

## 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.

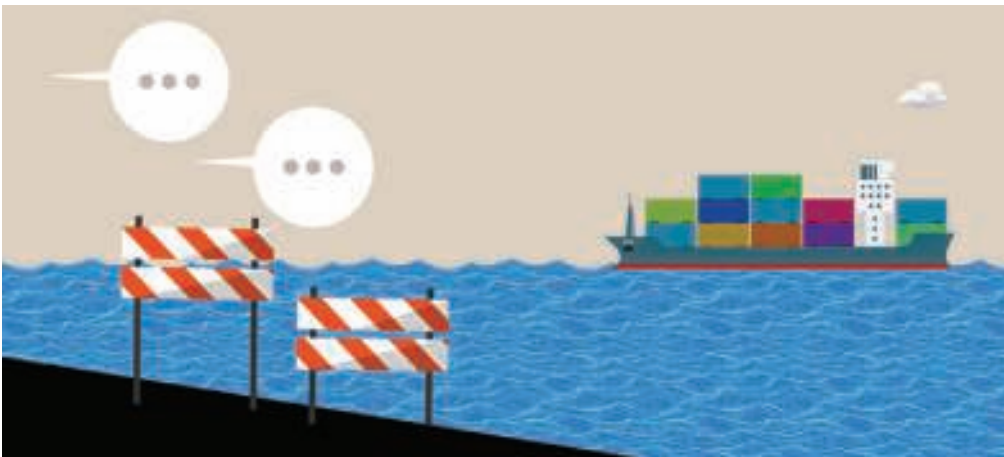
According to a December 2025 report by Deloitte India and Knight Frank India, foreign universities operating in India could serve over 600,000 students by 2040 and help save nearly \$113 billion in foreign exchange, which would otherwise be spent on overseas education. As of 2025, Indian institutions 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.

# 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 fron-



STRAIGHT TALK  
AMITA BATRA

## 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 steadily 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 400-kilovolt transmission line, or the maintenance 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.



NISHANT SAHDEV

tier artificial intelligence (AI) models, the US has initiated PaxSilica — 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 re-routed 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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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 quieter, 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.

The author is a theoretical physicist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His forthcoming book is called *Last Equation Before Silence*

## History against the grain



AJAY VIR JAKHAR

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 Nasibpur 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.

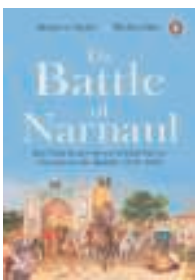
One of the most unsettling truths of Indian colonial history that the book brings out is not merely that a foreign power ruled the subcontinent, but that Indians were repeatedly deployed to suppress Indian resistance to that rule. Books on historical characters tend to be patronising to the protagonist, 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 Bal-labgarh, the Jats of Panipat and Rohtak or the Gujjars and Mewattis 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 alliances 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

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

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

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





OPINION

The  
Hindustan 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 *manos* (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 the waning 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 — *Surajya* or *Sushasan* — should serve as the foundation of a people-centric model that would drive development. His concept of *Surajya* 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



Venkaiah Naidu



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

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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

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,

the assertive heroes of our time.

One can recall that his first collection of poems, a small booklet, was published in 1970, called *Lagbhag Jaihind* (Almost Jaihind); his first novel was written under the first Muktibodh fellowship of the government of Madhya Pradesh called *Naukar ki Kameez* (The Servant’s Shirt) and published in 1979, and he got his first ever award, the Raza Puraskar for his poetry in 1980 or so. Much later, the novel was converted into a remarkable film by Mani Kaul in 1999. His first hardbound collection of poems carried the longest title in Hindi: *Vah Aadami Chala Gaya Naya Garam Coat Pehinkar Vichar Ki Tarah* (That Man Went Away Putting On a New Warm Coat Like an Idea).

In his long career of writing, lasting more than half a century, Vinod enjoyed popularity amongst readers and also invited serious attention from critics. His works were translated into many Indian and foreign languages, and some of them were converted into drama and film. But he remained a reluctant, modest, unambitious person, a man devoted to his family and home, a person unwilling to make any large claims for his writing. There was a time when the Left establishment in Hindi spurned

him as a writer, but many leftist critics and writers appreciated his writing. He was accused of being an aesthete, at best a stylist, unconcerned with the toiling masses. Vinod did not attempt to placate these forces and continued to write, to walk almost alone on the path “not taken”.

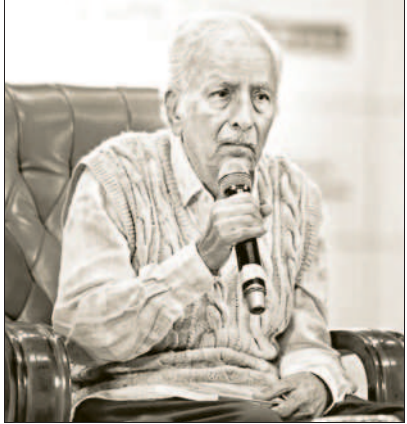
At some point, Vinod also took to writing for children, especially for the new adult. In these works, he allowed his imagination to go wild, and the difference between reality and fantasy was allowed to cease. Implicitly, he believed that both life and creativity cannot be apprehended or understood without imagination. For him, the dualities of time and timelessness, self and others, individual and society, the temporal and the cosmic, almost did not exist; or, they could be superseded by imagination.

While he continued to explore the lower middle-class life and reality, Vinod moved on to face the abysmal displacement of the adivasis of Chhattisgarh, the forced immigration, the erosion of their natural habitat, and their loss of home and hearth. His later poetry is imbued with wide and moving empathy with this particular phase of human suffering and degradation in our times. The geography of his empathy and imagination notably expanded. His innate disbelief in grandeur, pomp and show, and the grandly visible, only deepened as he proceeded in his writing to manifest the nobility and dignity, the interminable suffering of the tribal and the deprived, the glow and grandeur of the denuded.

In the last analysis, Vinod Kumar Shukla was a master who made us feel and realise the vast suffering, the small pleasures, the possibilities and contradictions, the dignity and nobility of the human condition in our times. Also, he made, *inter alia*, politics, urbanisation, smartness, and social manoeuvres appear trivial, lacking in human liberties, life-affirming substance.



Ashok Vajpeyi



By distorting grammar, Shukla forged a new syntax of imagination

PTI

Ashok Vajpeyi is a Hindi poet and critic. The views expressed are personal

{ A RAJARAJAN }

DIRECTOR, VIKRAM SARABHAI SPACE CENTRE



This is the heaviest satellite launched from Indian soil with our own launcher... It gives us confidence to take care of the Gaganyaan mission

On the successful launch of the BlueBird Block-2 satellite



Learning who’s left out of the UPI ecosystem

As India’s payments digital public infrastructure approaches its tenth anniversary, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) continues to stand out for its scale and adoption. In November alone, it processed over 20 billion transactions. As estimated by experts, UPI has 491 million unique users and serves close to half of India’s total addressable population. Its role in reshaping everyday transactions is evident. Yet, important questions remain: Who are the millions still not using UPI, and why? And is there public data that can point us toward the answers?

These questions matter because the next phase of UPI’s growth depends on a deeper focus on inclusion and innovation. Reaching those who remain outside it needs a clearer picture of who the non-users are, where they are concentrated, and what prevents them from joining. However, the public data currently available does not allow for such analysis. At present, information on UPI largely covers aggregate transaction volumes, values, and technical performance indicators such as uptime. While these metrics capture system efficiency, they offer little insight into the distribution of adoption across geographies, income groups, or demographic segments. It is thus difficult to design interventions that address the specific reasons for non-use.

A national baseline study on UPI users and non-users could help bridge this gap. Such a study would allow policymakers to identify clusters of exclusion, whether these lie in rural areas with poor connectivity, among older populations less familiar with digital interfaces, or among those who lack access to smartphones or formal financial accounts. The data could also point to the underlying reasons for non-use, which may differ across groups.

Evidence from a recent study by Artha Global provides a starting point. The study covered 3,200 personal users, 800 micro-merchants, and 800 non-users across four districts in Maharashtra and Bihar. While the findings are based on in-sample data and are not nationally representative, they highlight important trends, suggesting that non-users are not a single group but fall into distinct categories, each facing different barriers to adoption.

The first group consists of those who are unaware of UPI altogether, a surprisingly large share. About 57% of non-users surveyed had not heard of the platform. This indicates that even in states with relatively high digital maturity, awareness gaps persist. Knowing where these gaps are most pronounced can help target

outreach efforts more effectively.

A second group is aware but access-constrained. These individuals face structural or capability-related barriers such as a lack of personal smartphone access, poor internet connectivity, or limited digital comfort. While nearly all respondents had bank accounts, 60% of aware non-users cited lack of smartphone access or the confidence to use one as barriers. These constraints were found to be gendered — women were less likely to have a personal device or feel comfortable using it. Understanding where such access and capability barriers are concentrated could guide investments in both digital infrastructure and literacy.

A third group can be described as access-ready but unconvinced. These individuals have the necessary prerequisites — smartphones, internet access, and bank accounts — but choose not to use UPI. Their reasons relate to perceived complexity, usability concerns, or apprehensions about safety and security. Addressing this group will require efforts focused on building trust and simplifying user experience, rather than expanding infrastructure alone.

These three categories — unaware, access-constrained, and access-ready — collectively point to a layered reality that captures the varied challenges driving non-use. Each requires a different kind of policy response: Targeted communication for the unaware, structural and capability support for the access-constrained, and confidence-building measures for the access-ready.

A national baseline study could help identify where each group is concentrated, enabling researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to respond with precision rather than through broad, undifferentiated measures. Such data could also support ongoing efforts to make digital payments more inclusive by providing a foundation for longitudinal tracking of adoption and usage.

As India looks to expand the reach of its digital public infrastructure, the next step for UPI is not just about larger transaction numbers, but also about broader participation. UPI’s long-term success will depend on how effectively it reaches those still excluded, and that effort must begin with a clearer understanding of who they are and why they remain outside the system. Without this baseline, policy efforts risk being guided by aggregate data that conceal, rather than reveal, the gaps that matter most.

Khushi Baldota and Anushri Pundit are with Artha Global. The views expressed are personal







## The digital narcissus

There was a time when evolution depended on confrontation. Not the violent kind, but the friction of minds, the discomfort 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 sychophants 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

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

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.

## 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 platforming films such as *The Ker-*

*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

**Devvyanshi 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-

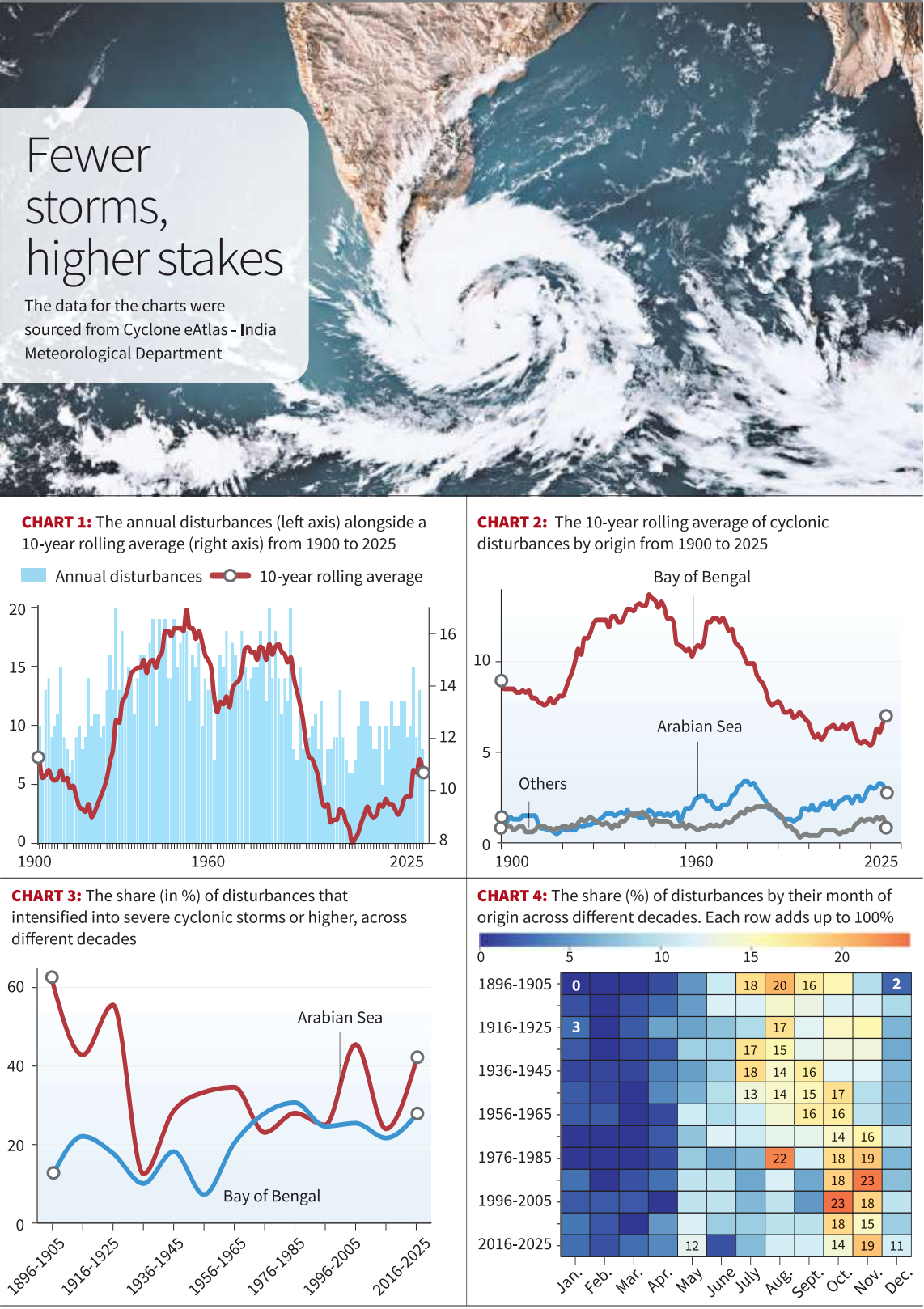
quency remains lower than that of the Bay even in recent years.

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).



### 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, signalling 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.

### How have port laws been modernised?

These developments called for a revival and strengthening of Port security infrastructure, defined security measures and conservation of the coastal environment with an impetus for ease of business. This led to the replacement of the century-old Indian Ports Act of 1908 with the Indian Ports Act of 2025, along with additional legislation like the Coastal Shipping Act of 2025, the Modernised Merchant Shipping Legislation 2025, and the Bureau of Port Security 2025. These laws aim to modernise the framework for coastal trade, encourage Indian ownership and operation of vessels, simplify licensing and regulatory processes, and promote cost-efficient and eco-friendly sea transport.

### 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

## 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.



# 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 KD-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 potsherd 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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A “well-planned brick structure” (left) and a canal used to transport water, both at the Keezhadi site. DOI: 10.18520/CS/V129/I8/712-718



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/UNSPASH

## 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.

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

## 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:**

- Words that were combined for ‘transistor’ – **Ans: Transfer, resistor**
  - Expansion of MOSFET – **Ans: Metal oxide semiconductor field effect transistor**
  - Attribute that Dennard’s scaling preserves – **Ans: Power density**
  - Transistor type that ‘remembers’ past states – **Ans: Memristor**
  - 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











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



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 embedded 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

MIIS ARE EMPOWERED TO MAKE BYLAWS GOVERNING THEIR OPERATIONS, THE CONDUCT OF MEMBERS, AND EVEN MARKET PARTICIPANTS

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.

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

Our Company was originally incorporated as a Private Limited Company under the name of "MM9 Polytrade 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, Jammnalal Bajaj Marg, Nariman Point, Mumbai City, Maharashtra- 400021 Telephone: + 91-7208027910; Website: www.aureatetrade.in E-mail: compliance@aureatetrade.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 ₹ [a] PER EQUITY SHARE INCLUDING A SHARE PREMIUM OF ₹ [a] PER EQUITY SHARE (THE "ISSUE PRICE") AGGREGATING TO ₹ [a] LAKHS ("THE ISSUE"), COMPRISING OF FRESH ISSUE OF 38,98,000 EQUITY SHARES AGGREGATING TO ₹ [a] LAKHS (THE " FRESH ISSUE") AGGREGATING TO ₹ [a] LAKHS, OUT OF WHICH UPTO 1,96,000 EQUITY SHARES OF FACE VALUE OF ₹10/- EACH FOR CASH AT A PRICE OF ₹ [a] PER EQUITY SHARE INCLUDING A SHARE PREMIUM OF ₹ [a] PER EQUITY SHARE AGGREGATING TO ₹ [a] 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 ₹ [a] PER EQUITY SHARE INCLUDING A SHARE PREMIUM OF ₹ [a] PER EQUITY SHARE AGGREGATING TO ₹ [a] 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 SCRR 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/PP/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 IIs), 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 [a] 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.aureatetrade.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@aureatetrade.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 21<sup>st</sup> day i.e. 21 days from the date of filing of Issue Document with SME Platform of BSE Limited ("BSE SME").

Investment in Equity and Equity-related securities involve a degree of risk and investors should not invest any funds in this issue unless they can afford to take the risk of losing their investment

Investors are advised to read the risk factors carefully before taking an investment decision in this issue. For taking an investment decision, investors must rely on their own examination of the issuer and this Issue, including the risks involved. The Equity Shares have not been recommended or approved by the Securities and Exchange Board of India ("SEBI"), nor does SEBI guarantee the accuracy or adequacy of the Draft Prospectus. Specific attention of the investors is invited to the statement of "Risk Factors" given on page no. 31 of the Draft Prospectus. Any decision to invest in the Equity Shares described in the Draft Prospectus may only be made after the Prospectus has been filed with the RoC and must be made solely on the basis of such Prospectus as there may be material changes in the Prospectus from the Draft Prospectus.

The Equity Shares, when offered, through the Prospectus, and proposed to be listed on the SME Platform of BSE Limited ("BSE SME or BSE"). For details of the main objects of our Company as contained in its Memorandum of Association, see "History and Corporate Structure" on page 166 of the Draft Prospectus.

The liability of the members of our Company is limited. For details of the share capital, capital structure of our Company, the names of the signatories for the Memorandum of Association and the number of shares of our Company subscribed by them of our Company, please see "Capital Structure" beginning on page 73 of the Draft Prospectus.



CORPORATE MAKERS CAPITAL LIMITED 611, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, Pragati Tower, Rajendra Place, New Delhi- 110008 Telephone: 011 41411600 Email: info@corporatemakers.in; Website: www.corporatemakers.in Investor Grievance Email: compliance@corporatemakers.in; Contact Person: Mr. Rohit Pareek SEBI Registration Number: INM000013095 CIN: U65100DL1994PLC063880



MUFUG INTIME INDIA PRIVATE LIMITED (Formerly Link Intime India Private Limited) C-101, 247 Park, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor, LBS Marg, Vikroli (West), Mumbai- 400083, Maharashtra, India; Telephone: +91-8108114949 Email: aureatetrade.smeipo@in.mpmf.com; Website: in.mpmf.com/ Investor Grievance Email: aureatetrade.smeipo@in.mpmf.com; Contact Person: Mr. Shanti Gopalakrishnan SEBI Registration Number: INR000004058 CIN: U67190MH1999PTC118368

All capitalized terms used herein and not specifically defined shall have the same meaning as ascribed in the Draft Prospectus.

Date – December 24, 2025 Place – Mumbai Company Secretary and Compliance Officer Sakshi Sareen Aureate Tradde Limited is proposing, subject to receipt of requisite approvals, market conditions and other considerations, to make an Initial Public Offer of its Equity Shares and has filed the Draft Prospectus with BSE on December 23, 2025. The Draft Prospectus shall be available on the website of the BSE at www.bseindia.com and is available on website of the Company i.e. www.aureatetrade.in, website of the Lead Manager to the issue i.e. Corporate Makers Capital Limited at www.corporatemakers.in. Potential investors should note that investment in Equity shares involves a high degree of risk and for details relating to such risks, please see the section entitled "Risk Factors" on page no. 31 of the Draft Prospectus and the details set out in the Prospectus, when filed. Potential investors should not rely on the Draft Prospectus for making any investment decision The Equity Shares offered in the Issue have not been and will not be registered under the U.S. Securities Act, 1933 (the "U.S. Securities Act") or any state securities laws in the United States, and may not be offered or sold within the United States, except pursuant to an exemption from, or in a transaction not subject to, the registration requirements of the U.S. Securities Act and applicable state securities laws. Accordingly, the Equity Shares are being offered and sold only outside the United States in offshore transactions in reliance on Regulations and the applicable laws of the jurisdiction where those offer and sales occur. There will be no public offering of the Equity Shares in the United States.



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.

THEIR VIEW

# WhatsApp: Antitrust oversight led to a win for privacy

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.



ANURAG BEHAR is CEO of Azim Premji Foundation.

My father's father, my Dada, was born in Sarangarh and lived out his life there. Sarangarh was one of the least consequential of over 550 'princely states' when the British left in 1947, and yet it was one of those that wanted to be independent. To negotiate with Sardar Patel the terms of equal coexistence with India, a three-member delegation was sent by the King of Sarangarh to Delhi that year. My Dada was one of the three. He would narrate this story frequently, with amusement about the delegation's own delusions of grandeur. The three of them waited in Delhi for 14 days. Forget the Sardar, even his secretary did not give them an audience. In those epochal days, these tiny states were simply sucked into India in the wake of conflicts and bargains with bigger states like Travancore, Bhopal, Hyderabad and Kashmir. In the 1980s, when I first heard the story, it was obvious to me that the idea of an independent Sarangarh was ridiculous and its union with India was inevitable. How could a territory about 35km in width and 40km in length in the middle of India imagine independence? That would make my Dada laugh. It was only after I lost him in 2005 that it occurred to me that they could have done nothing else. When tectonic plates collide and shift in an earthquake, what else is there to do but try and pro-

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 flats 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 every day, 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 us 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.



JUST A THOUGHT

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

S. SOMANATH







THURSDAY, DECEMBER 25, 2025



# The Indian EXPRESS

JOURNALISM of COURAGE

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THE INDIAN EXPRESS  
WISHES ITS READERS  
**A MERRY  
CHRISTMAS**

## Happening 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 Rashtra 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](#)

BNP LEADER TARIQUE RAHMAN ENDS 17-YEAR EXILE

## Khaleda's son back today; kin of slain Hadi blames Dhaka

Yunus govt is behind murder to foil Feb polls, says anti-Hasina activist's brother

Ruma Paul  
Dhaka, December 24

THE BANGLADESH Nationalist Party aims to gather five million supporters to welcome its leader Tarique Rahman home from nearly 17 years in exile Thursday, a show of strength as he emerges as a leading contender for Prime Minister in the February elections.

Rahman, 60, is the son of ailing former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and acting chairman of the party that is widely expected to come out on top in the parliamentary vote set for February 12.

His return from London comes as his BNP is on the ascendant following the ouster of



Tarique Rahman has lived in London since 2008 as he faced multiple criminal convictions. He was acquitted of all charges after Hasina's removal

its arch foe, long-time Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in a student-led uprising last year. Apart from brief transition administrations, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina have alternated in power since 1991.

A December survey by the US-based International Republican Institute suggests the BNP is on course to win the largest number of parliamentary seats, with the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party also in the race.

Hasina's Awami League party, which has been barred from the election, has threatened unrest that some fear could jeopardize the vote.

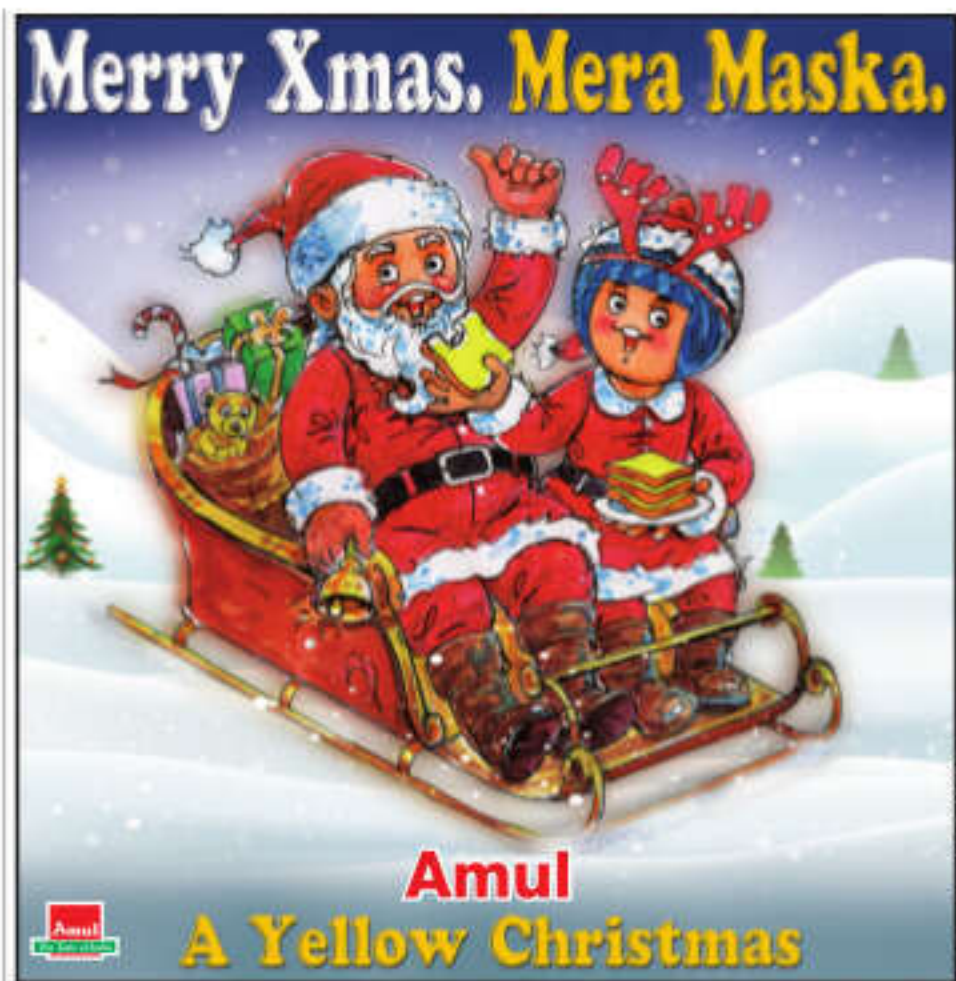
Rahman's decision to return is driven by both political developments and personal circumstances. His mother has been seriously ill for months, prompting what party insiders describe as an urgent trip home.

BNP leaders said they are preparing for what they call an "unprecedented" gathering in the capital, aiming to draw more than five million supporters along the route from the airport to the reception venue.

"This will be a defining political moment," senior BNP leader Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said, adding that security arrangements are being closely coordinated with authorities to ensure order.

Rahman has lived in London since 2008 as he faced

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2



BACK TO RAJASTHAN YARDSTICK

## Before 2025 yes was the 2010 no: SC had rejected 100-metre definition of Aravallis

On court's direction, FSI in 2010 assessed Aravalli hills in Rajasthan, arrived at 3-degree slope norm

Jay Mazoomdaar  
New Delhi, December 24

IN STARK contrast to its order last month, the Supreme Court had rejected the state of Rajasthan's 100-metre definition for Aravallis — 15 years ago. The court had in 2010 ordered a survey by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) which shall "not be confined to peaks/parts of hills above 100 metres, from the ground level".

This FSI survey came up with the 3 degree slope definition of Aravalli, which was ignored on November 20 by the Supreme Court in favour of the same 100 metre height benchmark now recommended by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

Hearing multiple matters related to minings in Rajasthan, the Supreme Court had noted on February 19, 2010, that "according to the deemed definition given by the State of Rajasthan, only peaks/ parts of hills

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

Business as Usual  
By EP UNNY



INSIDE PAGES 12, 17

CENTRE TO 3 STATES: ENSURE NO NEW MINING LICENCES

THE GREAT WALL IN THE NORTH: WHY ARAVALLIS MATTER

## 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](#)

Tuesday's violence.

Over Monday and Tuesday, long-simmering tensions in this area of West Karbi Anglong came to a boil, claiming two lives — Suraj Dey, a Bengali resident of the market who died when his house was set on fire, and Linus Phangocho, who was allegedly in a Karbi mob that clashed with the police. An Army column marched through the market, the quiet Karbi villages, and the restive non-Karbi settlements on Wednesday.

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

POLITICS PAGE 6



UDDHAV, RAJ ANNOUNCE ALLIANCE FOR BMC POLLS

## Nothing to show membership of IM, SIMI or plot: Court on terror suspect

Mahender Singh Manral  
New Delhi, December 24

A DELHI court has acquitted Abdul Subhan Qureshi — accused of being a key Indian Mujahideen (IM) operative behind the 2006 Mumbai train blasts and the 2008 Gujarat blasts — and his associate, Ariz Khan, in a case of alleged conspiracy to revive the IM and the Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI).

The court noted that there was "no admissible material on

record" to show that they were members of the banned outfits or that they had "entered into any conspiracy against the sovereignty and security of India".

While Qureshi was arrested from Ghazipur area of East Delhi on January 23, 2018, Khan, who was reported to have fled the country after the 2008 Batla House encounter, was arrested from the India-Nepal border on February 14, 2018.

The case under Section 18 of UAPA (conspiracy related to

terrorist act) and 120B IPC (criminal conspiracy) in which they have been acquitted was registered in 2014.

"...In the said circumstances, there is absolutely no admissible material on record in the charge sheet of the present case to show or raise a grave suspicion against both the accused persons that they entered into a conspiracy to revive activity of banned terrorist organisation SIMI and IM in India, or that they were

»CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

● 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.

PAGE 1  
anchor

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 Sonapat 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 Rs 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









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# The twilight of deliberation: When Parliament becomes a rubber stamp



**THAROORTHINK**  
BY SHASHI THAROOR

**T**HE 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 dismaying 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**

**O**N 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 Aajeevika 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



ILLUSTRATION: MITHUN CHAKRABORTY

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 obedience 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*

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Faith in law

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘Court rescues due process in Akhlaq case’ (IE, December 24). Such tragic cases highlight the importance of judicial oversight. If the case was concluded in such circumstances, it would be a travesty of justice. It would send a message to would-be vigilantes to “wait out” the consequences of their actions. The government must ensure a review of evidence in line with judicial instructions.

*Anany Mishra, Bhilai*

### Beyond FTAs

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘Trade deal with New Zealand is much needed’ (IE, December 24). It rightly observes that the “welcome embrace” of free trade agreements — from the UK to EFTA and now New Zealand — signals India’s deeper integration with global markets. However, sustained growth requires not just open markets but internal monetary stability. The RBI deserves credit for its decisive steps that have led to a rebound of the rupee against the dollar. A robust currency combined with “meaningful market access” creates the perfect ecosystem for growth.

*Krishan Kumar Chugh, New Delhi*

### Nuclear Standards

THIS REFERS to the editorial, ‘SHANTI Bill is India’s second shot at nuclear energy leadership’ (IE, December 24). The SHANTI Bill marks a long-overdue transition from state monopoly to a pragmatic partnership with the private sector. By resolving the contentious supplier liability issues that long deterred international partners, India is finally aligning with global standards. While the dilution of liability remains a sensitive political debate, the priority must be achieving the ambitious 100 GW target by 2047. Success now depends on building a trained workforce and maintaining rigorous safety oversight to ensure progress does not come at the cost of protection.

*Jai Prakash Acharya, New Delhi*



**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 cumulative 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, CCTV, 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*

## Claims about destruction of Aravalli hills alarmist



**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.

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  
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Jafar Panahi has always been  
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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

**Amaal 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.

### Personality rights

Personality Rights safeguard an individual's name, image, likeness, voice, signature and other identifiable traits from unauthorised commercial exploitation. India does not have a standalone statute defining these rights. Instead, courts have assembled them through a combination of intellectual property law and constitutional principles. Personality rights are derived from the 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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● 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

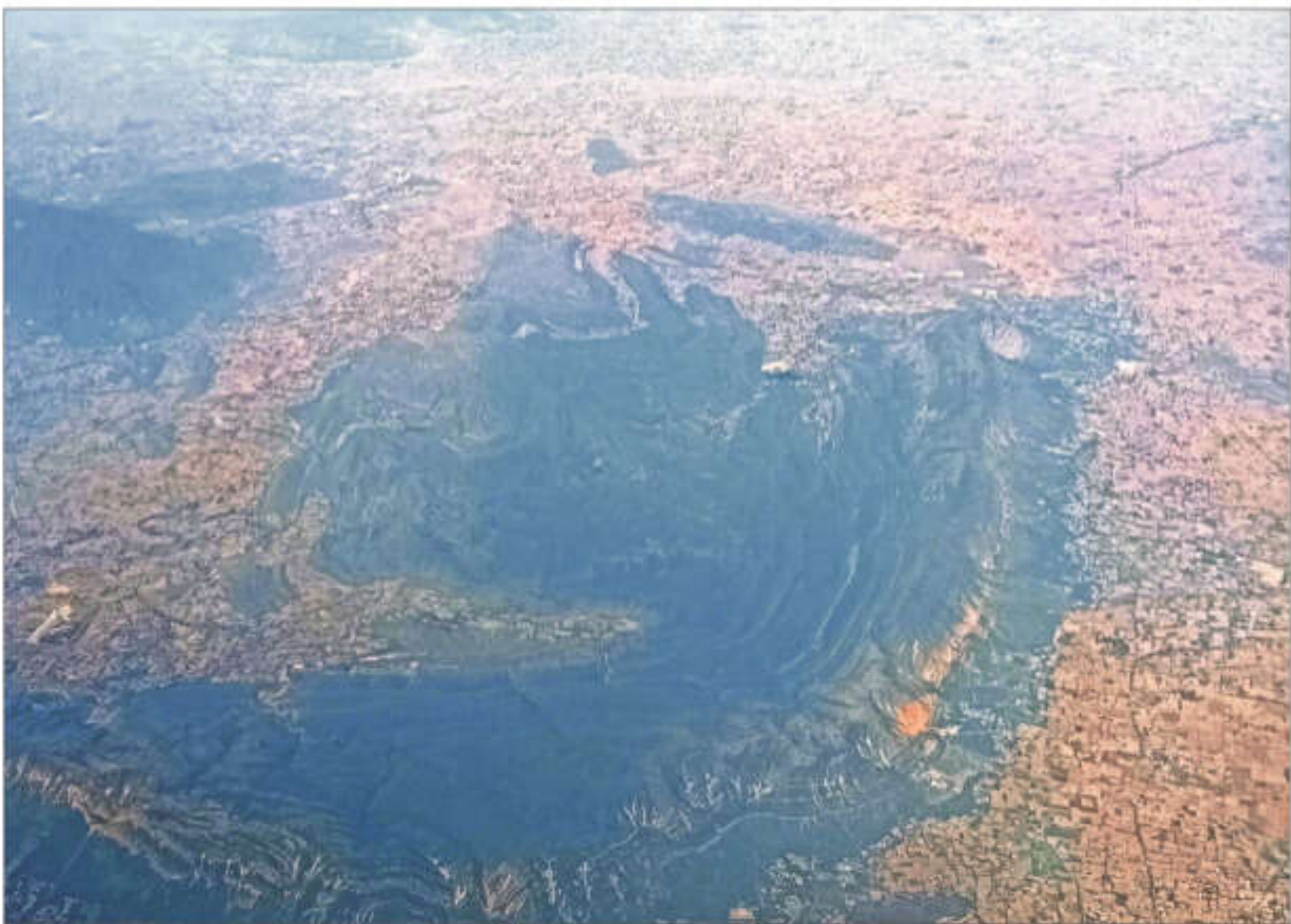
At over a billion years old, the Aravallis are one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world, formed during the Precambrian Era due to the collision of tectonic plates of the earth's crust. The 700-odd-km range stretches across four states (Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi) and 37 districts, with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



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

### ● 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.

Jhunjhunu district and northern most hill-ocks in Mahendragarh district of Haryana.

### Water recharge & biodiversity

Although water drainage and recharge influenced by the Aravallis is not talked about enough, the hills' rocky formations are essential to recharge aquifers and groundwater levels, and sustain seasonal rivers of Rajasthan and Gujarat.

The Centre's Aravalli landscape restoration action plan documents the key role the Aravalli hills play on this front.

"It (the Aravalli range) is one of the main watersheds, separating the drainage of the Bay of Bengal, through rivers like the Chambal, and other tributaries of the Yamuna, from that of the Arabian Sea through the Mahi, Sabarmati, Luni, and other rivers," the action plan states. The region is also home to important lakes and wetlands including Sambhar, Sultanpur, Pushkar, Fateh Sagar,

### Range anxiety

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

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

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-

● 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 developmental 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.

### 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.

Also, Akash-NG 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.

clude tiger, leopard, sloth bear, sambar, chital, desert fox, blackbuck, hyena, wolf, jackal, gharial, crocodile. These species are also crucial in helping preserve the semi-arid scrub forests and semi and dry savanna forests, such as those found in Sariska Tiger Reserve in Alwar. The uniform height definition, and management plan for sustainable mining as ordered by the Supreme Court before allowing new leases, will have to consider these ecosystem services.

The smaller Aravalli hillocks, if opened for mining, would shrink the wildlife corridors. "The ecological richness (of Aravallis) is rapidly declining, and now restricted to fragmented forest patches and protected areas, due to an increase in human pressure and forest loss. The Aravallis also sustain local livelihoods, and communities depend on fuelwood, fodder, fruits, vegetables, and medicinal plants," Dhasmana said.

### Challenges, need for safeguards

The Aravallis are already under immense pressure, and have faced degradation over the years due to urbanisation, industrial clusters, and mining, both legal and illegal. The Union government has itself accepted the large-scale degradation in its action plan under the 'Aravalli Green Wall' project.

"The Aravalli Range faces increasing threats due to deforestation, mining, grazing, and human encroachment. Forest lands around Sariska Wildlife Sanctuary were diverted before the 1980s, reducing its forest cover. Desertification is exacerbating as desert sands move eastward, compromising regions like Gurugram and Alwar. Mining activities have damaged aquifers, dried up lakes, and reduced the range's ability to support wildlife," the Centre's action plan notes.

However, these challenges are only set to rise: the Aravallis, after all, are recognised as a repository of metals and minerals, including critical minerals. Even as the Supreme Court has placed a moratorium of sorts on new mining leases until a detailed mining plan study is undertaken, it has accepted Centre's recommendation to make an exception for critical minerals.

The mountain range is home to lead, zinc, copper, gold, tungsten and has reserves of critical minerals such as tin, graphite, molybdenum, niobium, nickel, lithium, and rare earth elements (REEs). These are considered to be of strategic relevance for energy transition, high-technology manufacturing, and national security.

Although the Centre says the new definition is only for mining purposes, how it plays out for the real estate sector remains to be seen. These pressures call for stricter protection of the mountain range, which is already under stress.

Akash-NG is primarily designed for the IAF with an aim of intercepting high manoeuvring 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 and a much smaller ground system footprint. The DRDO has also developed another version of Akash, called Akash Prime, which has the same range as that of the earlier version but has an indigenous active radio frequency seeker for improved accuracy to hit the aerial targets.

### User evaluation trials

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.

● 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.

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. Terming 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 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.



## 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 installations 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

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(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

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

The rest of the world, like in the past several years, continues to buy much more from China than selling to it

# 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 his 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 law is 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 dur-

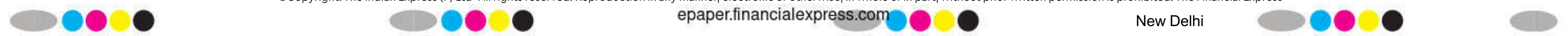
ing disruption windows—data inputs received, active rule sets, constraints in place, and prices generated time-wise. These records should be subject to post-event scrutiny with the ability to order remedies and penalties where patterns suggest exploitative conduct. This aligns with global regulatory 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.

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# 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 Ribands. 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 sambhar 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!

**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



Heave-ho!

while studying the possible velocity of the 2025 reforms.

Reformist measures this year can be classified into six buckets: **1. Rationalising taxation** GST 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 frontloaded and cost-inefficient tax extraction.

**2. Consolidation of 29 disparate laws into 4 labour codes** The codes give employees security and fair wages. They give employers flexibility, without which there will be 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.

**3. 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.

**4. 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.

**5. Nuclear** Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act was long overdue. It reversed a unique piece of self-harm in the shape of India's unenviable 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.

**6. 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 manufacturing in India itself.

In late 2025, major correctives 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

# Only Trains Don't Kill Gentle Giants



Shantanu Nandan Sharma

When the Delhi-bound Rajdhani Express from Mizoram ploughed into a herd of elephants in Assam's Hojai district last week, 8 jumbos — including 5 calves — were killed.

In a country that is home to about 25,000 elephants — and where trains claim the lives of over a dozen jumbos every year, with as many as 92 killed between 2018-19 and 2023-24 — this tragedy might have passed as another statistic. It drew attention only because 8 elephants were wiped out in a single, devastating moment.

Early reports quoted a divisional forest officer (DFO) attributing the late-night accident — around 22.30 am — to dense fog. The same accounts cited a local railway spokesperson who stressed that the collision occurred outside a designated elephant corridor, implying that it carried no mandatory speed restrictions.

Pointing fingers at loco pilots, signal engineers, forest guards — or even at

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 Jhonjh 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 ₹234 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,



Not the best route

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, fencing, 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 Jamshepur and Ranchi, officials had to delay the selection process by 4 mths, exposing once again the costs of departmental silos.

This 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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# Social Security, Reimagined



D K Singh

The recently released labour codes have revived a familiar debate. Some hail them as revolutionary; others see them as consolidatory. But almost all converge on one concern: Code on Social Security (CSS) could raise labour costs and reduce take-home pay. This concern is overstated and, largely, misplaced. CSS should be judged not by isolated provisions but by its capacity to correct failures in India's social security system.

CSS aligns India's framework with the UN's SDGs, which recognise social security as a fundamental right safeguarding dignity against life's risks. Crucially, the code's language of rights and affordability imposes a positive obligation on the state to design schemes that deliver benefits. Together, these provisions lay the foundation for transforming PF from a narrow savings device into a contribution-funded social insurance system.

The code also abolishes schedule-based applicability of EPF Act, under which coverage depended on whether an establishment's activity appeared in prescribed lists. Entire sectors — railways, financial institutions, insurance companies and state establishments — were excluded or mired in litigation under this regime.

Under CSS, any establishment employing 20 or more persons may be covered irrespective of activity, subject

only to limited exclusions. Importantly, exclusions now operate at the employee, not establishment, level. While employees covered under state social security schemes may be excluded, contract and other workers engaged by state departments become entitled.

Chapter 3 mandates schemes with universal membership of employees, alongside schemes for the self-employed. Section 2(26) ensures that no wage ceiling can apply for enrolment, while Section 2(89) empowers GoI to prescribe a wage ceiling for contributions.

This separation of membership from contribution is decisive. All employees in covered establishments may be deemed members. But employer and employee contributions apply only up to the notified ceiling. Coverage is, thus, universal, while financial exposure remains capped and predictable.

**► Power to declare any class as employees** This has the potential to resolve decades of litigation involving trainees, apprentices, contract labour classifications, delivery workers and platform-based roles. A single notification can settle classification disputes. The provision is also future-ready, en-

abling 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 overlays 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 robust 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 provident fund commissioner, EPFO, GoI



THE SPEAKING TREE

# Inclusive Love

JANINA GOMES

Jesus' birth is meant to change us all. This reveals to us the profound love of God for humanity, a love that is inclusive, transformative and available to all. Christmas invites us to look beyond our immediate needs and concerns, and reach out to those in need with love, kindness and compassion. It is a call to reconnect with our inner humanity.

Christmas is celebrated by both Christians and non-Christians. But its true significance is lost in all the fun and merriment that does not correspond with the true message of Christmas. Jesus was born in a manger because there was no room in the inn. Jesus' birth was quietly made known to humble shepherds and to seeking wise men from the East. Jesus lived in an ordinary family and remained invisible and unseen for 30 yrs before he began his public earthly ministry.

The legacy of Christmas is one of hope and renewal. Do we associate Christmas with worldly values, such as power, love of money, show of wealth, importance of status and class or caste, glorifying of false prophets and worldly glory? Or do we see and act as messengers of a more peaceful, loving and caring world where healing, joy and love reign?

As Joan Chittister says, 'Christmas is the call to see God everywhere, especially in places we would not expect to find glory and grace. Christmas is the call to exult in life; Christmas is the obligation to see that everything leads us directly to God and to realise that there is no one, nothing on earth that is not the way of God for me.'



# Eleven Madison Park New York

Eleven Madison Park (EMP) is less a restaurant than a choreographed act of modern luxury. Under chef Daniel Humm's eye, nothing feels accidental: the custom-tailored suits, handblown water vases and hushed Art Deco room all signal a temple built on precision. The discipline carries onto the plate.

Since its audacious shift to a largely plant-based menu after Covid, EMP has redefined



what luxury dining can mean. A freshly baked vegan roll, delicately crisped and served with faux butter,

sets the tone — warm, comforting and magical. A quenelle of tonburi, paired with horseradish cream and a radish tostada slicked with pumpkin seed butter; is playful and refined. These are dishes that don't apologise for what they lack, instead, they revel in what vegetables can become. For those unconvinced, the kitchen discreetly allows a few animal-protein supplements, though the plant-forward vision stands confidently on its own. Humm's journey — from neoclassical indulgence to pared-back minimalism — feels complete here.

Housed in the Metropolitan Life North Building and holding three Michelin stars since 2012, EMP remains timeless yet restless, serious yet generous.

# Chat Room

# Every Day Is Sun Day

Apropos 'Storage Policy Haazir Ho' by T K Arun, and 'Renewable Made Reliable' by Amitabh Kant (Dec 24), we need a simple and effective policy to mandate that large consumers of power, such as malls and high-rise apartment complexes, should meet their common-area electricity needs through rooftop solar power; which would solve the problem of over-generation and underutilisation of solar energy. These places should also be mandated to install EV charging points to encourage daytime power utilisation when solar energy is abundant. Battery storage being expensive, real-time use of solar is more economical and environmentally sound. Discoms' revenue loss can be addressed by making them partners in rooftop solar and EV-charging infrastructure. Pallavi UB Bengaluru





**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 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 diddly 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?

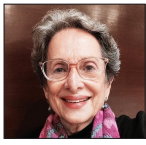
When justice is stained even in cases that proceed under heavy public gaze, it spreads an awful hopelessness through those proceeding under routine light. Delhi high court's decision to suspend the jail term of expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar is another such blemished moment. Supposed reason: “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 POCOS 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  
Commodore with Italian flush.  
Why not buy two flats  
as pa-air  
Sky villa castles in  
the air?

The towers are  
dizz-i-ly hi-high  
Thanks to pumped up F-S-!!  
Yes, you can have deluxe galo-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 morn 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,**  
Spitefully triumphant.

O come ye, O co-ome  
To bi-got-ry.  
O come let us destroy them,  
O come let us Other them,  
O come let us or-der them  
To Pa-aa-kistan.

**Rahul, the baba-faced neta**  
Had a very patchy fame.  
But if you truly heard him,  
You'd know he had more than name.  
All the ruling pashahs  
Laughed and junked his vote-theft claims.

They said that he 'n' Mama  
Were the ones playing 'cho-ri' games.  
Then one stormy Christmas week  
Santa Court came to say,  
'The Gandhis are not guilty.  
There's no case for PMLA.'  
Then all the mocking critics  
Jumped up 'n' down *sans* glee.

They feared that 'Pappu' Rahul  
Was not yet hiss-to-ry!  
**You better watch out, you better  
not cry,**  
You better learn how  
'Coz I'm telling you why  
AI is com-ing to town.

It's perfecting algo-rithms  
And Large Language Models too.  
It's got computer vision.  
Tho' Gemini could still fool you!  
So you better watch out,  
You better just cry,  
Out-bot-ed humans must start  
leav-ing the town!

\*\*\*  
**Alec Smart said: "Eggs aren't  
yolked to cancer."**

# 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



Columnist based  
in Washington DC

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 to 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



US presidents/ambitious diplomats in the good old days of trans-Atlantic bonhomie but that's over.

It's Trump time now. Literally. Check out the Trump watch collection in gold-tones and solid gold with a price range to suit all pockets. From \$499 to a whopping \$100,000 a piece, there's Trump love for everyone. Expect the sale of 'everything' else to continue. Access, assets, club memberships. Did you say chips? Those too. But you have to be Xi Jinping with supply chains cornered and the future mapped out.

Trump will dash to Beijing next year for a summit like a man in awe ready to

## 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



Professor of  
Social Policy

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 govts to bear 40% of the cost, the new scheme will have a shrunken reach if state govts 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

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.

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?

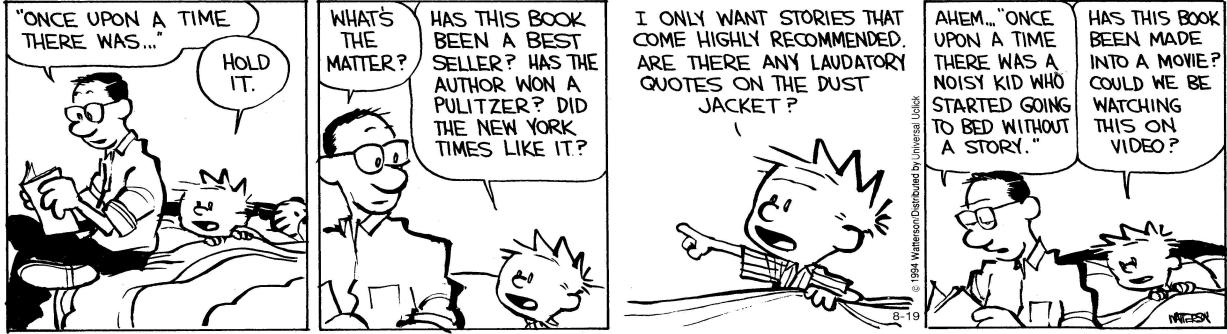
Most studies show that MGNREGA increased income, consumption, and lowered rural poverty. It became an automatic stabiliser during Covid – higher allocation increased incomes and rescued millions from falling into poverty. The biggest weakness of MGNREGA was its implementation. The scheme reeked of political patronage and corruption. Instances of fake job cards, fake enrolment, and fake projects were not uncommon, and village sarpanchs 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

## Calvin & Hobbes



## Christmas Is A Feast For The Vulnerable

Janina Gomes

Angels appeared to shepherds at night when Christ was born, announcing the good news, singing: “Glory to God in the highest and peace to all people of goodwill.” The incarnation of Jesus, who was born of the womb of Virgin Mary, was God's decisive intervention in human history. Jesus, who was God, took on the form and nature of a human being to save us. He became like us, vulnerable, fragile and weak. He could share our experiences of joy, anticipation, pain, struggle, and sorrow, as well as those of victims of injustice and oppression.

He understood it all. He healed those who were sick and helpless. He understood the pain of a widow who lost her only son, thirst and hunger of crowds, who

longed for heavenly food. He cleansed lepers who were social outcasts and drove out demons who ruined people's lives. He always reached out to others with compassion and love.

Today, many have forgotten what it really means to be human. Christmas reminds us that Jesus came to bring peace to the world, torn apart with hate, division and strife. He hears cries of those who are subjected to cruelty and for whom life is a relentless fight for survival. He even hears cries of Mother Earth, which is being despoiled by our mindless disregard for nature. The vulnerable are not only those who are disadvantaged due to physical, mental or social conditions, but also those fleeing from wars, persecution, climate upheavals and other

dangers in several countries.

An image of Mother Mary cradling her child is familiar; many Christmas greeting cards use it. It is a reminder of vulnerability of women and children. Women are targeted especially in wars and conflict zones. At Christmas, we recall all vulnerable groups in our society, the impoverished, Dalits, workers, and minorities.

Christmas celebrates the divine becoming human and the gift of abundant life that God promised and has given us. It also means we

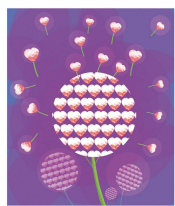
are meant to share our resources with others, especially those who are disadvantaged. It is a community feast just as much as it is a family feast, because we share our joys and happiness with others. This

happiness is not only for the elite circle, but for all people of goodwill.

This Christmas, let us put on the garment of love. Love that envelopes all of humankind. This manifestation of divine love, when God became man, is an invitation to all of us to give up hatred of the other and to see others with the eyes of God, for the Divine has no favourites.

In life's journey, there are many milestones we must cover. If we fill our lives with love and compassion, there is no end to Christmas. Life is uncertain, and we do not know what tomorrow will bring. But the birth of Jesus brings hope to the battered in life and reassures us that, despite all tragedies and difficulties we may face, ultimately God is in control and will never abandon us, because He is Emmanuel, which means God is with us.

## 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.

Kate McGahan



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 Ferozabad 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.



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COALITION ERA

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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 freedom and India's place in a changing 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.

## Conquering the self as taught in the Bhagavad Gita



AJIT KUMAR  
BISHNOI

### 2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

Very few people realise a profound truth: our greatest enemy is not outside us, but within. This is not a modern psychological insight, nor a personal conjecture. Lord Krishna articulates this clearly in the Bhagavad Gita: "For one who has not conquered the mind, the mind alone becomes the enemy" (6.6). When consciousness-comprising the mind, senses, and intelligence—remains unconquered, it works against the individual. How many among us can genuinely claim mastery over all three? Perhaps none. Consider first the mind. We allow it almost unchecked freedom. Thousands of thoughts pass through it daily—many impulsive, unhealthy, and often crossing the boundaries of maryada (social and moral restraint). We justify this freedom by assuming that thoughts are private

and inconsequential. Yet two critical truths are ignored: God is witness to the mind, and karma is generated even at the mental level. Every harmful action is first conceived subtly in thought. If thoughts truly had no consequence, how would we explain the deep physical and psychological illnesses that arise from prolonged negative thinking?

Clearly, the mind can harm us profoundly. The senses fare no better. Our lack of restraint is evident everywhere—from gluttony at buffet tables to secret indulgences that defy medical advice, such as diabetics consuming sweets in the dead of night. Our eyes roam freely, objectifying others, with technology offering endless temptation. Even touch, taste, and comfort-seeking become excesses, rendering the body incapable of basic physical discipline. Hearing, too, is easily exploited—false praise inflates the ego, and most of us relish it unquestioningly. Thus, the senses, when ungoverned, deepen our bondage.

What, then, of intelligence? If it were truly active, would it permit such anarchy? Intelligence is meant to guide the mind and restrain the senses, yet we often invert this hierarchy. "My mind wants this" becomes justification enough. Goals are postponed because *tapasya*—discipline and effort—is inconvenient. Sleep is sacrificed for late-night entertainment, despite knowing its vital role in health. In such choices, intelligence itself becomes an accomplice to self-

destruction. The Gita, however, does not merely diagnose the problem; it offers the remedy. Lord Krishna advises taking refuge in Him in all respects (18.62). This path is demanding but achievable through consistent practice (*abhyasa*) and detachment (*vairagya*) (6.35-6.26). The mind will wander; our task is to gently but firmly bring it back. Reducing excessive desires is essential, for an overcrowded mind cannot be disciplined. As the mind becomes steady, the senses naturally fall into line—taste moderates, vision purifies, and hearing

becomes discerning. Intelligence, too, is refined by aligning with scriptural guidance (16.24), satsang, and humble inquiry from genuine gurus (4.34). Prayer cultivates humility, dissolving ego. As Tulsidas reminds us, God responds to humility, not arrogance. The rewards are immense. Krishna declares that one who has conquered the self remains peaceful amid pleasure and pain, honour and dishonour, and such a person is accompanied by God Himself (6.7). This divine companionship is intimate and transformative, leading to jeevan-mukti—liberation while living (5.28). Ultimately, by mastering mind, senses, and intelligence, we cease to be our own enemy and become our greatest ally. I write this with conviction and with practice already under way.

The writer is a spiritual teacher

## 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 and empathy. 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

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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

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Governance beyond power and authority

Transparency and accountability are the cornerstones of good government. 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.

### 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.

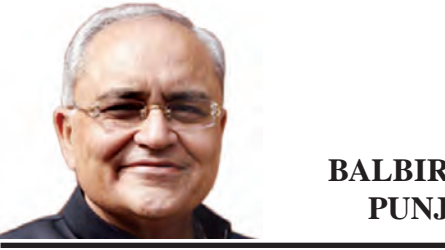
Further, inclusivity, independent audits and a time-bound grievance redressal mechanism are essential to maintain trust. It is therefore imperative that facial recognition and live photo verification are introduced responsibly to restore credibility to the examination process.

VIJAYKUMAR HK | RAICHUR



# 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 unabashed 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



CAPITULATION TO TERROR, AS THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE SHOWS, DOESN'T BRING LASTING PEACE; INSTEAD, IT ONLY FUELS THE TERRORISTS' HUNGER FOR MORE BLOODSHED

The writer is an eminent columnist and the author of 'Tryst with Ayodhya: Decolonisation of India' and 'Narrative ka Mayajal'

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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 recorded 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 Saïd 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 Aouissauil 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? Apologists 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?

## 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 Aravalli 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 via 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 Aravali 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 'Aravali 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 Aravalis' 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.

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## 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 franchise-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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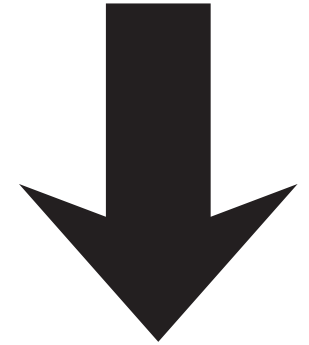
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## EDITORIALS

### 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.

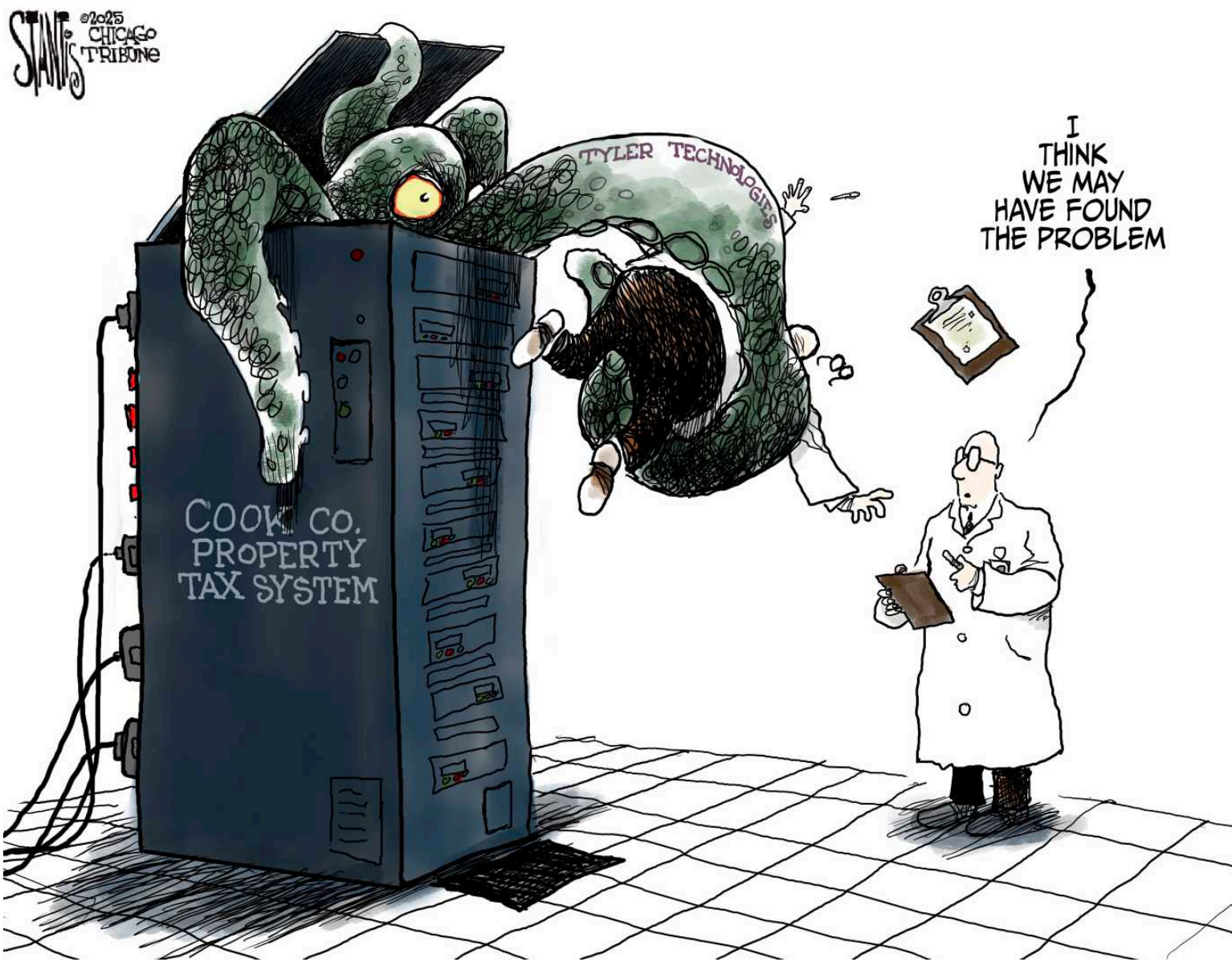
Palatine School District 15, for example, projects the delay will cost it more than \$1 million when all is said and done. That’s money that simply is being flushed down the toilet — resources that otherwise could go to augmenting the educations of the students served by those schools.

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 million 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 booksellers, 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

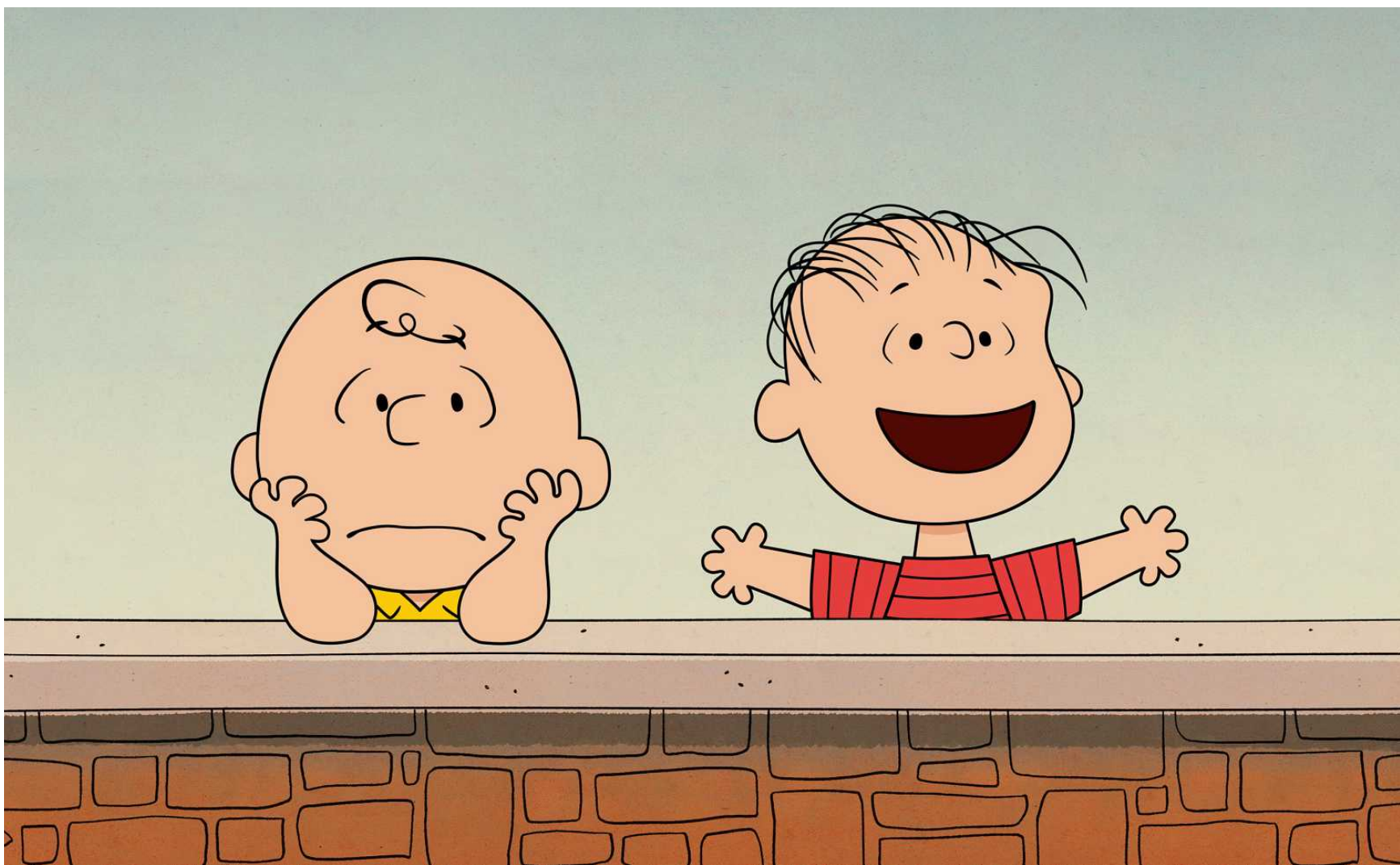
part of the officials concerned that they were stupid or negligent, but always an alibi of some sort, followed by a demand for further sacrifices.

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. Yet."

"Sold!" I replied enthusiastically. (Spoiler alert: This is not, actually, the plot of "Oh.What.Fun," the holiday flick starring Michelle Pfeiffer, that he 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 playing 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 furs 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 polygraphs, 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. Jahdae 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 “10/10, 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 MaCaskeys 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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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

# 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

**A**CROSS 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.

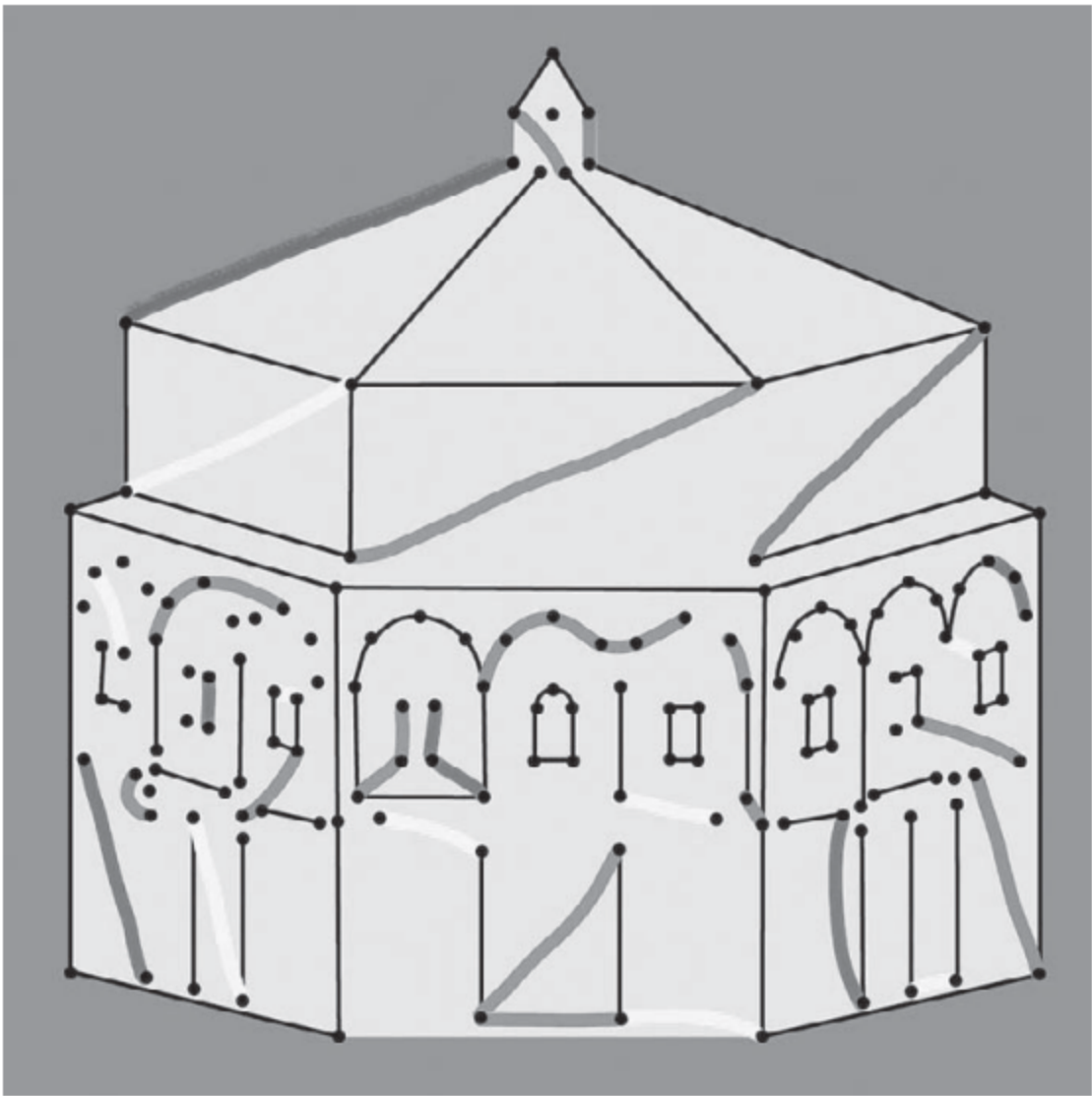
After years of poring over historical documents and reading voraciously, I made an important discovery that was published last year: The baptistery was built not by Florentines but for Florentines — specifically, as part of a collaborative effort led by Pope Gregory VII after his election in 1073. My 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,

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.

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 patron 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 unworthiness and sent him packing, the formidable rulers of Florence (and all of Tuscany), Beatrice of Bar 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 under-

stand. 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.



INÉS 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 retraining 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-

## 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.

*The Times welcomes letters from readers. Letters must include the writer’s name, address and telephone number. Those selected may be edited, and shortened to fit allotted space. Email: letters@nytimes.com*



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 economic 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.