baptistery's origins, they ultimately couldn't piece together a wholly new idea. They lacked essential qualities for making discoveries.

There are a few reasons for this. Large language models have read more text than any human could ever hope to. But when A.I. reads text, it's merely picking up patterns. Peculiar details, outlier data and unusual perspectives that can influence thinking can get lost. Without eccentric or contrarian ideas, I never would have made my discoveries. For example, in his 2006 book "Toscana Romanica," Guido Tigler, a professor at the University of Florence, argued the baptistery was built later than generally believed. It's an idea that's not widely accepted, and I believe that's the reason the chatbots never presented it to me when I asked them what they would read to solve the enigma of the baptistery. Although I ultimately found reason to reject the later dating, Mr. Tigler's unorthodox ideas taught me to more strongly consider the possibility that past scholarship had gotten the timeline for the baptistery wrong.

For centuries, many people believed Pope Nicholas II consecrated the baptistery in 1059. There is actually no known record of such an event; its existence is based on an assumption drawn from documents that show his involvement with other Florentine churches that year. When I nudged the chatbots to discover this discrepancy themselves, ChatGPT and Claude found it but failed to observe that it was suspicious, whereas Gemini hallucinated evidence that would eliminate this discrepancy. To contribute to a field of knowledge, you need to accurately survey the landscape, sniff out



JOSÉ QUINTANAR

Sometimes pattern recognition — human and A.I. — is wrong.

what's fishy and demonstrate why it's rotten. Large language models have trouble on all three counts.

And here's the deeper problem: Sometimes pattern recognition — human and machine — is wrong. Though there was no confirming evidence, most scholars had simply assumed the patrons of the baptistery were Florentine. After all, a vast majority of church building in the Middle Ages was driven by local people: bishops, abbots,

wealthy families. But from my readings I began to agree more and more with a fringe view that the inhabitants of 11th-century Florence were still too poor and provincial to produce such an accomplished building.

The key to identifying who built the baptistery was how much its architecture is inspired by the ancient Pantheon in Rome. By the 11th century, the Pantheon had become a church officiated only by the pope. Once you take Pope Nicholas out of the equation and focus on pontiffs obsessed with ancient Rome, only one name for our mystery patrion comes to mind: Gregory VII.

A few years before Gregory's election in 1073, Florentines had stopped having their children baptized in Florence, fearful that a reputedly corrupt bishop could not protect their infants' souls. After an event proved the bishop's unorthodoxy and sent him packing, the formidable rulers of Florence (and all of Tuscany), Beatrice of Tuscany and her daughter Matilda, seem to have made amends to the city by working with Gregory to give it a magnificent new baptistery. The sumptuous evocation of Roman splendor in the heart of Florence is exactly the kind of church architecture Gregory would have patronized.

Synthesizing so many pieces of medieval history into a new interpretation required stepping back and reconsidering their importance and how they relate to one another. A.I. may be able to optimize the process of collecting those pieces, but discovery means drawing new connections — something far beyond current A.I. capabilities, as the tests I did confirmed to me.

Discovery remains a human endeavor and is propelled by the very human quality to see oddities that don't fit patterns and by examining them more deeply.

When Dementia Has a Seat at the Table

Patti Davis

A daughter of Ronald Reagan and the author of "Floating in the Deep End: How Caregivers Can See Beyond Alzheimer's."

IN THE photograph I'm sitting beside my father, a decorated Christmas tree behind us, as he looks at a picture book of horses. I had given it to him as a Christmas present, knowing that by his stage of Alzheimer's disease, words got lost but images still made an impact. What you don't see in the photo is that the rest of my relatives were there, too, which was unusual for our fractured family. It would be the last time we spent a holiday together. I don't remember who snapped the picture, but I'm glad someone did.

Moments later, my father turned and looked at the tree. He had a puzzled look on his face when he turned back around. "Why is there a tree in the living room?" he asked. A perfectly understandable question from someone with Alzheimer's, for whom time and the markers of a holiday are a blank screen. I remember several of us scrambling to explain Christmas and the decorations that go along with it. He listened and then repeated, "But why is there a tree in the living room?" It occurred to me that explanations were not going to work, but a simple description might. I said something like, "It's so pretty to have a tree inside sometimes. People do that at this time of year, and

it's so nice to look at." The puzzled look went away; he nodded and returned to the picture book of horses.

Through the holiday season, there will be many families who share a table with someone who has Alzheimer's or some other version of dementia, who might not grasp what the holiday is. They see people around them and a table laden with food, but they don't know why everyone is there and, frankly, they don't care what the reason is. What they do pick up on are the emotional currents that drift around many holiday tables.

Sometimes the saddest passages of our lives are the most instructive.

That will be especially true now that political divisions have intensified enough to make many people dread family get-togethers.

When people's cognition is splintered or absent, they are absorbing the emotions around them with no filter to protect them. They can't tell themselves, "Well, these two love each other but they disagree politically," or "There is messy family history between those relatives." Please don't tell yourself you can say whatever you want around them because they don't understand.

They may not understand the content, but they very much understand the emotion, and it can be scary.

Sometimes the saddest passages of our lives are the most instructive. As hard as it is to watch a loved one drift away to another world where you can't follow, as much as the grief can feel overwhelming, dementia has important lessons to teach us all. One is not to take for granted that you understand what your loved one is feeling or absorbing. So assume that everything that radiates from you is sinking into them, and adjust accordingly. Another lesson is that we are all perfectly capable of stepping away from the sternness of our opinions and viewpoints, choosing instead to be calm, receptive and gracious.

In the 10 years of my father's Alzheimer's, I knew I was being presented with lessons that could serve me in every aspect of my life. I've told many people that, after the journey of dementia with a loved one, you won't be the same. How you change is a choice. You'll either be more open and more gracious or harder and more closed off. The holiday season, when sensitivity runs high, is a good time to reflect on that.

The poet Rumi wrote: "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." Maybe our holiday gatherings this year, regardless of whether they include someone with dementia, but particularly if they do, can be that field.

LETTERS

Hopes for Mamdani's Vision for Child Care

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "How Mamdani's Audacious Child Care Plan Could Work," by Rachel Cohen Booth (Opinion guest essay, Dec. 15):

As an immigrant mother and literacy advocate, I read this essay with both relief and resolve. Relief, because it confirms what families like mine have long known: The child care crisis is not a personal failure but a policy failure. Resolve, because this moment demands courage, not caution.

Attempts to discredit universal child care miss the point. Universal child care is not inherently harmful — poorly designed systems and implementations are. Quality is everything. We must invest in early childhood educators: fair pay, sustained coaching, pathways for growth. Anything less undermines children and families alike.

Child care is not only about giving parents the ability to work. It is also about the development of children. It is about building the foundations of lifelong opportunity. In New York City, only 19 percent of children affected by poverty read proficiently by fourth grade, according to the Nation's Report Card (2024). Children who cannot read become adults whose independence, mental health and upward mobility are severely affected. We cannot separate care from learning; education in early years determines long-term outcomes. Universal child care must include universal literacy.

This is the unfulfilled demand of the feminist movement and a moral imperative for immigrant and working families today. Leaders like New York's mayor-elect, Zohran Mamdani, are showing what bold, values-driven leadership looks like. Child care is essential infrastructure. Families are waiting. Our children deserve it. We must act.

ELIANA GODOY, NEW YORK
The writer is the deputy executive director of Literacy in Community.

TO THE EDITOR:

Rachel Cohen Booth raises important points about New York City's opportunity to create a much-needed child care blueprint. As Ms. Booth noted, families need a range of options. At the same time, offering too many choices without clarity or adequate funding is exactly the problem we have now.

New York City families are already struggling to understand a maze of local child care options: Head Start, Early Head Start, 3-K, pre-K, federally subsidized care rated by QualityStarsNY and more. Each option comes with a siloed bureaucracy that drains public resources and doesn't help the many families who prefer to rely on nannies, family members or other

trusted caregivers.

New York City should go where no other child care system has gone before by providing clear, fully funded options. Regardless of setting or funding stream, child care options should fall into one of two categories — safe and nurturing child care or intentional early childhood education. Regulations, autonomy and funding levels should fit each classification.

When families and providers can select from a simplified, jargon-free, well-funded child care menu, children are better positioned to thrive. The incoming administration should take note.

MARICA COX MITCHELL
WASHINGTON

The writer is chief program officer of the Bainum Family Foundation.

The Best Gift Ever

TO THE EDITOR:

Re "The Best Gifts You Can't Click to Buy" (Opinion guest essay, Dec. 21):

The essay argues that "the best presents make the recipient feel seen." I agree — and yet the best gift I have ever received doesn't quite fit that description.

Twelve years ago, on our first Valentine's Day together, my partner gave me a handmade, heart-shaped lollipop from Papabubble, a small artisanal shop in Amsterdam. It wasn't something I needed. It didn't surface a hidden vulnerability or solve a quiet problem.

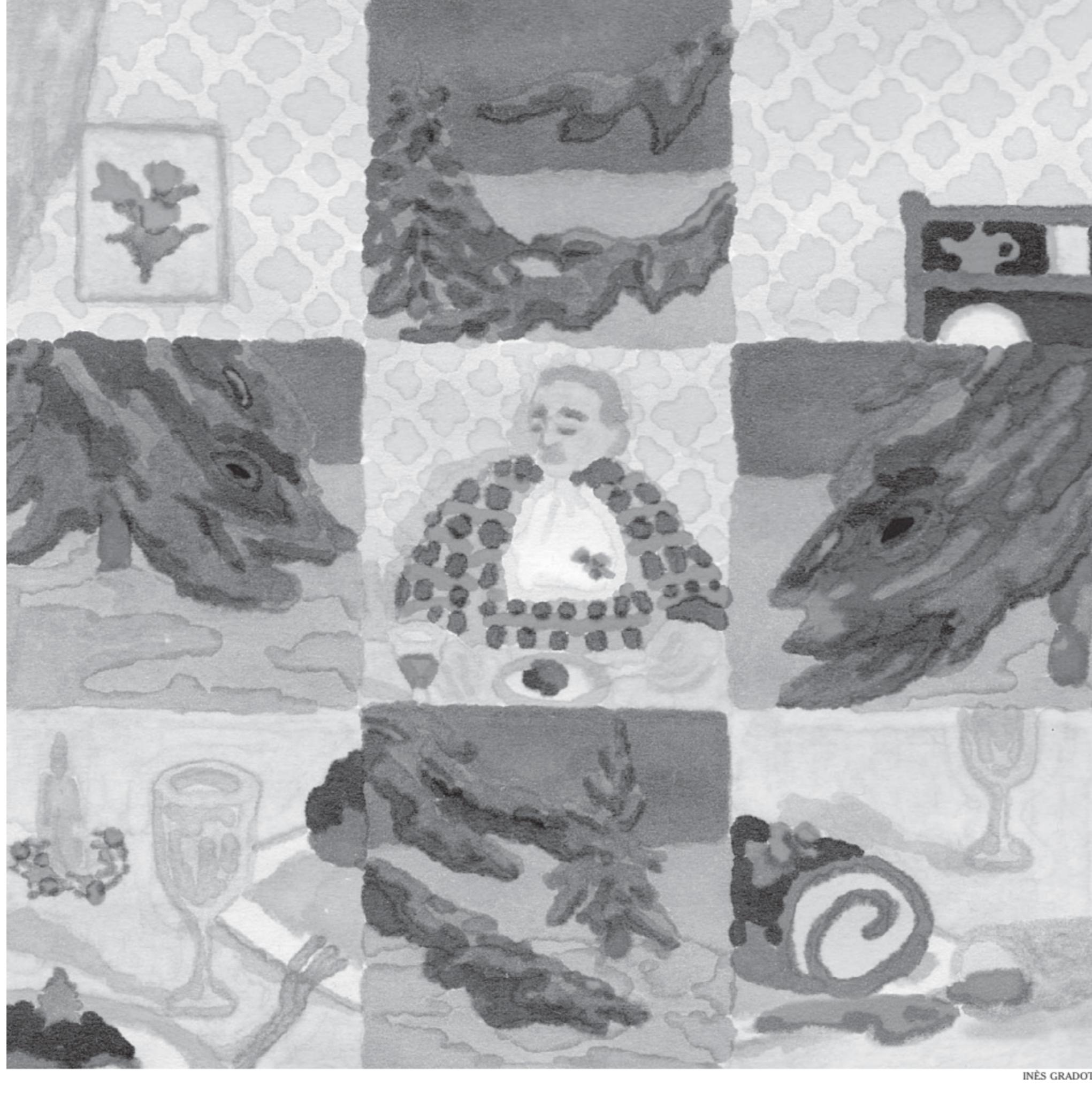
What it did instead was something rarer. The gift didn't "see" me — it played with me. It treated our love as joy rather than insight and elevated our shared silliness into something worthy of ritual. A handmade candy heart is earnestly silly. No wink. No apology. In that seriousness about not being serious, it offered a different kind of intimacy: permission to be unserious without irony.

Gifts that make us feel seen affirm who we already are. This one did something slightly braver. It shaped who we could be together. It encoded an ethos — we are allowed to be silly, even on the most seriously romantic day of the year. That, to me, goes beyond recognition. It is not just being seen. It is being free.

Cost: 10 euros; time: 12 years.

TANUSHREE GOYAL
PRINCETON, N.J.

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INÈS GRADOT

You Should Be Skeptical of the TikTok Deal

Jim Secreto and Brett Freedman

Mr. Secreto was a counselor for investment security at the Department of the Treasury during the Biden administration. Mr. Freedman was the chief of staff at the national security division of the Department of Justice.

TIKTOK took a major step toward avoiding a U.S. ban last week. Its chief executive, Shou Zi Chew, announced that the company had signed binding agreements to spin its U.S. operations into a new joint venture with American investors set to close on Jan. 22. President Trump has blessed the framework, declaring that he is "saving" TikTok while protecting national security.

Americans should be skeptical. As former Treasury and Justice Department officials who worked on TikTok policy in the Biden administration, we believe the proposed structure fails to resolve the national security risks and revives elements of a plan the U.S. government has already rejected. Most concerning, it appears to endorse an arrangement that TikTok itself told the courts it could not realistically implement in accordance with federal law.

Last year Congress passed bipartisan legislation to address two national security risks: China's potential access to the data of roughly 170 million American users and its ability to manipulate TikTok's content recommendation algorithm. Lawmakers of both parties believed the app could secretly assist the Chinese Communist Party's intelligence, law enforcement and national security efforts to recruit intelligence assets, blackmail Americans or influence U.S. elections. Unless TikTok's Chinese parent company, ByteDance, sold its U.S. assets to an American buyer, the app would be banned in the United States.

Mr. Trump's deal preserves many of the ties to China that the law was designed to sever. ByteDance reportedly would license or transfer its recommendation algorithm to

the new U.S. entity. TikTok would continue to manage "global product interoperability," meaning the American app would remain integrated with TikTok's worldwide platform. Oracle, the app's U.S. cloud provider, would serve as a "trusted security partner," monitoring the system and eventually re-training the algorithm. Make no mistake: In this new arrangement, Beijing would still have leverage over the newly structured entity.

The implications of China's continued involvement are far-reaching. For years Washington has urged its partners to restrict Chinese technology firms: It has barred Huawei from 5G networks and tightened export controls on semiconductor manufacturing equipment and Nvidia's advanced artificial intelligence chips. If the president can stretch a bipartisan law forcing TikTok's sale, which was upheld unanimously by the Supreme Court, allies and adversaries alike will assume that America will no longer enforce its security laws when it is easier not to.

To us, the TikTok deal looks familiar. It closely resembles an earlier proposal called Project Texas, which allowed ByteDance to remain involved in U.S. operations. The government ultimately deemed that proposal inadequate.

Under Project Texas, the government warned that there would be "no way to ascertain in real time" whether China was gaining access to or manipulating TikTok's data or algorithm — even with enhanced data controls and third-party auditing. ByteDance itself told U.S. officials that the platform's source code contained roughly two billion lines of code, software so large that Oracle estimated it would take years just to review.

For those reasons, the Justice Department concluded that simply monitoring ByteDance would not be enough to prevent covert access or manipulation. Ensuring that ByteDance was adhering to U.S. law would require "resources far beyond what

the U.S. government and Oracle possess," the Justice Department said. Congress endorsed that assessment when it passed a law requiring a clean break with no exceptions.

TikTok acknowledged the depth of its entanglement with China. In a sworn declaration, the company explained that severing the U.S. platform from the globally integrated app was "not feasible" on the law's timetable. The American app depends on a vast amount of code developed and maintained by thousands of engineers worldwide, including in China, TikTok said.

So why is ByteDance still involved in the deal announced last week?

The answer lies in a combination of hard constraints and mounting pressure to reach an agreement. China placed TikTok's algorithm on its export control list in 2020, giving Beijing veto power over any meaningful technology transfer. Chinese officials have shown little interest in approving the forced export of intellectual property from one of their most valuable firms.

And in the United States, the financial and political incentives to keep TikTok alive are substantial. ByteDance's American investors, including KKR, General Atlantic and Susquehanna International Group, stand to lose billions if a ban goes through. Oracle would significantly expand its role with the deal. Apple and Google, whose app stores distribute TikTok, hope to avoid potential penalties under the law. After repeatedly sidestepping the statute's divest-or-ban deadline, the administration appears eager to claim a win and unwilling to let a wildly popular service go dark.

But the national security concerns have not disappeared. China remains America's most significant strategic rival, and it has demonstrated both the willingness and the capacity to use private companies to advance its goals. Under the proposed arrangement, Beijing would still retain leverage over a platform that shapes what millions of Americans see every day — influ-



MARGARET MURPHY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

China would never allow the U.S. such influence over its digital ecosystem.

ence that China would never allow the United States to wield over its own digital ecosystem.

The White House has said that it approved the TikTok deal after an interagency process led by the vice president and involving defense, law enforcement and intelligence agencies. The administration should explain how it reached its conclusion. And given the stakes, the officials and executives involved should offer to testify and answer questions publicly.

Mr. Trump and his team deserve credit for seeking a solution to a problem that the Biden administration ultimately left unresolved, even as TikTok became more embedded in American economics and cultural life. If the deal truly adheres to the law and protects national security, more transparency would strengthen its credibility. If it cannot withstand scrutiny, that answer would be just as important — for investors, for Congress and for the public.