



Gates and windows

One round of appeals cannot fix the large-scale deletions in electoral rolls

The Election Commission of India (ECI)'s Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls has a reasonable aim: to prune the duplicates, outdated addresses and entries for people who have died or moved, which India's electoral rolls have a tendency to gather. But the ECI's design of the ongoing SIR, modelled on the one in Bihar, infuses systemic flaws in the process that the body seems unwilling to address or even acknowledge despite many of the same problems in Bihar reappearing in multiple States. The process is happening at great speed that, together with the burden of inclusion being shifted from the state to the voter, suggests that the ECI is treating the exclusion of eligible voters as an acceptable risk. The speed would be justifiable given the availability of digital technologies today but they have their own tendencies to exclude, exemplified by the fact that the 2002-2005 electoral rolls, details from which the ongoing SIR expects citizens to invoke, are not machine-readable and the ECI has treated even minor mismatches as cause for deletion. The scale of exclusions reported in the phase I draft rolls should thus be read as a warning sign. It is not obviously reasonable to expect that one round of appeals will fix this in the final rolls.

The claims and objections processes correct errors only to the extent that affected voters detect and pursue them. That is, the appeals stage only adds a new filter, selecting for those with the time, literacy, connectivity, social support and confidence to deal with the state. If a person does not realise they have been deleted, cannot take time away from work, travel to an office, assemble documents or navigate forms and hearings, the error will become an official fact. Important information is not consistently available in a form that enables real-time public scrutiny, such as the precise reasons for deletions at granular levels and demographic breakdowns, including gender-wise patterns, preventing civil society, smaller political parties, journalists and voters from identifying where the process is failing while it can still be corrected. Finally, the SIR depends on house-to-house work, form distribution and collection, digitisation and repeated visits executed by State staff who simultaneously have other duties. When they are further constrained by tight deadlines, the risk of chasing targets instead of completing tasks becomes great. The current SIR in sum comes across as a form of administrative gatekeeping that stratifies the electorate into two tiers: those who can continuously re-prove themselves in the state's preferred format and those who cannot. That outcome will not be corrected by a single-appeal window because the window is itself part of the gate.

Social scourge

Child marriages lead to poor outcomes in health, education, poverty alleviation

India has committed to end child marriage by 2030 through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), and while it has made comprehensive strides, there are still miles to go to achieve the target. The Union government recently marked the first anniversary of its *Bal Vivah Mukt Bharat Abhiyan* with a 100-day awareness campaign for a country free of child marriage. It is a fact that child marriages have been consistently dropping, from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 23.3% in 2019-21, according to National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data. But in a diverse country of a population of 146 crore, the ground reality is that progress is varied and uneven across States and socio-economic demographics. While the highest child marriage rates among women aged 18 to 29 years are prevalent in West Bengal, Bihar and Tripura, States such as Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Telangana, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan are not far behind. There is a direct co-relation between child marriage, poverty and education, as the UN Population Fund's analysis of NFHS data shows. While 40% of girls from the lowest quintile of the household wealth index married before they became adults, in comparison to just 8% of those from the highest quintile, 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years in comparison to only 4% among those with higher education.

The Prevention of Child Marriage Act, 2006, is the flagship law to end the practice, but figures from National Crime Bureau Records indicate infrequent application of the law and a low conviction rate. Also, the use of laws such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, which are stringent and provide no leeway for consenting sexual adolescents, has led to other concerns. Afraid of triggering harsh punishments from the criminal justice system, many underage girls are turning to unregistered, unprofessional help, endangering their health further. Already, it is established that child marriages can lead to poor maternal and child health. In this backdrop, it is imperative to study why States such as West Bengal, which incentivises girls to study with a cash scheme, still has a high incidence of child marriage. The Centre's *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* campaign has to do much more to reach the most vulnerable communities, and ensure that infrastructure, including clean toilets and safe public transport, are in place to keep girls at school. According to Girls Not Brides, a global partnership, at least nine of the 17 SDGs will not be achieved without ending child marriage. In India, unless the several factors driving child marriage – poverty, and education, health and gender inequality – are addressed, it will be impossible to bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Public policies have single or multiple objectives. Policy for public-private partnerships (PPP) in medical education could be many: the desire to ensure quality education at affordable rates; helping the investor make profits; to show people symbols of development by a 'happening' state; rent seeking on contracts in these multi-crore projects and so on. The design of the policy framework indicates the policy objective that is being sought to be achieved.

An expansion of numbers

Three years ago, the Andhra Pradesh government expanded the number of medical colleges by six, taking the total to 17 in the government sector. There are another 19 in the private sector. The government is now seeking to add another 10 under the PPP mode. The total number of seats in all these colleges, when functional, is expected to be over 6,500. For these 10 new colleges, initiated by the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy government, 835 acres of land have been acquired and the colleges are at different stages of development.

At the average rate of about ₹450 crore a college, the total project cost was estimated to be ₹4,500 crore, to be mobilised from the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD), government and Government of India schemes. Each college was expected to have 150 seats attached to a 650-bed district hospital by suitably upgrading it. In normal course, government colleges provide subsidised education. But for ensuring fiscal sustainability, a three-tier fee structure was designed: 50% of total seats for ₹15,000 a year; 35% at ₹12 lakh and 15% earmarked for non-resident Indians at ₹20 lakh. The total revenue from fees could amount to ₹11 crore a batch a year, which means a total recovery of about ₹55 crore in the fifth year. In addition, these colleges would be eligible for another 28 post-graduate seats from the second year, going up to over 50. Post-graduate seats are at least three times more expensive.

In 2024, the new N. Chandrababu Naidu government engaged KPMG to prepare feasibility reports for the 11 medical colleges under a PPP mode that NITI Aayog is pushing vigorously. Under the PPP model, the entire land is proposed to be on a 33-year lease, extendable for another 33 years at ₹100 an acre, along with the district hospital; provide viability funding of 25% of the estimated project cost; empanel the hospital under the State health insurance programme and obtain the National Medical Commission's and other statutory clearances; and ensure 70% bed occupancy. In return, the investor is expected to



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complete the civil works within two years; provide free outpatient and earmark 70% of the beds for free inpatient treatment for "special" patients or those referred to by the government to be reimbursed at package rates of the Ayushman Bharat health insurance scheme. Commercial rates can be applicable for the remaining 30% beds. To ensure time-bound construction, the government has to depute a full-time engineer at the site. Two rooms, measuring 500 square feet each, would also be provided for free to set up a Jan Aushadhi pharmacy and for medico-legal work.

The need for evidence-based assessment

There have been protests and much disquiet over the proposed policy, with the allegation of "privatising" what is envisioned to be a public asset. There is apprehension that middle class and poor students would lose out on opportunities to study, lose job opportunities as the private investor would be under no obligation to adhere to quotas for recruitment, and pay out of pocket for services that are currently free.

The contract seems faulty as the risks do not appear to be evenly shared. The risk of delayed payments, earmarking virtually the whole hospital – 70% of the beds – for patients to be referred by the government and treated at Ayushman Bharat rates and all outpatient treatment free, may only lead to incentivising the private investor to game the system by charging under the table capitation fees; resort to shortcuts in appointing the full complement of faculty (who are also very difficult to find); make compromises on the quality of care, and deny care, on various pretexts, so as to divert the earmarked beds on the plea that demand is low. The risk is greater for the government in case the investor fails, as the only remedy is the judiciary which in turn could take several years to adjudicate.

The idea of giving away all control over the district hospital, and for 66 years, needs to be reconsidered and better justified. Evidence shows that with comprehensive effective primary care, 30% of hospitalisation can be averted, besides the fact that with advancing technology, the list of day surgeries not requiring hospitalisation is increasing.

Technology is rapidly disrupting known delivery systems and arrangements. Thus, there is a need for a more thorough evidence-based assessment, keeping in view the shifts in disease burden, demographic profile and technology, to justify the need for 650 beds uniformly across the State.

Besides, the PPP arrangement at the district level only fragments the public health system and in the long run, harms its organic development. System efficiencies need vertical integration of primary, secondary and tertiary care to ensure a strong referral system and the smooth patient pathways required for continuum of care. This is central to coping with chronic diseases and good patient management.

Inefficiencies in the system

The health system in Andhra Pradesh has several inefficiencies due to inadequate infrastructure in turn linked to chronic underfunding and a large number of vacancies, particularly among specialists and in rural areas. The worry is that the already critical situation of vacancies in rural areas and government facilities will be further exacerbated if medical education is commercialised (as evidence shows that students after paying huge fees are more inclined to go abroad, work in the private sector and live in urban cities). Therefore, it is necessary for the government to invest in ensuring doctors and specialists at subsidised rates (instead of the present model of selling 50% seats) so that the government can build a pool of doctors who are willing to work in public health, in rural areas and in public hospitals.

Given these serious concerns, opting for the PPP route on grounds of financial stringency seems facetious as there are several options available to raise capital. The PPP route is also cause for concern as privatisation requires a strong state with institutional capacity to enforce laws and contracts. Andhra Pradesh, like the rest of the country, does not have that capacity. The earlier Telugu Desam Party regime fragmented the primary health-care system with almost half a dozen contracts. Poor enforcement resulted in chaos. Andhra Pradesh has not even been able to enforce the relatively benign Clinical Establishments (Registration and Regulation) Act. Given that the state in India is soft, it is unwise to get into the privatisation of public assets in critical areas such as health care that directly impact the lives of the poor.

Medical education is in a crisis and is also rapidly changing. At the current rate of the thoughtless expansion of colleges without faculty, the day may not be far when many medical colleges may have to shut down as engineering colleges did after the first flush of the IT boom. Quality of education and equitable access are more serious issues to address than opening medical colleges. The PPP model as a means of delivering welfare does not inspire confidence.

Decoding air pollution concerns in Delhi-NCR

In Delhi's National Capital Region (NCR), vehicular emission is the primary source of air pollution, especially in terms of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) and toxic gases such as carbon monoxide, benzene and nitrogen oxides. Unfortunately, officials, un-official agencies, citizens and the higher judiciary have held stubble burning farmers of neighbouring Punjab and Haryana responsible for Delhi's deteriorating air quality.

On PPP

The principle widely recognised to determine liability for polluted water, air and land is the 'polluter pays principle' (PPP) which envisages that the person or firm who damages the environment must bear the cost of such damage. In *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum vs Union Of India and Ors.* (1996), the Supreme Court of India held that the PPP is part of the law of the land, which paved the way for statutory recognition of the principle in the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010. The application of the principle of PPP (a principle of cost allocation and cost internalisation) is replete with complexity in a situation consisting of both multiple point and non-point sources of pollution that are directly or indirectly involved in the air pollution. The latter has a transboundary angle which cannot be addressed by PPP alone which is contingent on cooperation among neighbouring entities.

The jurisprudence laid down in the Standley case decided by the European Court of Justice in 1999 is very relevant. The case was about the implementation by the United Kingdom government of the so-called EU Nitrates Directive. This directive was aimed at reducing water pollution from nitrates discharged into waters from agricultural sources. In the U.K., the action programmes initiated by the local authorities in certain nitrate vulnerable zones led to a limitation on the agricultural activities in those areas. The



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farmers of these areas opposed it on the ground that they could not be held liable for nitrates released from the industrial sources into waterbodies.

The Standley judgment adds the proportionality dimension to the PPP which amounts to saying that seasonal stubble burning by the farmer cannot be held liable for the air pollutants created by other sources.

The narrative relating to the long-range trans-boundary effect of air pollution in India and in this part of the world has yet to acquire traction that air pollution is not simply local in nature but is subject to regional and global influences. The Trail Smelter case (1941) held sulphur spewing smelters based in British Columbia (Canada) responsible for damage of properties in the State of Washington, U.S. There is growing evidence of the global and regional impacts of air pollution (*Q Zhang et al., Nature, 2017*).

Zhang mentions that the trans-boundary health impacts of PM_{2.5} pollution related to international trade are even higher than those linked with long-distance atmospheric transport of pollution. The Convention on Long-Range Trans-boundary Air Pollution (CLRTAP, 1979) (51 parties and eight protocols), and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Trans-boundary Haze Pollution (2002) are examples of air pollutants travelling long distance. The Gothenburg Protocol to the CLRTAP Convention was amended in 2012 to include PM_{2.5} as a pollutant, making it clear that PM_{2.5} is also a long-distance air pollutant.

Government-Pays Principle

The judiciary in India has not been able to suggest precise contours in terms of the valuation choice to be deployed to determine the quantification of exact damage. In the Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action case, the Court

In India, the polluter pays principle has shifted to the government-pays principle

recognised that the precise scope of the principle and its implications for those involved in polluting activities have never been satisfactorily agreed. Instead, the Court, in *Indian Council For Enviro-Legal Action vs Union Of India and Ors. Etc.* (1996), *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum vs Union Of India and Ors.*, and *S. Jagannath vs Union Of India and Ors.*, leaned on the formula of compensation to human victims of pollution and environmental restoration. This is more aligned with corrective justice and less with PPP.

In India, PPP has shifted to the government-pays principle. India has used the Water Act 1974, Air Act 1981, the Environment Protection Act 1986 and Articles 48A and 51A(g) incorporated through constitutional amendments, to create specialised authorities and vested them with wide powers. These include the closure of industries and the power to give any directions to protect the environment.

Activist judiciary

These authorities suffer from administrative failures like the rest of the bureaucracy and the executive. In India, the increasingly activist judiciary tends to take greater note of these standards and creates an obligation on governments to bear the entire costs of monitoring air pollution and only secondarily to impose liability on the polluters.

On counts of welfarism, the Indian judiciary takes special interest in such matters, since most of the victims of such environmental degradation have little means possible of individually suing polluters to enforce the PPP. This approach projects the government's welfare-maximising nature but does not fully internalise the costs of pollution prevention and public health benefits to the people. Last but not the least, the environmental duties of individuals as compared to their rights are seldom discussed in detail in India.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Turmoil in Bangladesh

To defuse the Bangladeshi situation, what is required is a goodwill visit by senior Ministers and the External Affairs Minister, followed by the Prime Minister if necessary. Reciprocal visits need to be followed up because the turmoil has been going on for long. Meanwhile, irresponsible statements made by certain politicians and the frenzy being built up by the visual media should be nipped in the bud.

A.V. Narayanan,
Chennai

There is a need for strong action on the part of the international comity of nations to bring stability in Bangladesh. Fresh elections are awaited to curb tyranny and create a democratic hue across the nation.

Manas Agarwal,
Shahjahanpur, Uttar Pradesh
Tarique Rahman's return after nearly 18 years in exile has the potential to reshape the political landscape ahead of the 2026 polls. While projecting unity and stability, his absence during

years of turmoil raises questions. With unrest, minority concerns and strained India ties persisting, voters must choose carefully, judging leadership by proven actions rather than lineage, so that the nation does not regret it later.

R.S. Narula,
Patiala, Punjab
Ukraine war and peace

Had U.S. President Donald Trump been certain about creating peace between Russia and Ukraine, he would have exercised more

caution in devising his plans right from the beginning. The Kremlin's adamant attitude is also something that is difficult to digest. As discerning political observers will note, passing the buck appears to be what these powerful nations seem to be more interested in than finding permanent peace.

My fond hopes that Ukraine will have a peaceful future, at least in the New Year, are slowly and steadily diminishing.

Mani Nataraajan,
Chennai

Tourist-friendly measure

During the holiday season, the area surrounding the Brihadeeswarar (Big) Temple becomes severely congested for lack of adequate parking space. Vehicles spill over onto adjoining streets, forcing visitors – this includes foreign tourists, senior citizens and children – to walk long distances under the scorching sun. This situation affects the city's image. It is unfortunate that the large open ground, formerly used as a paid parking area, was converted

into a children's play zone under the banner of tourism development. However, the installation remains unused, overgrown with weeds and filled with rusted play equipment. The old court complex, lying in disuse, can be turned into a paid parking facility and improve the visitor experience. Pro-active actions will promote Thanjavur as a tourist-friendly heritage city.

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Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu
Letters emailed to
letters@thehindu.co.in
must carry the postal address.

GROUND ZERO



A view of hotels in Doodhpatheri's Raiyar village. Doodhpatheri is among the 48 destinations that closed for tourists after the terror attack in the Baisaran meadow in Pahalgam earlier this year. IMRAN NISSAR

The quiet, deserted meadows of Kashmir

Only 28 of the 48 destinations in the Kashmir Valley that were closed after the April 22 terror attack in Pahalgam have been reopened. While waiting for the Lieutenant Governor to give clearance to the rest to resume operations, locals who are dependent on tourism for their livelihoods worry about unpaid loans and unsteady jobs. **Peerzada Ashiq** reports on how the incident continues to impact tourism

The upper reaches of the Pir Panchal mountain range in the Lesser Himalayas is covered with fresh snow, forcing large-billed crows to fly downhill in search of food. One village they often flock to is Raiyar, a hamlet in the hillocks adjacent to Doodhpatheri in the Budgam district of central Kashmir. This is around 43 kilometres from Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Watching the crows perched on leafless apple and walnut trees, Rafiqa Jan, 38, complains that they keep cawing at a high pitch – considered a bad omen.

With its sprawling meadows, crystal clear streams, and evergreen pine trees, Doodhpatheri has been an increasingly popular choice for both domestic and international tourists over the last few years. However, this year, it remains deserted and quiet. It is among the 48 destinations that closed for tourists after the terror attack in the Baisaran meadow in Pahalgam left 26 people dead on April 22 earlier this year.

Jan and her husband, a labourer, live on the border of Doodhpatheri. She has had a tiring day, scaling the nearby forests dotted with dense pine trees to collect wood for cooking.

In 2024, Jan would make enough money from her tea stall to buy cooking gas cylinders. Her stall catered mostly to tourists – couples in love, honeymooners, and friends and families yearning to see and touch snow on the slopes.

"I would earn a profit of ₹500-2,000 a day, depending on the footfall. There are more tourists during the winter months because this place is covered by a thick blanket of snow," she says. "But all that came to a halt this year. All our plans, from conducting weddings to renovating our homes, from buying new winter clothes to getting new furnishings for our houses, have been ruined," says Jan, whose son got selected last year for the MBBS course in a government medical college in Jammu.

Jan raised a loan of ₹60,000 to pay the fees for her son's first year in college. "I thought I would repay the amount this year. I expected booming business from tourists," she says. "But the year is almost over and I have failed. We are now staring at the most stressful winter months of our lives."

Changing the status of women

By September, Jammu and Kashmir Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha had reopened 28 of the 48 destinations in the Kashmir Valley in a phased manner. The rest await clearance from his office.

The places reopened included Pahalgam, where the attack took place, and popular tourist sites such as Gulmarg and Sonamarg. Doodhpatheri, located more than 126 km away from Pahalgam and walled by a series of mountain ranges, remains closed, along with other prominent destinations such as Yusmarg, Tosamaidan, Drang, Nilnag, and Aharbal. This decision has impacted thousands of locals in these places, who earn their living from tourism.

According to official sources in the Governor's Office, a security audit is still underway and the destinations will be re-opened after the audit is

We don't understand why Doodhpatheri is closed, while Pahalgam is open.
GHULAM HASSAN SHEIKH
Restaurant owner

completed. As of now, Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel are manning Doodhpatheri and the J&K Police have set up a barricade to ensure that outsiders, including journalists, do not enter these destinations.

Doodhpatheri recorded less than 50,000 tourists in 2021; this increased to the highest-ever figure of 18 lakh in 2024. This year, according to the Tourism Department's figures, only 1.25 lakh visited the place in the first four months.

The earlier booming tourism in Doodhpatheri not only changed the economy of the place, but also the status of women. Jan is one of the 200 women from Raiyar and its adjoining villages who broke the glass ceiling by becoming the first owners of roadside tea stalls in Kashmir.

"For the first time in our lives, we were like the working men of our villages, who earned their own money and met their own needs. We also started buying new clothes without pressing our husbands for it, and ate what we wanted to," says Naseem Bano, 40, who was among the first few women in 2020 in the area to sit on the streets serving roasted corn to visitors.

With the number of tourists rising over time, more women set up tea stalls in and around Doodhpatheri. Social media 'influencers' soon turned up at these stalls to shoot Reels of *kehwa*, a piping hot brew of crushed almonds, saffron, cardamom, and cinnamon. The stalls also popularised home-made collard greens, chutney of onions and walnut, pickles, and corn flour rotis.

"In ones and twos, we started selling roasted corn to tourists in 2021. That business slowly picked up. Despite the initial reluctance and opposition from men, we continued to do this and carved a niche for ourselves," says Bano.

A tourist hub waits with bated breath

According to the 2011 Census, Raiyar has a population of 1,937. Ghulam Hassan Sheikh owns the popular Lal Baab restaurant here. He says his 32-year-old son, Bashir Ahmad Sheikh, who used to drive a taxi till 2021, began earning more from the restaurant business. "Many labourers of Raiyar village, who worked as carpenters and plumbers in Srinagar, also switched to the tourism sec-

tor to earn their living," says Sheikh.

Officials of the Doodhpatheri Development Authority (DDA) say Raiyar has around 400 families of which 80% depend on tourism. "We don't understand why Doodhpatheri is closed, while Pahalgam is open. It seems like we are being punished for somebody else's sins," adds Sheikh.

There is growing distress among those who raised loans to invest in the tourism sector. Bashir Ahmad, 21, raised a loan of ₹5.5 lakh and invested in an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) in September 2024, seeing the leap in tourist numbers. Since April 29, a snow shield has been covering it.

"I am supposed to pay around ₹10,000 as monthly EMI (Equated Monthly Instalment). This growing economic distress will force us to sell our land to repay the loan," says a worried Ahmad.

He lives with his older brother, two sisters, and parents in a single-storey house. "I used to earn even up to ₹2,000 per day. These days, I sell spicess to survive," he says.

According to the DDA, 1,500 locals were registered as labourers and horse owners, 200 as tea stall owners, and 50 as ATV operators in 2024. The government tenders out parking and ticketing to private players. The ticketing counter, tendered at ₹1.5 crore, has not generated any revenue this year, and the payment remains outstanding.

"Doodhpatheri was emerging as a major winter destination. We had been receiving a lot of queries from prospective tourists and filmmakers," says Riyaz Ahmad Beigh, Chief Executive Officer of the DDA. "We have not been able to grant permission because of the current status of the destination. We get a lot of representations from various stakeholders too, to re-open it for the winter. We are hopeful that it will re-open soon."

In 2024, the DDA granted 29 permissions to shoot films and music videos at the destination. The government intended to introduce activities such as skiing and paragliding to entertain visitors this year. These plans have been put on hold.

The situation is equally grim at Kulgarni's Aharbal, around 50 km away from Doodhpatheri. Aharbal is home to a 25-metre-high waterfall, popularly known as the 'Niagara Falls of Kashmir', on the Veshu river. Junaid Dar, an arts graduate, and his two friends raised a loan and invested in a guest house in Kulgarni to cater to the rush of tourists visiting the waterfall. Dar says he is not able to sleep because of the anxiety.

Woes at the epicentre

The Pahalgam attack has struck a major dent in Kashmir's tourism industry this year. "Kashmir has not even been able to touch 25-30% of the record number of tourists (26 lakh) who visited in 2024," says Farooq Kuthoo, president of the Travel Agents Association of Kashmir.

Official figures say that Kashmir received 7.53 lakh tourists, including 15,319 foreigners, and 7.38 lakh visitors in the first six months this year. This is a dip of over 52% compared to the 15.65 lakh for the same period in 2024.

The continued closure of major destinations has impacted both itineraries as well as the number of days of stay for tourists. "For a week-long trip, tourists get to travel to the golden triangle of Gulmarg, Pahalgam, and Sonamarg. However, we could not make an elaborate itinerary that includes major off-beat destinations such as Doodhpatheri and Aharbal. The closure has impacted tourists who want two weeks of stay and enjoy off-beat destinations more," says Kuthoo.

There has been a steady retrenchment of hotel staff in Pahalgam after the attack. "Most hotels have a retrenchment rate of 40-50% this year," says Kuthoo, who is also an executive member of the Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industries, a major traders' body of the Valley.

Pahalgam has a population of around 10,000. Without orchards or rice fields, its economy is driven by tourism. Several people say most of the unemployed youth in and around Pahalgam bank on tourism to earn their livelihood. "Many

For the first time in our lives, we were buying new clothes without pressing our husbands for it, and eating what we wanted to eat.

NASEEM BANO
Corn seller, Doodhpatheri

of them formed groups and raised loans to take properties on rent for a year. They are the worst affected. The situation has pushed many into depression," says Kuthoo.

Around 12 destinations were re-opened in September this year, including the famous trekking base of Aru, around 15 km away from Pahalgam. From Aru, tourists go to high altitude lakes such as Tarsar and Marsar. Several hotel owners in Aru village, with a population of around 4,000, claim that the closure has shattered the confidence of foreign tourists who visited frequently to trek.

Kursheed Ahmad, owner of Aru Heights, says this is the worst-ever tourism season this year since the 1990s. He says, "Aru has never been closed in the past for tourists. It has attracted foreign tourists for years and remained peaceful by and large. We had earned the faith of tourists over a period of time by offering a safe and secure environment. All that has gone to waste."

The Union Ministry of Tourism had declared Aru as one of the winners of the Best Tourism Villages Competition 2024 on World Tourism Day.

The closure of key destinations has impacted local taxi operators, guides, and travel agents in many places too. In Srinagar, Tanvir Dar, who runs The Kashmir Cabs, says, "We have been serving tourists for the past three decades with two taxis. In 2023, we raised a bank loan to add three more, to create a fleet for new or lesser-known destinations. All the drivers and cars earmarked for these places have failed to make any profit."

Several Srinagar-based travel companies have reduced their staff number because of the prolonged closure. "We receive several queries round the year for destinations such as Aharbal and Yusmarg, but we have had no guests. We had to cut the staff number due to decreased footfall," says Akhtar Khan, a tour operator.

Many locals associated with adventure tourism are also idle because trekking in most mountain passes surrounding the Kashmir Valley has been stopped too.

Not on the same page

The elected government of J&K, headed by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, is not on the same page as the Lieutenant Governor's administration on the prolonged closure of tourist destinations. Abdullah says the J&K government, even at the peak of militancy in 1996, did not take any drastic measures, keeping tourist destinations out of bounds.

He has repeatedly requested the Lieutenant Governor's administration to re-open all the destinations.

"The policy of closure of destinations sends a wrong message to the people. Kashmir has faced far more difficult circumstances. Unnecessary closures hurt local stakeholders, including hoteliers, tour operators, transporters, and thousands of families dependent on the sector," said Abdullah, who inaugurated tourism projects including Asia's longest ski drag lift and a rotating conference hall at an altitude of 4,390 meters on December 13. "Claims of normalcy ring hollow because of closed tourist destinations," he added.

In Raiyar, Jan says the continued closure of Doodhpatheri is not only shattering dreams, but also affecting the hard-earned esteem and economic *azadi* (independence) that many women tasted for the first time. "I pray five times a day that the destination be re-opened soon and we start earning again," says Jan.



A woman prepares maize flour flatbread and sells salted tea to locals at her roadside stall in Raiyar village. IMRAN NISSAR

Opinion

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2025

Liquidity matters

As system liquidity turns negative, rate cuts alone are proving insufficient to ease borrowing costs

WITH BENCHMARK BOND yields having hit a nine-month high of 6.67% despite a 125 bps cut in the repo rate, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has been compelled to infuse liquidity into the system. The central bank has said it would buy bonds worth ₹2 lakh crore in four tranches and also do a dollar swap for \$10 billion or around ₹90,000 crore. Having been entrenched at levels of 6.5-6.6%, yields retraced after the RBI's announcement but they continue to hover around the 6.56% mark.

One reason why the bond markets have been under the weather is that foreign portfolio investors (FPI) have been offloading their holdings. The net selling for December is estimated at close to ₹11,000 crore. It is clear, as seen in the spike in the overnight lending rates, that the system is short of liquidity in the midst of the busy season. It moderated from surplus levels of ₹4 lakh crore in July to around ₹1.3 lakh crore by the end of November. In early December, the central bank said it would purchase bonds for an amount of ₹1 lakh crore and conduct a \$5 billion dollar swap. But, despite this assurance, by about mid-December, the surplus had turned into a deficit and currently remains in a deficit of ₹85,000 crore.

One immediate reason for the shortage is the tax outflows on account of advance tax payments and thereafter for Goods and Services Tax (GST) payments. But it is also a fact that rupee liquidity has been sucked out due to the RBI's dollar sales to support the rupee; the central bank spent billions of dollars backing the currency. Again, the demand for bonds from insurance funds and pension funds has been somewhat muted. Also, some states have advanced their borrowings adding to the supply of paper. In fact, there is an expectation that states may advance their borrowings that have been planned for the January-March quarter.

The aggregate supply of paper in the March quarter is not small at an estimated ₹8.1 lakh crore; of this, ₹3.1 lakh crore would be the Centre's share and the bigger amount of ₹5 lakh crore would be borrowed by the states. Already, borrowing costs for the states have been high and, should liquidity remain tight, the rates could spike further. Against this backdrop, it looks like more liquidity infusions might be needed and the central bank may need to infuse at least another ₹1 lakh crore of rupee liquidity in about a month's time. Else, short-term rates could rise further while at the longer end, the yields might remain at these levels. The government too should speed up spending so as to add to the liquidity.

However, while the RBI does its job, banks must make deposits more attractive to savers by offering better interest rates at a time when money is moving into equities. The growth in deposits has moderated a fair bit from levels of over 13% year-on-year in December 2023 to 10.2% year-on-year as of end-November. The growth, through 2025 so far, has been in the range of 9.5-10.8%, with banks pruning interest rates on deposits after the RBI kicked off the rate cut cycle in February. Perhaps some tax breaks on deposits will do the trick.

Bollywood is no match for India's new wave cinema

THE SIGNATURE MOTIF of *Kantara: A Legend — Chapter 1*, India's second-biggest box-office success of 2025, is a primordial scream. It may as well be the sound of old Bollywood in its death throes, or the birth pangs of a new industry. *Kantara*, described by its writer-director Rishab Shetty as "faith, culture, and devotion in all its glory," isn't standard Bollywood fare. For one thing, the film wasn't made in Mumbai. Nor is it targeted primarily at a Hindi-speaking audience.

Filmed in Kannada, the story is about a mysterious forest — and the preternatural forces that reside in it. When they aren't fighting a greedy landlord, forest dwellers dress up in colorful costumes and exotic headgear and enter a trance through their dance. That's when they let out their bloodcurdling screams.

Kantara follows the commercial success last year of *Pushpa 2: The Rule*, a violent, stylised action drama about sandalwood smuggling, and *Kalki 2898 AD*, a futuristic dystopia. The two Telugu thrillers came out of Hyderabad. The *Kantara* franchise — the new movie is a prequel to a 2022 sleeper hit — is also from the south. What used to be confined earlier to the boundaries of regional cinema — with limited exhibition elsewhere — is now mainstream.

This is the new, multilingual Bollywood, and its main offering is fresh stories, set in new cinematic universes. They can be exotic folklore, or fantasy like *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra*, a superhero franchise in Malayalam. Meanwhile, the old Bollywood, the world's most prolific moviemaking industry, where big-name Mumbai entertainers delivered 5-billion-rupee-plus (\$55 million) Hindi blockbusters to a pan-India audience, remains mired in an existential crisis.

The numbers tell the story. Although audiences have finally shrugged off the pandemic blues and returned to theaters, for PVR Inox Ltd., the country's biggest exhibitor, the high point of the September quarter was the 97% surge in collections from Hollywood hits like *FI: The Movie*, supplemented by a 110% jump in revenue from Kannada cinema. The haul from Malayalam films increased by 49%. Meanwhile, Hindi and Hindi-dubbed movies brought in just 4% more than the same period last year.

The old industry is surviving on nostalgia. The song that Zohran Mandani's team played after he won the New York Mayoral race was *Dhoom*, from a Bollywood film by the same name — it was released 21 years ago.

As southern India turns myths into money, another kind of cinema, rooted in the lives of 1.4 billion Indians, is straining to be seen. One such movie is *Homebound*, based on a true story of two young village boys trying to become police constables amid an epidemic of youth unemployment. Beyond the security of a government job, the two friends, Chandan and Shaob, are searching for dignity. Where *Kantara* offers the audience escape into a mythical past, *Homebound* forces them to confront an ugly reality of the present: caste.

At *Homebound*'s New York premiere in November, director Neeraj Ghaywan explained caste with an analogy from the pandemic. To be born a Dalit is to be gaslit into believing that one is infected with an incurable virus. What comes next is unending social, educational, and occupational discrimination. Chandan wouldn't disclose his family name to outsiders because his caste identity is seared into it. For fear of abandonment by his peers, Ghaywan, himself a Dalit, used to do the same.

Local theaters have no use for realism. Payal Kapadia's *All We Imagine as Light* won last year's Cannes Grand Prix and was nominated for two Golden Globes, but the economics of movie exhibition favoured escapist fantasies over a story of two nurses from Kerala sharing rooms in Mumbai. The most recent Bollywood hit, which has overshadowed *Kantara*'s success, cashes in on this year's military hostilities with Pakistan by serving up a gory revenge plotline in the garb of a spy thriller. *Dhurandhar* has reportedly been banned in much of the Middle East.

Arthouse cinema everywhere grows in the crevices of popular culture. In India, however, a paucity of public funds is no longer the only hurdle. Ticket prices have gone up more than 50% in three years. Public perception of what's worth watching is being distorted by manipulated social media reviews and inflated box-office figures, deepening a crisis of credibility for the \$60 billion industry, AFP reported in November.

One hopes that movies like *Homebound* will have better luck finding an audience in 2026, even though the anguish that they bring to the screen — contemporary, urgent, and silent — may be no match for the loud screams of *Kantara*.



ANDY MUKHERJEE
Bloomberg



FORTIFYING HEALTHCARE

Union health minister JP Nadda

Quality diagnostics and timely testing form the backbone of effective healthcare delivery and must be strengthened across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

RAISING TAX REVENUE AND IMPROVING USER CHARGES Emerge AS KEY DRIVERS OF STATES' FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

Mapping states' fiscal health

STATE FINANCES DEPEND on the instruments used, resources raised, and their allocation to different sectors consistent with the population and priorities. States have significant autonomy in allocation of available resources; however, the availability of resources to a considerable extent is exogenously determined. Tax transfers from the Union are governed by the Finance Commission (FC), which recommends vertical sharing of tax resources of the Union with the states and horizontal sharing of the divisible pool among the states. Further, the Union also provides grants.

Fiscal consolidation (exclusively in the states' domain) includes raising tax resources, improving user charges for the services, maintaining current expenditure to the level of its revenue receipt, and prioritising expenditure consistent with citizens' aspirations. We use six parameters, each an average of the past 10 years, comprising the award period of the 14th and 15th (FCs) to develop a composite index of fiscal health based on the ratio of state revenue to total revenue, ratio of states' tax revenue to GSDP (STRG), development expenditure as percentage to total expenditure, ratio of total revenue to total expenditure (RE), and user charges for the economic and social services.

The figures reveal that STRG varies from a low of 3.32% for Mizoram to a high of 7.73% for Telangana. While most north-eastern States have a very low STRG, it exceeds 6% for Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Odisha, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Goa, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, and Telangana. Gujarat (5.3) and West Bengal (5.7) have a relatively low STRG.

State tax and non-tax revenue together indicate the degree of dependence on transfers. While transfers from the FC have usually been biased in favour of poorer states, grants have been discretionary. Overall, states were able to raise 56% revenue through their own sources, but it has been below 20% for Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, and Tripura, all

STATE FINANCES

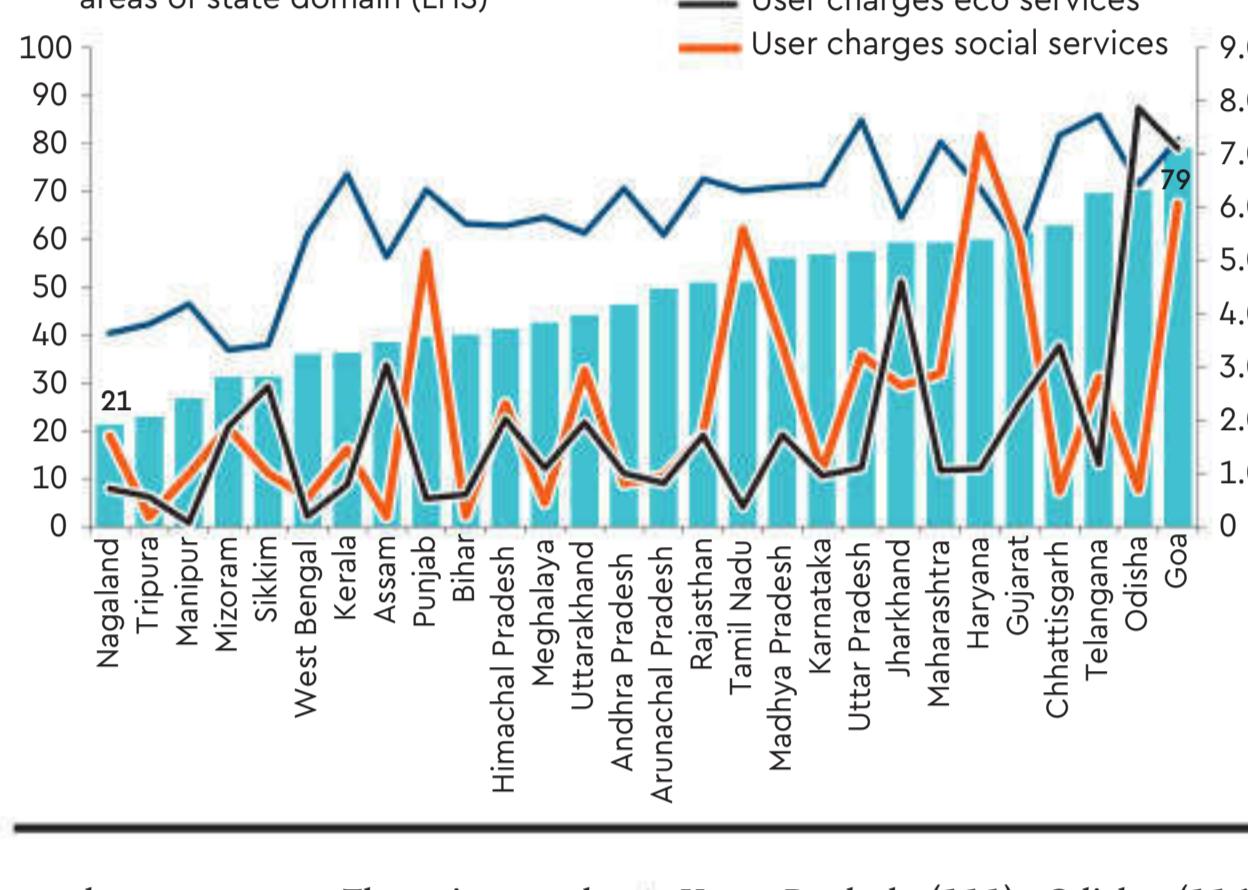
RAISING TAX REVENUE AND IMPROVING USER CHARGES Emerge AS KEY DRIVERS OF STATES' FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

R GOPALAN MC SINGHI

The authors are former civil servants



STATES' FISCAL HEALTH



north-eastern states. The ratio exceeds 70% for Goa, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Telangana, and Haryana. A ratio below 25% can indicate extreme vulnerability and dependence on central transfers.

States should meet their revenue expenditure from the available non-debt receipts. Revenue surplus is considered a key criterion for fiscal health. Overall, states were able to meet 97% of their current expenditure from the same. Some states, particularly Punjab, Haryana, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and West Bengal were in a significant deficit, with revenue receipts meeting less than 90% of expenditure. Meanwhile, 14 of 28 states had a revenue surplus (figures in brackets are revenue receipt to expenditure ratio)—Goa (105); Sikkim (105); Nagaland (106); Meghalaya (107); Mizoram (107); Jharkhand (110);

Uttar Pradesh (111); Odisha (116); Manipur (116); Arunachal Pradesh (127). There is hardly any relation between prosperous states (states with high percentage of revenue in revenue surplus).

States allocate resources per their priorities within their budget. Development expenditure is considered virtuous as it improves the states' capacity for accelerated growth. The states' overall development expenditure has been around 63% of total revenue expenditure. However, for Kerala, Punjab, Nagaland, Manipur, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Tripura, it has been lower than 60%, and it exceeds 70% for Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh.

States' non-tax revenue usually consists of administrative recoveries and user charges for the social and economic services provided. User charges for eco-

nomic services had the widest divergence across states, with a cost recovery of less than 1% for Manipur to 87% for Odisha. It has exceeded 25% of the expenditure on economic services for Gujarat (25.6% due to petroleum & natural gas), Sikkim (28.2% due to forests), Assam (33.7% due to petroleum), Chhattisgarh (37.7% due to minerals), Jharkhand (51.1% due to minerals), Goa (79% due to minerals), and Odisha (87.3% due to minerals). However, if we remove the revenue from minerals, the user charges fall to under 15% for mineral-rich States. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) and special area programmes are subvention schemes where no recovery could be considered. But in irrigation, industries, roads, and buildings, maintenance expenses could be recovered.

Recovery of user charges for social services has been under 1% for Tripura, Assam, Bihar, Meghalaya, West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh. It exceeds 5% for Punjab, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, Goa and Haryana. Social services like social security and pension and nutrition support are subvention schemes and no recovery could be expected. But for education above a threshold, health and family welfare, water supply & sanitation, and housing, recovery in some proportion could be considered.

Based on these parameters, a composite index for each state has been prepared giving equal weights to every parameter (user charges for social and economic services are treated as a single parameter). Northeast states usually have a lower index—50 can be considered as reasonably healthy. Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Haryana, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and Odisha meet this level.

The composite index indicates that increasing STRG and improving recovery of user charges are important for states in their journey towards fiscal sustainability. States could be incentivised to reach a threshold level of this ratio and user charges recovery through FC grants.

The reality of India's IPO boom



SAUMITRA BHADURI

Professor, Madras School of Economics

INDIA IS CURRENTLY experiencing one of the most vibrant initial public offering (IPO) cycles in the country's market history. A total of around ₹5.4 lakh crore has been raised by firms through IPOs between FY20 and FY24. At first glance, the situation appears to be a classic example of financial deepening. However, the capital markets matter for growth not because money changes hands, but because savings are transformed into new productive capacity. When the IPO boom is examined through this lens, the picture changes sharply. A growing share of India's IPO proceeds may not be funding physical investment at all; increasingly, it is funding promoters' exit.

The data points to a clear structural shift in India's IPO market. In the mid-2000s, IPOs were overwhelmingly capital-adding: between 2007 and 2009, over 85-90% of proceeds came from fresh equity—₹32,000 crore in 2007 alone versus barely ₹2,000 crore via offer for sale (OFS). This balance weakened after 2010 and flipped decisively after 2016. Since 2017, OFS has dominated issuance, accounting for about 81% of proceeds in 2017, over 86% in 2020, and more than 60% through the post-pandemic boom. Even as headline fundraising surged—from ₹27,000 crore in 2020 to nearly ₹1.7 lakh crore in 2024 and ₹1.9 lakh crore in 2025 so far—the tilt toward exits has deepened: in 2024, about ₹96,000 crore went to selling shareholders, and in 2025, OFS exceeding ₹1.12 lakh crore has already dwarfed fresh capital of roughly ₹75,000 crore. More listings, but far less net capital formation, leaving investors increasingly exposed to exit-driven offerings rather than growth-funding enterprises.

In contrast, the small and medium enterprises (SME) segment remains a genuinely capital-adding market. With Securities and Exchange Board of India (Sebi) capping OFS in SME IPOs, issues are overwhelmingly driven by fresh capital. Over the past decade, fresh capital has dominated SME IPO proceeds, with OFS usually below 10%. This trend has continued recently: SME listings have raised approximately 8,200 crore in fresh capital in 2024 and over 10,300 crore in 2025 so far, far exceeding the OFS. The irony is clear—while many main-board IPOs increasingly function as exit vehicles, the SME platform, despite hosting smaller and riskier firms, aligns more closely with the primary market's core purpose of funding growth through new risk capital.

More than two-thirds of the IPO funds in the last few years have not found their way into balance sheets. What escapes our attention often is the fact that even the one-third of the funds classified as 'fresh money' does not necessarily find its way into spending. Analysis of Sebi filings and bank research papers indicates that no more than 20-26% of the fresh issues are allocated to spending on such areas as factories, equipment, or infrastructure in the research and technology sector, which normally remains below 5%.

About 40% goes to refinancing of debt.

A quarter goes to working capital.

Therefore, of every ₹100 that has been raised in the average IPO in the last few years, only ₹8-10 can be traced back to the generation of new productive

assets. For an economy that wants to raise manufacturing capacity, infrastructure depth, and long-term productivity, this is a worrying conversation rate.

This concern sits alongside another structural fact: India's gross fixed capital formation has remained stagnant at around 31-32% of GDP for much of the past decade, well below the levels seen during earlier high-growth phases. At the same time, even as savings—despite their recent decline—are increasingly channeled into financial markets, the market is not reliably converting them into new productive capital.

A comparison with the US shows how institutional design shapes results. IPOs are explicitly structured as capital-raising events. In a typical US IPO, 70-85% of the issue consists of new equity issued by the company. Insider selling at the IPO stage is limited. Crucially, the IPO is treated as the beginning of a firm's relationship with capital markets. More than 60% of US IPO firms raise additional equity within three years through follow-on offerings, using public markets repeatedly to fund growth.

In contrast, data shows that in India primary shares usually account for only 35-45% of IPO size, while exits by promoters and private equity investors are front-loaded, and fewer than 15% of Indian IPO firms return to the market for follow-on equity within three years. The IPO, in effect, becomes the point of monetisation.

To assess IPOs stringently, it would be useful to look beyond subscription to

oversubscription ratios and listing day action. A basic capital-addition scoreboard that focuses on capital addition percentage, quality of proceeds utilisation, promoter support post-listing, proof of equity fundraising post IPO, and actual investment deliverables in three years has a consistent story to tell. Most IPOs in India since FY21 would fall well short of the midpoint on a scale of 100. Only a select few, possibly infrastructure, logistics, and manufacturing companies, would be rated as truly capital-addition IPOs.

This is no criticism of individual firms. It is a natural outcome of a system that is largely agnostic about capital entry and exit. Sebi has done well on disclosure, transparency, and inclusion.

However, neutrality in rules does not mean neutrality in outcomes when incentives consistently favour early exits over long-term investment. Retail investors—who now form the core of IPO demand—are increasingly exposed to exit-focused floatations that often struggle to sustain performance after listing.

Finally, India does not need fewer IPOs. In fact, the current boom reflects confidence in the country's economic future. However, it needs better-designed ones. Historically, when financialisation advances faster than productive capacity—lifting asset prices without strengthening the economy's supply side—the widening gap between buoyant markets and weak private investment eventually undermines the credibility of capital markets as growth engines.

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However, neutrality in rules does not



Editor's TAKE

Fixing the fault lines in PMKVY

Skilling must place employability and sustainable earnings as its basic premise if India is to truly reap its demographic dividend

India today is a young nation, and this demographic profile is a powerful economic asset. A large share of its population lies within the working-age bracket of 15-59 years, with the 25-44 age group forming the core of the most productive workforce. At a time when many economies are ageing, India's youthful labour pool offers a rare opportunity to accelerate growth and sustain momentum.

As the Indian economy gathers pace, expanding industries and infrastructure demand ever more skilled hands to keep the wheels of production turning. If effectively harnessed, this demographic dividend could propel India towards the goal of becoming a developed economy by 2047. However, this boon can quickly become a bane if these hands do not find meaningful jobs. If the young workforce fails to find meaningful employment and is left holding placards instead of tools, the dividend quickly turns into a liability. Unemployment on a large scale would not only squander a historic opportunity but also risk breeding frustration, social unrest, and economic instability.

India's demographic dividend rests heavily on its ability to skill, employ, and productively absorb millions of young people entering the workforce every year. It is against this backdrop that the Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) findings on the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) are deeply disturbing. That only 41 per cent of trained and certified candidates found employment under one of the government's flagship skilling programmes exposes not just implementation lapses, but a deeper structural disconnect between training and employability. PMKVY was conceived as a transformative intervention – offering short-term, industry-relevant training to school drop-outs, unemployed youth, and vulnerable groups. Implemented between 2015 and 2022, the scheme sought to standardise skills through qualification packs. Yet, as the CAG audit across eight states shows, it is a different story at the ground level. The gaps flagged are serious. Candidates were enrolled in clear violation of age, education, and experience criteria. In some cases, individuals lacking minimum educational qualifications were trained for technically demanding jobs. Equally troubling is the absence of robust industry linkage. Placements and certifications were heavily skewed towards a handful of sectors – most notably self-employed tailoring – while nearly 20 other sectors contributed negligibly to employment. The exclusion of high-absorption sectors such as plumbing, logistics, and health care from PMKVY was a grave mistake. Skilling without keeping in mind employers' needs is of no use. The audit also points to various other anomalies – unreliable data systems, dubious bank account details, repeated beneficiary records, closed training centres, and delayed or unpaid incentives. Unutilised funds running into hundreds of crores underscore poor planning and coordination between the Centre, states, and implementing agencies. PMKVY is the need of the hour, as it can transform the economy. The solution is not to abandon it, but to plug the gaps and keep employability at the core.

Marxism can still speak powerfully in India, but only if it learns to speak with society rather than at it. Treat Marxism as a method, not a mantra. Sharpen class through caste. Anchor equality in constitutionalism. Do this, and your politics may once again resonate



MANOJ KUMAR JHA

Dear Comrades,

I have watched, from a distance of time and circumstance, the trajectory of communist politics in your land. What troubles me is not that Marxism has lost relevance in India, but that it has lost its ability to translate itself into the language of lived life. The words you speak are right out of my lexicon - class, labour, surplus, exploitation - but I often do not recognise the society they are meant to describe.

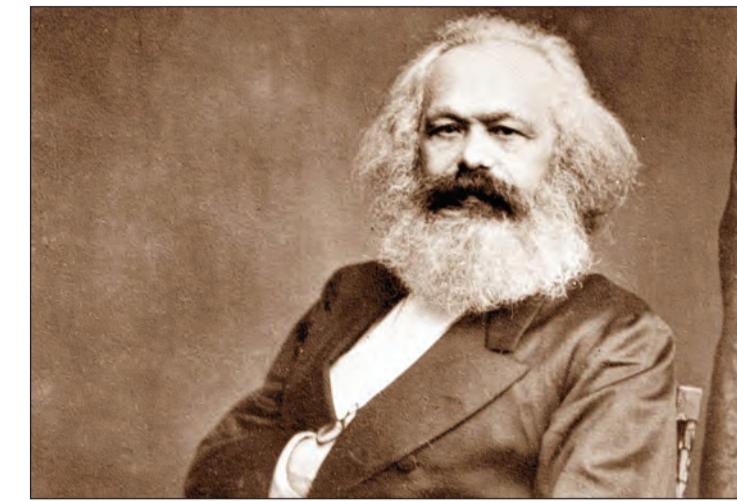
Allow me to remind you of something you already know but either seem to forget or ignore: Marxism was never meant to be doctrine. It was meant to be a method and a lamp. If that lamp has dimmed, it is not because the night has ended, but because the flame has not been fed by the realities around it.

Your task, therefore, is not reinvention for its own sake or in the manner of reinventing the wheel. I shall also not advise you to abandon the fundamentals. What you require is an organic renewal - one that grows from the soil of Indian society rather than being imported wholesale from other histories and societies. And in undertaking this renewal, you must reject a false and debilitating opposition that has haunted your politics for decades: the separation of class from caste.

Caste, comrades, is not a cultural residue floating outside the political economy. It is a material system of graded inequality that long predates capitalism and has been remarkably compatible with it. Capitalism in India did not abolish caste; it learned to operate through it. To imagine otherwise is to misunderstand both capitalism and caste. It misplaces priorities for people's struggle as well.

Who owns land? Who performs the most degrading labour? Who bears the greatest risk and precarity? Who is denied dignity even when wages are paid? These questions cannot be answered without confronting caste directly. Dalit and Adivasi communities remain disproportionately trapped in dangerous, insecure and dehumanising work. Informality, which is so central to Indian capitalism, is structured by caste. Class formation itself bears the imprint of caste hierarchy.

A Marxism that fails to place this at its centre ends up speaking about the oppressed rather than from within their lived experience. Dismissing caste as a "secondary contradiction" or postponing it to a future after revolution would amount to abandoning both moral clarity and political ground. You would invariably end up leaving space for forces that mobilise caste identities without challenging exploitation, while at the same time



alienating those for whom caste is not an abstraction but a daily injury.

Yet I must also warn against the opposite error. When caste politics detaches itself from political economy, it may secure representation without transformation. Power changes hands, but exploitation remains intact. The annihilation of caste and the abolition of exploitation are not parallel struggles; they are intertwined. To separate them is to weaken both. India does not need borrowed manifestos. It needs one that speaks in the idioms of its social realities.

You must also confront the transformations of capitalism itself. Inequality in your country has reached obscene levels. But this inequality does not produce a simple divide between bourgeoisie and proletariat. It fragments labour internally – formal and informal, salaried and gig, urban and migrant, visible and erased. Social security, legal protection and political voice are unevenly distributed across these layers. Do not imagine that these developments lie outside classical class struggle. This is class struggle today. The platform worker, the migrant labourer, the feminised care worker and the informal labourer are not marginal figures; they are central to accumulation in your time.

As I have learnt, your response to this new architecture has been episodic rather than sustained, rhetorical rather than organisational. If your image of the working class remains frozen in older industrial forms, it is not the working class that has vanished; it is your lens that has grown outdated, and you need to change it urgently.

Ask yourselves harder questions. How is surplus extracted in an economy where growth coexists with hunger and joblessness? How do profits soar while labour participation declines? Why is the experience of citizenship so uneven? Why are some considered bearers of rights while others are considered disposable? In such con-

ditions, humiliation and everyday violence cannot be considered mere social pathologies; they are mechanisms through which economic power reproduces itself.

Some among you revile grounding Marxism in such realities as diluting its radical edge. I assure you it does the opposite. It restores its sharpness. Especially in a time when religion and politics are fused into a dangerous and intoxicating mixture, critique must be rooted in everyday life if it is to matter at all.

This brings me to another critical concern which you have often treated with misgiving: your Constitution. I have heard some of you dismiss it as a bourgeois compromise, useful only as a transitional instrument. History has proven this view to be shallow and even dangerous. Your Constitution was born not only of liberal ideals but of anti-colonial struggle, anti-caste resistance and democratic aspiration. Its promises – liberty, equality, fraternity, justice – were made to a society scarred by hierarchy. That they remain unfulfilled is not an argument against them; it is an argument for struggle. To defend constitutional rights is not to abandon class politics. In India, it is one of its primary terrains. Rights, representation and institutional accountability are not distractions; they are battlegrounds. To fight on them is to fight for "We, the People of India" in material terms.

And to work along these lines requires an intellectual humility that I urge you to embrace. Read me, sure - but read me alongside Ambedkar, Gandhi and Nehru. Not tactically only, not ceremonially only, but seriously. Ambedkar's insistence on dignity, caste annihilation and constitutional morality does not weaken Marxism; it completes what your context demands of it. Together, these traditions offer a framework capable of grasping exploitation in its economic, social and cultural forms.

Finally, comrades, reinvention must not be limited to being merely theoretical. The time calls for it to be ethical. It demands a shift from certainty to listening, from vanguardism to solidarity, from imported templates to grounded struggle. It requires the courage to acknowledge past failures without defensiveness and the openness to learn from movements that did not originate within your party structures. Above all, it requires the willingness to be transformed by the struggles you claim to lead.

Marxism can still speak powerfully in India, but only if it learns to speak with society rather than at it. Treat Marxism as a method, not a mantra. Sharpen class through caste. Anchor equality in constitutionalism. Do this, and your politics may once again resonate. It would not be just an echo in an ideological chamber.

Comradely yours,
Karl Marx

The Pioneer
SINCE 1865

PIC TALK



A worker sells colourful sacred threads at the Sangam on a winter morning, in Prayagraj.

PHOTO: PTI

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PROTECTING THE ARAVALLIS BEFORE THEY COMPLETELY DISAPPEAR FOREVER

The Aravalli mountain range, among the world's oldest geological formations, has once again come into focus because of controversy over its definition and the Supreme Court's recent intervention. Stretching across Rajasthan, Delhi and Haryana and touching Gujarat, the range performs vital ecological functions, including groundwater recharge and acting as a barrier to desertification.

It is deeply troubling that the Union government proposed a flawed definition that treats any landform rising 100 metres above the surroundings as Aravalli. Such a definition opens loopholes for mining interests to exploit minerals and destroy a fragile ecosystem for short-term gain. Sustained pressure from citizens and environmentalists has finally borne fruit, with the government

expanding the protected area and halting new mining in the vicinity – a welcome but belated step.

Such action should arise from foresight, not merely outcry. These hills deserve proactive restoration. The region is ecologically sensitive and should be notified as an Ecologically Sensitive Zone. Not only must new mining be banned, but existing destructive operations should be phased out and strictly policed.

The Aravalli is not merely a range of hills; it is a natural heritage. Government and society alike must commit to reforestation and stewardship, so that damaged landscapes can heal and future generations inherit a living, thriving Aravalli.

KIRTI WADHAWAN | KANPUR

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com. In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Seeing each other first, before seeing our roles



ASHA IYER KUMAR

2ND OPINION THE PIONEER

Recently, I met a suave young lady – a style consultant – over a coffee. It was a meeting that had been planned as part of a writing assignment, which is presently on pause. Given that the professional need to meet her wasn't pressing, I could have let the proposed engagement lapse into silence. But I chose to keep the appointment, because in my theory of relativity, connection need not be purely transactional, with a constant "what's in it for me?" hovering over every social interaction.

This idea may appear anomalous in a world that glorifies networking, where every shared space becomes a venue for business-oriented exchange. It might also go against the conventional wisdom on how to gather "useful" people in our lives. I deviated from those norms

simply because I admired her work. Meeting her was my way of saying, "I honour you and your business." The premise was clear to both of us: we were meeting as two individuals, not as a journalist and an entrepreneur.

The meeting was stripped of the formality and performance that might otherwise have crept in had we met for business. We had no reason to impress or inflate our images. We were simply two women peeling back the layers of life, taking a rare peek at who we were without labels or titles. I listened to her speak about her work with genuine interest, grasping the nuances and making mental notes for personal practice. When we parted, we knew we had struck a chord that would resonate for a long time.

For as long as I can remember, I have believed that no human transaction is complete unless it is anchored in the heart. For me, the acronym B2B has plastic connotations and little emotional bearing. It sounds as though two machines with push buttons are bargaining. B2C feels marginally better, yet still falls short of what it should be – P2P, person to person. My argument is against the double standards we maintain in human relations.

Why must we rely on clever tactics and curated strategies to connect with others, turning relationships into arid alliances where the primary aim is tangible gain?

We have become too civil to allow genuine emotion into our collaborations, because in commercial culture business is equated with returns. We collude when it serves our immediate interest – often in the most cosmetic way.

Is it truly difficult to build enduring liaisons in our professional lives – bonds not bound to time-specific objectives or narrow windows of monetary gain, but grounded in the belief that if we walk together, one day we may genuinely help one another, as co-workers, as business partners, as human beings? Let's admit it: the polish we display in our networking rituals has become too artificial for comfort. In private, we wince at the shallowness of it, yet we cling to these habits because intimacy feels risky. It lowers our defences and makes exploitation easier. We would rather behave like robots than humans.

Can we not introduce a touch of bona fide warmth that transcends the textbook rules of corporate culture, holding space for each other simply because we are in this material mess together? As they say, after the game is over, the king, the queen, the pawns, the bishop, the knights, and the rook all go back into the box.

The writer is a Dubai-based author, columnist, independent journalist and children's writing coach

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Deadly lessons from highways

Another massive bus blaze near Hiriyur in Karnataka has left the country shocked and grieving. In October, more than 20 passengers died in the Kurnool accident. In the Hiriyur crash, a container truck hit a divider and rammed into a private Volvo bus, killing at least nine people. Of the 29 passengers, nearly 25 were under 30, travelling to Gokarna for a holiday.

The height and strength of road dividers across the Pune-Bengaluru highway are rightly being questioned. For long stretches, the dividers are little more than symbolic. Authorities must prioritise sturdier barriers and wider medians rather than simply extending road networks. Saving lives is more important than adding kilometres. Equally worrying are buses with non-fire-retardant interiors, limited exits, and heavy emergency window glass with unclear instructions. Speed limits on highways must be strictly enforced, and old, unsafe buses should be phased out urgently. The Minister for Road Transport and Highways, Nitin Gadkari, should focus firmly on safety reforms so families are spared such preventable tragedies. Lives matter before speed or convenience. Every journey should end safely. Let us fix our roads before families suffer.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Pollution crisis demands accountability

Air pollution is the presence of harmful substances in the air, threatening both human health and the environment. Delhi breathed slightly easier for the second day in a row, with the Air Quality Index recorded at 234 – still firmly in the "poor" category. Transport emissions and pollution from neighbouring regions continue to contribute significantly.

Illegal dumping, toxic fumes, burning weeds, and chemicals leaking into lakes intensify the crisis. Unauthorised urbanisation has damaged flora and fauna, posing a wider threat to human life. Pollution control boards must move beyond paperwork and deliver real results, particularly in metropolitan areas.

Delhi faces unique challenges: stubble burning in neighbouring states, relentless construction, expanding landfills, shrinking green cover, and very few water bodies. Being in the Indo-Gangetic plains, pollutants stagnate in winter, creating dense smog. While farmers are often blamed, safer stubble-management options are expensive, and many lack resources. The problem cannot be solved simply by pointing fingers. It requires a coordinated, compassionate, science-driven strategy across states. A clean city is not a luxury – it is a necessity for survival.

CK SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

A return with expectations

Apropos the report, "BNP leader returns to Bangladesh, urges peace" (Dec 26). The return of the BNP's acting chairman, Tarique Rahman, to Bangladesh after more than 17 years in Britain is a development of considerable political consequence. His arrival, greeted by large crowds, comes as the country searches for stability ahead of the February 12, parliamentary elections.

In his first public address since 2008, Rahman placed current unrest within Bangladesh's broader historical narrative, invoking the Liberation War of 1971 and the 2024 mass uprising.

By emphasising sacrifice, unity and civil rights, he attempted to present himself as a conciliatory figure in an increasingly polarised society. His stress on inclusiveness – across religion, geography and identity – and his call to restore law and order resonated with citizens anxious about political violence. Yet symbolism cannot substitute for governance. As the BNP projects Rahman as its prime-ministerial face, voters will expect credible plans for economic revival, institutional reform and democratic accountability. Expectations have now risen; how they are met will determine whether this moment becomes a genuine turning point or merely another episode in Bangladesh's political theatre.

SANJAY CHOPRA | PUNJAB



The indispensable ecosystem: A case for protecting the Aravallis

The massive habitat disturbance due to the proposed safari park in the Aravallis will disrupt the crucial wildlife corridor, displace indigenous Aravalli wildlife, destroy the fragile habitat and biodiversity therein, compromise the already-stressed groundwater-recharge zone, and impact the health and livelihoods of local populations



BKP
SINHA



ARVIND
KUMAR JHA



The Aravalli Range, stretching approximately 692 kilometres, is the 3-billion-year-old geological "spine" that supported the dawn of Indian civilisation. Known in the Puranas as the Pariyatra, this range formed the protective wall of Brahmaputra, the sacred heartland of Vedic hymn composition. It also sustained a network of the Saraswati, Drishadvati, Sahibi, and Luni rivers. The valleys served as a global metallurgical hub, providing the Harappan world with gold and copper, while archaeological records reveal that the Saraswati banks nourished the world's earliest ploughed field (Kalibangan), and the Drishadvati valley conceals Rakshigiri, a metropolis now confirmed to be larger than Mohenjo-daro. The Aravallis are no less than a unique national treasure and a natural monument.

Often referred to as the "green lung" of northwest India, the Aravallis today provide indispensable ecological services vital for the environmental and socio-economic stability of the entire region, with benefits extending far beyond their geological structure due to their crucial role in climate regulation, water security and air quality. The continuous ridge of the Aravallis impedes the eastward and north-eastward spread of Thar Desert sands and controls desertification in Haryana, Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh, while the range's part in Haryana and Delhi helps channel monsoon moisture towards the plains during summer and shields the region from intense dry westerly winds.

For the water-stressed populations of Haryana and Delhi, the Aravallis are a primary natural mechanism for groundwater recharge, sustenance of streams and water bodies, and water security. Acting as a vital physical filter, the existing hills and vegetative cover function as a critical environmental buffer against air pollution and even the dust storms that sweep into the NCR.

Although continuously damaged due to illegal mining and deforestation, the Aravalli Range remains a vital biodiversity-rich area, having endemic species and

THE REMOVAL OF HILLS OF ARAVALLIS WOULD LEAD TO FRAGMENTATION AND BREACHING OF THE NATURAL BARRIER THAT CONTROLS MOVEMENT OF DUST FROM THE THAR DESERT TOWARDS THE NATIONAL CAPITAL REGION OF DELHI

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medicinal plants, an important genetic reservoir for northwest India, and a habitat and corridor for wildlife, facilitating their movement from Gujarat and Rajasthan to the areas of Haryana and Delhi and vice versa.

A specific threat to the Aravallis currently is the opening for diversion, especially for mining, of hills less than 100 metres tall. This "100-metre rule" is particularly dangerous because over 90 per cent of the Aravalli Range has a height lower than this.

Further, a significant area of the Aravallis is proposed for conversion into an open zoo (safari park) by the Haryana Government — a proposal fraught with severe regulatory, ecological and socio-economic risks.

Considering the Aravallis' historical, cultural, ecological and social significance, examples of global warnings emerging from the prioritisation of short-term economic gain over environmental conservation seem relevant.

In the Central Appalachian Mountains, USA, mountain-top removal (MTR) mining led to ecological catastrophe, with over 2,000 miles of streams buried with waste rock, destroying entire forested ecosystems. Acid mine drainage leached heavy metals into waterways, and ultra-fine silica and sulphur particles contaminated the air. MTR proximity resulted in

higher occurrences of cardiovascular diseases, including lung cancer, among residents, and environmental degradation left communities impoverished and in a state of social ruin.

Severe ecological and social impacts have followed mining in the high Andes Mountains of Peru and Chile. Driven by reserves of copper, gold and zinc, open-pit mining has disrupted the fragile Andean water cycle, leading to water scarcity, air pollution and water contamination with heavy metals such as arsenic and mercury.

Studies of large-scale hillside clearing and deforestation accompanying mining and breaking of lands in Brazil, Indonesia and India show that they dramatically accelerate soil erosion, eliminate forests' ability to act as carbon sinks, contaminate rivers with massive sediment loads, and ruin livelihoods and cultures of local communities.

The removal of hills of the Aravallis would lead to fragmentation and breaching of the natural barrier that controls movement of dust from the Thar Desert towards the National Capital Region of Delhi. The loss of smaller ridges, currently acting as localised micro-watersheds and aquifer recharge points, would compromise water availability, destroy unique micro-habitats and leave behind barren, excavated pits. A sample survey

of mined areas in the country unfortunately reveals that the mandated condition regarding their post-mining rehabilitation is rarely complied with by agencies.

There are already examples in the Aravallis where broken lands are converting the natural recharge zone into a stagnant "sump" of contaminated surface run-off, poisoning the groundwater that people use. The Central Ground Water Board (2024-25) and various health studies confirm that, in the Aravalli mining belt, water already has an altered chemistry with higher-than-permissible limits of lead and cadmium ($>0.01 \text{ mg/L}$) and fluoride ($>4.7 \text{ mg/L}$), which cause neurological impairment and bone deformities, including mottled teeth in children. Further, nitrates have increased by 60 per cent since 2017 and their levels are just one short of the permissible limit of 45 mg/L. Yet another danger to the Aravallis has emerged from the proposal to convert its forest area into an open zoo that would burden it with land breaking and accelerated non-essential constructions in the name of development. International examples show that similar projects in arid or semi-arid zones have caused ecological havoc because of the competing demands of intensive tourism infrastructure, local people's survival needs and the wounded susceptibilities of the xeric ecosystem.

Safari parks in semi-arid African rangelands (such as Kenya and Tanzania) demonstrate the severe impacts of high-volume tourism infrastructure, leading to rapid localised desertification, contributed by the mining of water for captive animals.

Open zoos established in Spain and Portugal on dry, scrubland forests illustrate the dangers of eco-tourism in low-biomass ecosystems. Constructing artificial water bodies and modifying natural streams for animal viewing cause hydrological stress that damages the natural flood-drought cycle crucial for indigenous scrubland species.

High-impact tourism and animal-concentration schemes in arid zones in the Middle East and Australia show how easily dry ecosystems can move into ecological collapse. The uncontrollable pressure for increased infrastructure, together with grazing burden, rapidly destroys the cryptobiotic crusts and soil structure, accelerating desertification. Large tracts

of the open zoo or safari become ecological dead zones and contribute to regional dust pollution. Additionally, any heightened concern for non-native "charismatic" megafauna introduced for tourist appeal exacerbates adverse impacts on local species.

The massive habitat disturbance due to the proposed safari park in the Aravallis will disrupt the crucial wildlife corridor, displace indigenous Aravalli wildlife, destroy the fragile habitat and biodiversity therein, compromise the already-stressed groundwater-recharge zone, and impact the health and livelihoods of local populations. It will also affect the very ecological services (air purification, water recharge and dust control) that the Aravallis currently provide to the region.

Global precedents of ecological collapse in sensitive regions serve as a stark, cautionary blueprint for the Aravalli Range. Preliminary frameworks have, of course, been initiated by India for valuing ecosystem services. Apparently, adequacy of conservation initiatives for the Aravallis is claimed by quoting the establishment of some protected areas and steps taken towards restoration of selected patches. While these initiatives reflect important policy intent, the ecological integrity of the range continues to face severe and intensifying threats.

In fact, the absence of a regional natural-capital accounting approach limits the systematic quantification of the range's contributions towards land productivity, water regulation, carbon storage, biodiversity conservation, livelihoods and climatic stability. As such benefits provided by the Aravalli ecosystems remain largely unaccounted, the financial returns of "development" appear comparatively significant — more so when the land is not "forest land". Undervaluing the ecological damage caused by development projects also results in a distorted trade-off, ensuring that economic growth is prioritised over long-term environmental sustainability. Vulnerability of the Aravallis to short-term development pressures will continue until it is valued appropriately in economic terms. Saving the Aravallis, apart from being an appropriate response to preserving the cradle of Harappan and Vedic civilisations, is an environmental and urgently needed socio-economic imperative.

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When culture masquerades as wisdom



ACHARYA
PRASHANT

Cultural assertion is the mood of the day. From rituals to symbols, all is in. Even the Gita is trending in a way not seen before. Politicians, motivational speakers, and corporate gurus are all uttering its name, quoting it and, more frequently, misquoting it.

These are not mere aberrations. In India especially, and increasingly elsewhere, a wave of cultural self-assertion is sweeping through public life, sometimes as confidence, often as a reaction. The young declare they are done apologising for their roots, and social media amplifies the chorus.

On the surface, this can look like a civilisational reawakening. But on closer look, it becomes clear that what is being reclaimed is rarely examined, and what is being celebrated is rarely understood. The confidence is loud, but it rests on very little inner contact.

As generally practised, culture is not wisdom; it is repetition. It is behaviour carried forward because it was once useful, once meaningful, once powerful, or simply because it has not yet been questioned. It belongs to the past by definition. It has momentum because it becomes society's collective habit. Truth is alive, but culture is memory. When a society begins to bow before its memory, it has already stopped learning.

What we are witnessing is not a cultural renaissance. It is mostly the past asserting itself through the present, helped by technology, volume, and collective emotion. This is not depth returning. This is conditioning congratulating itself.

The Shelter of Inherited Answers

People claim to be returning to their "roots". But what are roots, really? The word sounds noble, earthy and authentic. But what we generally call roots are inherited habits, languages, rituals, symbols and reflexes. They are not chosen or examined, but simply absorbed. To derive pride from them is to derive identity from accident. That is not liberation; that is bondage made respectable.

Culture gives the ego a ready-made shelter, telling the individual who to be, what to value, what to fear, and whom to oppose. This is convenient, because thinking is demanding and inquiry is lonely. Conditioning offers belonging without inner work, certainty without investigation, and meaning without responsibility.

Identity is nothing but conditioning made respectable. Whether one calls it national pride, civilisational confidence, or cultural assertion makes little difference. The psychological movement remains the same: the past dictates the

present, and the present obeys while calling obedience strength.

Devotion Without Inquiry

Devotion, in the true sense, means the devotion of the false ego to truth itself. Devotion implies the love of the encaged self for freedom. However, something has happened to devotion itself. Bhajans are remixed for dance floors, pilgrimage becomes content for social media, and ritual becomes lifestyle aesthetic. None of this is necessarily wrong, but something essential is lost when the sacred is used primarily to entertain or to display. Repetition with better lighting is still repetition, and conditioning with music is still conditioning.

A bhajan is not meant to affirm identity; it is meant to dissolve it. The Ashtavakra Gita declares that the false self must be dropped at all costs, and that all spirituality is about negating and sublimating the false self. Devotion, too, is meant to see the falseness of what one has erroneously become. Instead, when devotion becomes a way to feel good about who one already thinks one is, it has betrayed its purpose.

When behaviour flows from habit rather than awareness, life becomes mechanical, and mechanical living is the very definition of unconsciousness. One may chant, celebrate and travel, but if nothing essential is questioned, nothing essential has moved.

This is precisely how culture survives: by discouraging inquiry. It labels questioning as disrepect, calls dissent arrogant, and frames obedience as loyalty. Intelligence does not ask whether something is ancient or indigenous; it asks whether it is true.

True inquiry has no loyalty to tradition; it has loyalty only to clarity. A culture that demands preservation before understanding has already placed itself above truth, and anything placed above truth becomes false.

The Sages Were Culture-Breakers

The great sages and saints of this land were not culture-builders; they were culture-breakers. They did not polish inherited identities; they shattered them.

The Upanishadic seers did not ask how to belong better; they asked who it is that wants to belong at all. They spoke in the language of negation: *neti neti* — not this, not this — dismantling body, mind, belief, tradition and self-image with ruthless honesty. And today, their words are used as cultural ornaments, stripped of their fire, repackaged to reassure the very ego they were meant to burn.

Saint Kabir mocked the priest and the mullah alike. Saint Ravidas declared that the divine cares nothing for caste. Saint Meerabai defied palace and temple, singing her way out of every cage society constructed. They did not celebrate their roots; they pulled them up and examined them with honesty. Their devotion was not a costume; it was a fire that burned down pretence. These figures were not culture-proud; they

were truth-hungry. And truth-hunger does not permit comfortable sleep in ancestral beds.

The Only Valid Criterion

What is presented as cultural confidence is often fear in disguise: fear of standing alone, fear of not knowing, fear of losing the comfort of inherited answers. So the crowd is embraced, the slogan is repeated, and doubt is silenced.

This fear does not remain hidden. It turns defensive, then aggressive, policing thought and equating criticism with betrayal. At that point, culture stops being mere memory and becomes a weapon. Loud self-assertion without depth does not inspire respect; it signals anxiety. A civilisation that constantly announces its greatness appears unsure of it, for a mind at peace does not need to shout.

India does not need more pride, for pride has never liberated anyone. Pride is the ego's way of feeling good about itself without changing. India needs intelligence: intelligence willing to look at everything inherited and ask one ruthless question: Is this true? Not whether it is ancient, not whether it is ours, but simply whether it is true. Does this liberate, or does this bind?

This does not mean rejecting everything inherited. It means refusing to accept anything merely because it is inherited. Some inherited things may prove true upon examination; keep them. Some may prove false; let them go. But the criterion must always be truth, never heritance.

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad records Yajnavalkya telling Maitreyi: it is not for the sake of the husband that the husband is dear, nor for the sake of wealth or children, but for the sake of the Self alone. This is the Upanishadic demand: see through every identification until only the Self remains. Culture cannot survive this gaze. Only truth can. Freedom lies not in asserting identity, but in seeing through it; not in preserving culture, but in transcending it; not in being more loudly, but in understanding more deeply.

Culture belongs to the past, but truth is always present. Those who cannot let go of the past will never touch the present. The question before every thinking person is not which culture to preserve, but which conditioning to dissolve.

That inquiry begins when the noise stops and the slogans fade, when one is left alone with the only question that matters: Who am I, beneath all this accumulated memory?

Whatever remains is not Indian or Western, ancient or modern. Whatever remains is simply true. And truth alone liberates.

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GDP growth signals recovery



JYOTI PRAKASH
GADIA

India's recent GDP figures depict an economy that is not only rebounding but also reinforcing a fundamentally strong structure. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation reported real GDP growth of 8.2 per cent in the second quarter of FY 2025-26, far above the 5.6 per cent recorded a year earlier. This performance confirms India as the fastest-growing major economy and shows that the recovery is durable rather than temporary. Real GDP at constant prices has risen from ₹44.94 lakh crore in Q2 FY 2024-25 to ₹48.63 lakh crore, reflecting firm underlying fundamentals. Equally important is the breadth of growth. The secondary sector expanded by 8.1 per cent, supported by a 9.1 per cent rise in manufacturing and 7.2 per cent growth in construction. Improvement in the Index of Industrial Production points to better capacity utilisation and stronger factory activity. The tertiary sector grew 9.2 per cent, driven by trade and transport, financial and professional services, and public administration. Private final consumption rose 7.9 per cent, showing domestic demand remains resilient despite global uncertainty.

Within services, the standout is the financial, real estate and professional services segment, which grew 10.2 per cent in Q2 compared with 7.2 per cent a year earlier. It now accounts for 27 per cent of nominal GVA, the largest contribution within the services economy. Crucially, the trend is sustained: growth of 7.2 per cent in FY 2023-24, the same in FY 2024-25, and then a rise to 10.2 per cent in FY 2025-26. Half-year data show the sector strengthening further, while nominal growth reaching 11.3 per cent reflects rising value creation.

The banking system mirrors this improvement. Total bank credit rose 10.8 per cent and deposits increased 9.4 per cent. Retail lending, stronger housing demand, a revival in corporate credit and wider formal access in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities are key drivers. Insurance and mutual funds continue to deepen household financialisation, while real estate activity remains firm alongside a 7.2 per cent rise in construction. Property uptake in major and emerging cities signals investor confidence and improving affordability.

Professional services — consulting, IT-enabled, legal, accounting, management and digital solutions — are another source of momentum, supported by domestic demand and India's growing global services presence. Firms increasingly seek expert advice on compliance, technology and finance. The broader consequence is that India's growth base is widening and deepening. A financial sector expanding 9.11 per cent provides resilience against shocks, stabilises cycles, mobilises savings and enables entrepreneurship. Because

the sector represents more than a quarter of nominal GVA, its sustained expansion will shape macroeconomic outcomes well into the future.

Beyond finance, headline figures show a robust consumption-led economy. Private consumption rose 7.9 per cent, while GST rationalisation should leave more liquidity with households. Gross fixed capital formation grew 7.3 per cent, signalling continued investment in infrastructure and industry. Exports increased 5.6 per cent, and imports rose 12.8 per cent, underlining strong domestic demand. What makes these achievements notable is the difficult global backdrop. Geopolitical tensions, weaker trade, commodity volatility and unstable financial markets persist, yet India's engines of consumption, investment, manufacturing revival and a dynamic services sector have limited disruption. Both GVA and GDP rose above 8 per cent, while nominal GDP grew 8.7 per cent with contained inflation — an encouraging sign for stability. Looking ahead, India appears positioned for full-year growth between 7.2 per cent and 7.5 per cent. Momentum will depend on private investment revival and stronger rural demand. The financial sector's three-year upturn will be central to sustaining medium-term expansion. With a more inclusive, technology-enabled and well-capitalised system taking shape, finance is becoming a core pillar of resilience.

Equally, policy continuity will matter. Stable regulatory frameworks encourage investment, while prudent fiscal management preserves confidence. Sustained emphasis on infrastructure, skills and innovation can lift productivity and support inclusive growth across regions. Strengthening credit delivery to small enterprises and improving financial literacy will deepen participation in the formal economy. Meanwhile, vigilance against financial risks — from excessive leverage to asset-quality pressures — will remain essential as the system expands. Handled carefully, today's momentum can translate into durable gains in employment, investment and living standards. India's latest GDP performance therefore represents not only fast growth, but also a gradual strengthening of the foundations on which future prosperity will rest. As global conditions remain uncertain, economies with domestic depth and diversified engines will be better placed to navigate shocks. India's mix of investment, consumption, services strength and improving financial intermediation provides exactly such a platform. If reforms continue to encourage productivity and broaden opportunity, the country can aim not only to grow faster, but to grow more sustainably and inclusively as well. That, ultimately, is the promise embedded in the present GDP numbers. Maintaining discipline, investing wisely and expanding opportunity can keep this trajectory secure for years.

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Fiscal squeeze

Revenue growth is low but deficit targets may be met

It is likely to be a stretch for the Centre in meeting its fiscal targets this year. There are a few options that it can exercise, though. Basically, the developing shortfall in direct and indirect tax collections may constrain the Centre's ability to spend freely. Meanwhile, the committed expenditures include interest payment, defence, subsidies and direct benefit transfers. An increase in non-tax revenues could help in ensuring that there is no major deviation from the budgeted fiscal deficit of 4.4 per cent of GDP.

Advance tax collections reported up to December 17, indicate that direct tax collections are going to be underwhelming in FY26. While collections for corporate tax recorded 8 per cent growth, income tax collections declined 6.5 per cent, resulting in overall growth in direct taxes of 4.2 per cent. The decline in income tax collections is not surprising given the large reductions in rates across tax slabs, announced in the Union Budget for FY26. But this will weigh on the total tax revenue since income tax revenue comprises 56 per cent of direct tax revenue and is budgeted to grow at a higher rate of 14.4 per cent in FY26, compared to the 10.1 per cent growth pencilled for corporate tax revenue. It appears improbable that the collections will revive in the rest of the year. The news on the indirect tax front is not too good either, going by the provisional numbers available for April-October 2025. CGST, which accounts for almost 68 per cent of indirect tax collections is also decelerating, CGST collections have grown 5.7 per cent this fiscal year; well below the budgeted growth rate of 11.1 per cent. The reduction in GST rates from September will impact the collections further.

But there are several reasons why the Centre can still keep the deficit under check. One, the non-tax revenue has been quite strong between April and October this fiscal year, achieving 84 per cent of the budgeted amount. The RBI has paid ₹2.68 lakh crore as dividend for FY25 which is higher than the budgeted sum. Two, strong profit growth among CPSEs has resulted in dividend payouts of ₹43,638 crore from these enterprises so far, at 63 per cent of budget target. While disinvestment proceeds were not included in the Budget, the Centre has already raised ₹8,768 crore through minority stake sales. If the strategic sale of IDBI is completed this fiscal year, it can add to the Centre's capital receipts. Three, with the Centre front-loading its capex in the first half, there will be lower outgo in the rest of the fiscal year. Four, a possible reduction in outgo on schemes such as the rural employment scheme will also help in supporting the fisc.

The Centre cannot afford to move away from the path of fiscal prudence as interest expense, at ₹12.76 lakh crore for FY26, accounts for one-fourth of Budget expenditure and crowds out other productive spends. It will have to bring down debt as a percentage of GDP to bolster a nervous bond market.

OTHER VOICES.

The Guardian

A new political geography across Britain

Next year will be pivotal in British politics, and 7 May will be the point around which things pivot. Elections to local councils, the Scottish parliament and the Welsh Senedd will give millions of voters across the UK a chance to express party preferences. Their verdicts could imperil Labour and Conservative leaders. In Wales, Labour might be sent into opposition for the first time since devolution. Plaid Cymru and Reform UK are set to make substantial gains. At Holyrood, the Scottish National party (SNP) is on course for a majority. That would be an extraordinary defiance of political gravity for a party weighed down by nearly two decades of incumbency. In England, both Labour and the Tories risk losing scores of councillors as their vote shares are gobble up by the Liberal Democrats, Reform UK and the Greens. Those results will be taken as evidence that Sir Keir Starmer and Kemi Badenoch are failing as leaders. But it would be a mistake to filter the results only through that lens. The fragmentation of national allegiances began much longer ago. LONDON, DECEMBER 25

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

EUROPE

Can Trump's Navy Match China's?

Will the United States counter China's ambition to become the world's dominant sea power? That's one of the biggest questions for U.S. security in 2026. The Administration is steering the U.S. Navy in a new direction, and give President Trump credit for focusing on a fleet in troubled waters. New battleships for the U.S. Navy will "help maintain American military supremacy, revive the American shipbuilding industry, and inspire fear in America's enemies all over the world," Mr. Trump said Monday. "We're going to start with two" ships and "quickly morph into 10," he said, with lasers, guns, missiles and more. NEW YORK, DECEMBER 25

US and China are sabotaging the global economy

TRADE TURMOIL. US protectionism and Chinese mercantilism are limiting trade opportunities, especially for the developing world



ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

Although 2025 will probably be remembered as the year that US President Donald Trump upended the global trading system, the truth is that both of the world's hegemons, the United States and China, have gone rogue. Surging US protectionism and resurgent Chinese mercantilism are now twin scourges afflicting the rest of the world, especially developing countries.

While some apply the label "G-Zero" to today's leaderless world, it is more accurate to say that we are dealing with a "G-Negative-Two" world. Instead of providing global public goods, China and the US are inflicting global economic costs, and they are doing so in mutually reinforcing ways.

In some sense, Chinese mercantilism begat US protectionism. Trump's long-standing tariff obsession derives from his fury-fueled conviction that trade surpluses abroad have damaged the US economy, especially its manufacturing sector. In that world view, China, with its consistently large trade surpluses, was the provocateur-in-chief, even though in practice more countries have been targeted.

LIBERATING TARIFFS

Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs in April, and the tumultuous iterations that followed, have made the US one of the world's most protectionist economies. On average, tariffs on exports of goods to the world's largest market have jumped from just over 2 per cent to 17 per cent, an eightfold increase. Not only

has access to US markets been constrained, but it is also radically more uncertain, because tariffs have become an instrument for indulging the President's erratic whims and furthering private interests.

In lawsuits challenging Trump's justification for such sweeping tariffs, the Supreme Court has signalled that it will not second-guess the executive's authority to determine what qualifies as a threat to national security. Never mind that the same authority has been (implicitly) invoked to target Brazil for baldly political reasons, and to punish India for contradicting Trump's claim to have brokered the peace in its border skirmish with Pakistan in May. Restraining such an arbitrary and absurd exercise of presidential authority is surely the Court's core responsibility. But even if it does rule against Trump, he will have other ways to pursue the same protectionist agenda, and US trading partners will still be operating in a fog of uncertainty.

To be sure, the direct impact of Trump's tariffs on other countries has been obscured by other developments in the US economy, notably the AI boom, which has propped up demand and imports. But there have also been indirect effects, and chief among these is Chinese mercantilism.

Of course, mercantilism has been etched in China's economic DNA for

With access to US markets reduced and China still so dependent on exports, the Chinese juggernaut has turned its focus to conquering markets elsewhere, especially in South-East Asia

centuries. *The Financial Times* recently reported that China is making trade impossible because "there is nothing it wants to import, nothing it does not believe it can make better and cheaper." It was an echo of 1793, when Imperial Britain's emissary, Lord Macartney, visited China to persuade Emperor Qianlong to open the Chinese market to British goods.

In response, the emperor boasted: "Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign hongs [merchant firms] should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence."

CHINESE IMPORT AVERSION

Not only can we discern a similar attitude today, but Chinese mercantilism has been aggravated by Trump's tariffs. With access to US markets reduced and the Chinese growth model still so dependent on exports, the Chinese juggernaut has turned its focus to conquering markets elsewhere, especially in South-East Asia. Proximate economic necessity has supercharged a deep-seated predilection.

As Shoumitro Chatterjee and I have documented, China's exports of low-value-added goods to developing countries have been rising sharply, undermining the competitiveness of these countries' own domestic industries. Despite rising wages, China still accounts for a large share of global exports, including in areas where it

should have ceded space to poorer countries. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that China's exports are not the result of some natural advantage; rather, they are being sustained by its exchange-rate policy. As Brad Setser of the Council on Foreign Relations and others have argued, the renminbi is undervalued by about 20 per cent.

Thus, while the Trump tariffs exacerbate China's mercantilism, developing countries are opting for another round of protectionism to shield their domestic industries from the Chinese onslaught. Mexico, for example, has just imposed tariffs on goods from China and India. But while other countries are seeking to shield themselves from China, targeting only one country is difficult in today's world of complex supply chains. Inevitably, protectionism will become a broader phenomenon.

What does this tell us about the near-term future? In recent research, Dev Patel, Justin Sandefur, and I find that the heady convergence of developing countries toward Western standards of living stalled in the last decade. Slowing growth in the developing world has coincided with the reversal of globalisation. Exports of low-value-added manufacturing products such as textiles, apparel, and furniture are the engine of development. If it stalls, the poorest people in the poorest parts of the world will be the first victims, and the blame will lie with the world's two hegemons.

The US and China have more in common than they would like to believe. Both are hijacking the global economy and limiting trading opportunities for everyone else.

The writer is a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2025

Undergraduate education in the age of LLMs

The challenge for educational institutions is to integrate LLMs thoughtfully and responsibly into pedagogy

Subhashis Banerjee

Large Language Models (LLMs) such as GPT-class systems have entered undergraduate education with remarkable speed, provoking enthusiasm, anxiety, and uncertainty. Their influence extends beyond simple automation; they are reshaping how students learn, how teachers teach, and how institutions conceptualise educational goals.

LLMs are genuinely remarkable. Not only can they do routine tasks like coding, summarisation, translation, format conversion and rephrasing, but their capacity to represent, generalise, and manipulate concepts across vast and complex multimodal domains would have seemed inconceivable even a decade ago.

LLMs' ability to support increasingly sophisticated forms of reasoning is also improving at a rapid pace, making them capable of critical analysis in complex domains, including mathematics.

For students, the most compelling advantage of LLMs is the unprecedented access to personalised, on-demand tutoring. LLMs offer instant scaffolding, explanations at different levels, step-by-step derivations, a sounding board for critical analysis, and "ask again

with alternate phrasing" possibilities that human tutors cannot always match. This not only benefits students who enter university with uneven preparation, limited access to support, or hesitation in asking basic questions in public settings, but also lowers the barrier to exploration: a student can query a concept repeatedly, request varied examples, or ask for analogies without fear of judgement.

For teachers, LLMs offer substantial gains in productivity. They help generate draft lecture notes, alternate examples, practice problems, and visual diagrams; they can translate complex arguments into simpler forms or create graded levels of difficulty for diverse learners. Teachers can quickly design interactive exercises, scenario-based questions, or automated feedback tools that can provide detailed, individualised feedback that would be hard to produce otherwise.

THE CAVEATS

However, there are caveats. LLMs are overwhelmingly instrumentally powerful, but their pedagogic value is conditional, context-dependent, and fragile. Learning — not only in writing-intensive disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences, but also in mathematics, computer science,

engineering, and the sciences — requires productive struggle. LLMs offer premature closure, and students can obtain correct-looking answers long before they have wrestled with the underlying concepts. This flattening of the cognitive struggle risks shallow comprehension, weak transfer, and overconfidence without competence.

Moreover, LLMs are trained for coherence and not for correctness. The reasoning tools to verify correctness are still work in progress. As such, LLMs produce patterns rather than explanations, coherence rather than ground truth, and fluency rather than understanding. A non-discriminating user may not be able to disentangle this epistemic tension, may increasingly outsource judgement rather than just labour, and may be vulnerable to absorbing confident but flawed outputs.

Academic integrity also becomes a central tension. Indeed, take-home assignments — which had such great pedagogic value — are beginning to lose their significance. Moreover, it appears unsatisfactory and regressive to fall back on in-class examinations as the only way to assess student learning. Assessment validity has indeed become a serious problem, and effective strategies for combatting it are not immediately obvious. Institutions need to worry not just about cheating, but about graduates who appear competent yet lack core skills and understanding.

The central question, therefore, is not whether LLMs should be used in undergraduate education, but under what norms, constraints, and pedagogic designs their use genuinely enhances learning rather than merely accelerating output. The challenge is not the technology itself but the pedagogic imagination and institutional will needed to integrate it responsibly.

LLMs will evolve and are here to stay. Universities need to cultivate thoughtful norms, redesign assessments, support faculty in thoughtfully integrating LLMs into pedagogy, and train students in discerning, reflective use.

The writer is with the Department of Computer Science, and Centre for Digitalisation, AI, and Society, Ashoka University

LETTERS TO EDITOR

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

Fare hike

This refers to "Railways notifies train fare hike from December 26, short journeys spared" (December 26, 2025). Though the Railway Ministry's fare hikes appear quite insignificant at the micro levels, they are likely to spruce up its financial kitty at the macro level. Despite the Railways' objective of protecting short-distance commuters while balancing passenger affordability with the financial sustainability, one just fails to comprehend the rationale of this

hike. Train fares were earlier hiked in July. So this hike now will pinch the pockets of the common folk.

SK Gupta
New Delhi

Corruption challenge
This refers to the article "Funds alone don't ensure job scheme success" (December 26). The finding that corruption is prevalent in some poor States in implementing the rural employment scheme (MGNREGA, now VBRAMG) necessitates immediate corrective action.

MGNREGA corruption involves fund misappropriation, fake job cards, fake muster rolls, underpayment/non-payment of wages, and corruption by officials. Failure to check the rot despite Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT), Aadhaar linkage, social audits, and online grievance redressal is a challenge.

Will the new scheme stem the rot? The outcome will be one of the yardsticks to judge its worth. YG Chouksey
Pune

Contract issues

With reference to "Labour laws" (December 26), the global business shift towards operating lite-asset models, adoption of disruptive technologies and avoidance of cost, compliance and legal complexities involved in engaging permanent employees, results in sourcing more contractual labour. People are also opting for short-term contracts to have a better work-life balance. Though the preliminary protection towards social security and working

conditions to this class were provided through amended regulation CLRAA, due to prevailing multi-layer structure of operational controls, there have been unending disputes, requiring judicial intervention. Apart from mandatory license registration of main contractors in core business activities, the regulatory purview under EPF and ESI Acts need to be enhanced to protect the rights of contractual labour.

Sitaram Popuri
Bengaluru

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India founded 1818

Test of intentions

Ukraine's latest peace proposal marks a subtle but significant shift in how Kyiv is trying to end a war that has long defied clean diplomatic solutions. Rather than framing peace as a binary choice between territorial integrity and continued fighting, the plan advances a more ambiguous idea: de-escalation without surrender. In doing so, it exposes both the limits of compromise and the deeper strategic contest that still defines the conflict.

At the centre of the proposal is the concept of demilitarised or economically neutral zones in eastern Ukraine, particularly in parts of Donbas still under Ukrainian control. This is not an offer to redraw borders or legitimise occupation. Instead, it suggests a managed reduction of military presence, matched on both sides, while retaining Ukrainian administration and policing. The logic is clear. Kyiv is signalling flexibility on how territory is defended, but not on who owns or governs it.

Any pullback of forces carries obvious dangers after years of brutal fighting. Yet the alternative - an endless war of attrition - also carries mounting costs, both human and economic. The proposed zones are less about trust in Moscow and more about creating enforceable mechanisms that make renewed large-scale offensives harder to launch unnoticed.

What gives the plan its sharper edge is the emphasis on security guarantees. Ukraine is no longer seeking vague assurances or symbolic partnerships. It is demanding a framework that mirrors the collective defence logic associated with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, even if formal membership remains unresolved. Combined with a sizable standing military, this reflects Kyiv's core lesson from recent history: peace without deterrence is merely an interlude.

The implicit message is that rejection would trigger deeper Western involvement, from heavier arms supplies to harsher sanctions. In this sense, the plan is as much about shaping external incentives as it is about resolving disputes on the ground. From the Kremlin's perspective, the offer is unlikely to be attractive. President Vladimir Putin has consistently framed the war as a question of control, not coexistence. Demilitarised zones that remain under Ukrainian authority undermine the narrative of irreversible territorial gains. Acceptance would imply limits to Russia's ambitions - something Moscow has so far resisted.

Yet, the proposal's real audience may not be Russia alone. By insisting on a future referendum, Ukrainian leaders are anchoring any settlement in domestic consent. This reinforces democratic legitimacy at a moment when external actors, including US President Donald Trump, are pressing for rapid conclusions. It also signals to Europe that Ukraine's eventual integration into the European Union is tied to stability, not capitulation. Ultimately, the plan does not promise peace in the immediate sense. What it offers instead is a framework to test intentions. If Russia refuses, the diplomatic burden shifts decisively. If it engages, the war may enter a phase where guns fall silent even as fundamental disagreements persist. Either way, Ukraine is asserting that any end to the conflict must balance realism with resolve - and that survival, not exhaustion, now defines its negotiating position.

Narrow victory

The razor-thin outcome of Honduras's presidential election reveals less about partisan strength than about the vulnerability of democratic legitimacy under stress. When victory margins fall below a percentage point, elections cease to be simple contests of numbers and instead become tests of institutional credibility. In this case, delays, technical failures, and competing claims of interference have transformed a procedural exercise into a national reckoning over trust. The declared winner, Nasry Asfura, enters office with a formal mandate but a contested moral one. While the vote count eventually produced a result, the process by which it arrived there - system crashes, manual recounts of a significant share of ballots, and weeks of uncertainty - has left space for doubt. For the runner-up, Salvador Nasralla, rejection of the outcome reflects not just personal grievance but a broader anxiety shared by supporters who view procedural irregularities as decisive, not incidental.

The real danger is not disputed ballots but eroding consent, where citizens accept outcomes reluctantly, convinced rules were bent, and future contests feel predetermined rather than genuinely competitive and fair. What makes this election particularly consequential is the visibility of external pressure. When powerful foreign actors signal preferences, issue threats, or frame outcomes in advance, they inadvertently weaken the very stability they claim to support. Even if the final tally reflects voter intent, overt intervention reshapes domestic perceptions, turning technical disputes into symbols of sovereignty under strain. In such conditions, calls for calm and acceptance sound hollow unless accompanied by credible assurances of institutional independence.

The reaction within Honduras itself highlights this tension. Protests, counter-protests, and sharply worded statements from senior political figures suggest that the election has deepened existing polarisation rather than resolved it. The governing challenge ahead is therefore twofold. First, the incoming administration must demonstrate competence and restraint, signalling that the narrow victory will not translate into winner-takes-all governance. Second, electoral authorities must confront the failures of the process with transparency, not defensiveness, if they are to regain public confidence.

The broader lesson extends beyond Honduras. Democracies today operate in an environment where technology, geopolitics, and information flows intersect in unpredictable ways. Technical glitches are no longer mere administrative hiccups; they can become catalysts for systemic distrust. Likewise, foreign endorsements, once routine elements of diplomacy, now risk being read as attempts to pre-empt popular will.

Ultimately, stability will depend less on legal finality than on political maturity. A narrow win demands humility from the victor and restraint from external partners. It also requires opposition leaders to calibrate dissent carefully, distinguishing between legitimate scrutiny and escalation that could fracture institutions further. Honduras's election is thus not just about who governs next, but about whether democratic processes can still command consent in an era of suspicion. The answer will be shaped in the months ahead, not by rhetoric, but by governance that proves worthy of trust.

Showing the way

This decade has been transformative. India is not merely growing; it is guiding. Not merely rising; it is reassuring. Not merely participating; it is shaping global outcomes. At a time when many nations are building walls, India is building bridges - between continents, ideologies, economies, and cultures. The world, torn between superpower rivalries and leadership voids, increasingly turns to India for reason, balance, and hope.

In a world increasingly fractured by distrust, rivalry, and polarisation, India stands today as an unexpected but undeniable centre of gravity. This rise did not happen by accident; it is the cumulative effect of a decade marked by purposeful leadership, democratic stability, cultural confidence, and a foreign policy that has redefined India's place in world affairs.

If the previous centuries belonged to geopolitical might, the coming ones will belong to nations with moral authority - and India has emerged as one such nation, powered by an ancient civilisation and a modern, forward-looking State.

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The hallmark of India's foreign policy today has been strategic autonomy backed by strategic clarity. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar, India has mastered the art of engaging the world without becoming entangled in its camps. This is not non-alignment of compulsion but multi-alignment of choice - working with all, aligning with none, and speaking for many. Jaishankar captured it succinctly: "India today is recognised as a voice of peace, security and stability. When India speaks, it speaks not only for itself but for many others."

India's relevance comes from credibility. During the Russia-Ukraine conflict, India refused to be bullied into taking sides. It took the path of dialogue, urging an immediate cessation of violence, earning praise from both Moscow and Kyiv. Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba himself acknowledged that India's "authoritative voice is vital for peace efforts." In West Asia, India alone has managed to maintain steady relations with Israel, Palestine and Iran - a rare diplomatic balance that few nations have achieved. In the Indo-Pacific, India has become the anchor of stability, countering aggressive



postures through partnerships built on trust rather than threats.

Beyond diplomacy, India's peace credentials are grounded in decades of service. As one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping missions - over 25,000 troops across 50 missions - India has demonstrated that peace is a practice, not just a position. From Lebanon to Congo, Indian peacekeepers have protected civilians, rebuilt communities, and earned admiration for professionalism and compassion. If peace is India's message, prosperity is its method.

The last decade has seen India rise from the world's tenth-largest economy to the fifth, and it is poised to enter the top three. Sectors from digital infrastructure to space, agriculture to aviation, defence manufacturing to renewable energy have undergone radical expansion. The Atmanirbhar Bharat mission has turned crisis into opportunity by pushing for local innovation and global integration. Today, India is the pharmacy of the world, the tech back-office of the world, and increasingly, the digital backbone of the world. India's vaccine diplomacy during the pandemic set a new global benchmark.

While richer nations hoarded supplies, India delivered over 240 million vaccine doses to more than 100 countries under Vaccine Maitri - a gesture that strengthened global health and restored faith in humanity. Whether in earthquakes in Nepal, cyclones in Mozambique, tsunamis in the Pacific or, most recently, the devastating floods in Sri Lanka, India was the first responder. This readiness to help is not strategy; it is civilisational duty shaped by the timeless values of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam - the world is one family.

The G20 presidency in 2023 was perhaps India's most visible moment on the global stage. India broke deadlocks that even powerful nations failed to resolve, brought the African Union into the G20 as a permanent member, and reframed global development debates around equity and justice.

The theme "One Earth, One Family, One Future" was not a slogan; it was a worldview. Under India's leadership, the G20 became more representative, more humane, and more attuned to the Global South. Part of India's modern rise comes from the regeneration of its soft power. Yoga is now a global phenomenon celebrated in 180 countries.

Ayurveda, Indian cuisine, classical arts, cinema, and philosophy have

become cultural ambassadors. But the real soft power revolution is not accidental; it is the result of conscious cultural diplomacy. The International Solar Alliance - championed by India - has emerged as a global climate coalition of hope, proving that environmental leadership can come from developing nations too.

Alongside this, the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) is shaping a new generation that is globally connected yet deeply rooted.

It promotes mother languages, Indian knowledge systems, and cultural literacy while embracing modern skills like AI,

blockchain, and design. It is an educational renaissance that seeks to bridge India's past and future. Naari Shakti - the empowerment of women - has become a moral and developmental pillar. From higher female participation in STEM and armed forces to the passage of the Women's Reservation Act, India is signalling that a rising nation must rise with its women.

But India's success is not merely about India. It has changed the psychology of South Asia itself. When people speak of the region, they often invoke clichés - poverty, conflict, migration. What they ignore is that South

Asia is home to 40 per cent of the world's democracy. Despite imperfections, it is one of the world's most vibrant democratic zones. India's constitutional continuity, gigantic election management, culture of alternation, and acceptance of political loss have inspired neighbours to rethink their own democratic journeys.

Losing an election in India does not end politics; it begins renewal. This stability has allowed institutions to mature and citizens to develop expectations about how power should change hands. Neighbours trapped in debt crises - from Sri Lanka to Maldives - now see the resilience of the Indian model: political stability, constitutional continuity, and economic prudence. India has become not just the largest democracy, but also the most successful and instructive in the region.

While nations worldwide battle ideological radicalism, India practices pluralism; while many grapple with identity crises, India celebrates diversity; while others retreat into protectionism, India champions globalisation with fairness.

The cultural confidence of this decade has allowed India to shed outdated inferiority complexes. The world no longer views India as a land of snake-charmers or call centres, but as a civilisation-state that blends antiquity with modernity. Perhaps the most underrated instrument of India's democratic strength is Mann Ki Baat - the world's largest mass-line communication experiment.

Over 110 episodes, it has turned communication into a national movement, spotlighting grassroots heroes, ordinary citizens, innovators, environmental champions, and social reformers. It connected the State with society in ways no government programme ever has. Mann Ki Baat is India's democratic heartbeat - participatory, people-centric and profoundly inclusive.

India today is shining not like a bird in a cage but like a bird that has discovered open skies. It is no longer content with being a moral spectator or a demographic giant; it sees to be a civilisational leader. In the last decade, the world has witnessed an India that is strong without being threatening, confident without being arrogant, assertive without being aggressive. It speaks softly but with strength; it mediates without imposing; it leads without dominating. In an era where many nations are building walls, India is building bridges. Bridges between peace and power. Between past and future. Between nationalism and universalism. Between development and dignity. And between responsibility and ambition.

As the world searches for stability in uncertain times, India stands tall as a superpower of meaning. A nation that shows peace is not weakness, democracy is not chaos, and diversity is not liability. A nation that insists that power without compassion is dangerous, and peace without power is fragile. India's journey over the last decade offers a simple truth for the world: the future belongs to those who can grow without hatred, rise without violence, and lead without fear. India has done exactly that. And in doing so, it has not just marched ahead - it has shown the world the way.

Jakarta Post

The Constitutional Court ruling that is (not) final and binding

The controversy surrounding the Constitutional Court's decision to annul the mechanism of "secondment" under the National Police chief, as well as the subsequent Police Regulation (Perpol) No. 10/2025 that effectively revives the same mechanism, has left the public deeply confused.

What citizens are witnessing is a dissonance in how the state speaks to, and hears, itself. When the court speaks as the final boundary of power and state apparatuses respond with "administrative creativity", what unfolds is not merely a difference in interpretation but a shift in how the state understands compliance.

This is a political symptom of a state that has lost its unified moral voice. The state now speaks with two interpretations at once: a firm Constitutional

The state does not openly defy the Constitution; it manages it. This is done not through overt resistance but through productive bureaucratic methods, in which the highest ruling is respected as text while it is weakened in practice. This is where the polemic becomes significant, not because of what is regulated but because of what is considered permissible to ignore without ever declaring rejection.

This is a political symptom of a state that has lost its unified moral voice. The state now speaks with two interpretations at once: a firm Constitutional

Court and a flexible wielding of power. Both are legally valid within the bureaucratic sphere, yet precisely for that reason they have become confusing, and dangerous, for citizens.

On the one hand, the Constitutional Court has spoken in the highest language available to the republic: the language of the Constitution. Its rulings are not recommendations, let alone moral advice, but markers of limitation. They are imaginary boundaries defining how far power may extend. The decisions of the Constitutional Court are not meant to expand policy options but to close them. They are the

state telling itself "enough".

On the other hand, the Constitutional Court has spoken in the highest language available to the republic: the language of the Constitution. Its rulings are not recommendations, let alone moral advice, but markers of limitation. They are imaginary boundaries defining how far power may extend. The decisions of the Constitutional Court are not meant to expand policy options but to close them. They are the

IN MEMORIAM

GANGULI SHUDHANSHU KUMAR
— Left us on 27th December, 1980. —
Missed by Chhanda, Babu, Munmun and others.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Squandered

Sir, Harsha Kakar's opinion, "Ill winds blow in Bangladesh", published in the perspective page today, is absolutely justified. The current juncture is volatile.

The killing of Sharif Osman Hadi, one of the key figures in the anti-Hasina quota stir, sparked a fresh wave of protests and attacks on minorities.

Another student leader, Motaleb Sikder of the National Citizen Party, was shot this week. In this turmoil, India has become a convenient scapegoat.

The Yunus government, if it wants to maintain a modicum of credibility, must be seen to calm the situation rather than fanning the flames, as it has done over the last year. It must ensure order and allow the Awami League to contest the elections.

It is for the people to reject the party, or not, through the ballot. Protection must be given to the country's besieged minorities.

The Yunus government must know that the stakes are high, it cannot afford to fail. Fifteen months after Sheikh Hasina was

toppled, Bangladesh continues to reel under mobrule. Hasina's authoritarianism undoubtedly contributed to the eruption of public anger in July 2024.

Her fall offered Bangladesh a chance to begin anew, grounded in reconciliation, pluralism, and democracy. That opportunity has since been squandered.

Mr. Yunus appears to lack the legitimacy or the resolve to steer the country through this crisis. For Bangladesh, the only viable path forward lies in inclusive elections with the participation of all the major political parties.

Yours, etc., S S Paul,

Nadia, 23 December.

A prayer

Sir, Prior to take-off, Indigo flight crew ought to make the following announcement to its passengers: "Dear passengers, our pilots are flying under relaxed FDTL norms. Please say a sincere prayer before we get airborne. Your prayers will go a long way in keeping this aircraft afloat and help it to

land safely at our destination. God bless us all. Amen."

Yours, etc., Avinash Godbole,
Dewas, 23 December.

Indefensible

Sir, The Aravallis are being ripped apart in broad daylight, and the nation is watching. Mining has reduced one of the oldest mountain ranges on Earth to a quarry, an ATM for greed masquerading as development. Protests have erupted across India because people can see what is being done - systematic, calculated destruction. What is truly infuriating, however, is not just the crime, but the chorus of defenders scrambling to justify it with arguments so flimsy they collapse under the weight of basic logic.

Let's be clear: there is no sane, informed, or morally defensible argument for this. None. To defend the annihilation of the Aravallis is to defend ecological suicide. These mountains are not decorative backdrops; they are groundwater lifelines, climate regulators, and shields against desertification.

The excuses are an insult to intelligence. Jobs? Growth? Progress? As if poisoned aquifers, heatwaves, and collapsing ecosystems will employ anyone. As if future generations will thank us for turning ancient mountains into rubble. This is ignorance anymore; it's arrogance. It's the smug confidence of people who believe money can replace water, forests, and air.

History will not be kind to those who stood by - or worse, cheered - while the Aravallis were dismantled. Defending this destruction doesn't make you pragmatic or realistic. It makes you complicit. And no amount of hollow reasoning can wash that stain away.

Yours, etc., Noopur Baruah,
Tezpur, 26 December.



Destroying them for mining is not "development" - it is vandalism with paperwork.



'Farming is our identity'

Chhattisgarh's Agriculture, Farmer Welfare and Tribal Welfare Minister Ramvichar Netam is spearheading a transformative shift aimed at improving the lives of farmers, tribal communities, and rural youth. Known for his grassroots connect and long political journey, Netam is focused on promoting sustainable farming, modern technology, and self-reliant villages. In a conversation with Shishir Roy of The Statesman, he shares his plans to reshape Chhattisgarh's agriculture and strengthen the rural economy over the next few years.

Q. What are your achievements in the agricultural sector of Chhattisgarh?

A. Agriculture is not just an occupation in Chhattisgarh - it is our identity. People here have been connected with farming for generations, and our entire rural economy is based on it. The first priority of our government was to ensure that farmers get the right price for their produce. Earlier, they had to struggle to sell their crops. After our government came to power, we focused on fair pricing and timely procurement. Under the guidance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we have reduced input costs through substantial subsidies on machinery and equipment, around 40 to 50 per cent, and provided quality seeds to make Chhattisgarh self-reliant in agriculture. We were earlier dependent on other states for seed supply, but that is no longer the case. Through the e-NAM portal, farmers are now able to sell their produce directly across India. Our vision is simple, 'when farmers prosper, Chhattisgarh develops'.

Q. What special plans are being implemented to help farmers in different regions of Chhattisgarh?

A. The dairy and livestock sectors are an important part of rural life. But for years, farmers faced challenges



like lack of fodder and poor milk production. We have now revised the cooperative model in partnership with the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB). I visited Anand in Gujarat to study their system. We are improving cattle breeds, setting up milk chilling plants, and providing better market access for milk producers. The focus is not just on milk but also on value-added products such as paneer, ghee, and curd. These small changes will have a big impact on rural income. Within a year, people will start seeing the results.

Q. Chhattisgarh is also taking new steps in palm oil cultivation. Could you tell us more?

A. Palm oil is an area where India has been heavily dependent on imports. The central government has given us a big responsibility to expand palm cultivation in Chhattisgarh. We have identified large tracts of land suitable for this and are working closely with agricultural universities and Krishi

Vigyan Kendras (KVKs). Under this plan, the central government aims to develop 1.2 lakh hectares of land across the country for palm cultivation - and Chhattisgarh is contributing a major share. Farmers are being encouraged through subsidies and intercropping options like chilies and spices so that they can earn even before the palm plantations mature. The response has been very encouraging.

Q. Chhattisgarh is known as the "Rice Bowl of India". How are you ensuring a better paddy procurement system for farmers?

A: Chhattisgarh's farmers grow rice in abundance, and it's our pride. When our government came to power, we had promised to purchase paddy at Rs 3,100 per quintal - and we kept that promise. We have modernized mandis, expanded storage facilities, and made the procurement system more transparent. This year, around 1.5 lakh new farmers have joined the procurement network. Payments are being made faster, and the system is becoming simpler. Our aim is that no farmer should have to worry about selling their produce or getting paid on time.

Q. Chemical fertilizer supply has often faced disruptions. What steps have you taken to address this issue?

A. Global issues like the Russia-Ukraine conflict affected fertilizer imports everywhere, but with the direct intervention of Prime Minister Modi and constant coordination with our leadership, we ensured that Chhattisgarh's farmers did not suffer. At the same time, we are focusing on reducing dependence on chemical fertilizers by promoting organic farming. Farmers are being encouraged to prepare compost using cow dung and natural materials. This improves

soil health, protects the environment, and reduces cost. The more we move towards organic methods, the stronger our farming will become.

Q. How is the government implementing the PM Janman Yojana in Chhattisgarh?

A. The PM Janman Yojana is one of the most significant programmes for the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). Chhattisgarh is among the best-performing states in its implementation. Every PVTG

family is being provided with housing, solar power, clean drinking water, education and healthcare. I have visited many of these villages. Electricity is being supplied through solar panels, new schools are opening, and roads are being built in areas that were earlier cut off. We have also started coaching centres for tribal students in 16 districts and expanded hostel facilities in Delhi to support higher education. The goal is to bring tribal communities into the mainstream of development while preserving their culture.

Q. What is your message for the youth and young farmers of Chhattisgarh?

A. The youth of Chhattisgarh are full of energy and talent. Agriculture today is not what it was 20 years ago - it's now an opportunity-filled profession. With modern technology, precision farming, and startups, it's possible to make a good income from the land. I have seen engineers, doctors, and entrepreneurs returning to farming because they see the potential. My message to them is simple: Chhattisgarh has fertile land, abundant water, and a strong agricultural base. Use technology wisely, adopt drip irrigation, and focus on the principle of "More Crop per Drop." This will increase productivity, conserve water, and secure a better future for everyone.

100 Years Ago



Front page of The Statesman dated 27 December 1925

OCCASIONAL NOTE

Nations in the high temper of war do many things that in the cool temper of peace they agreed not to do, and that is how it happened that during the last War all the countries concerned broke the Hague Convention of 1907 forbidding the seizure of enemy merchantmen in foreign ports. The Convention having been so openly violated there is no practical purpose to be served in pretending that it still exists. The Privy Council, however, is not to certain that it is dead and a recent decision has induced the British Government to administer a final quietus. Sir Austen Chamberlain has addressed a despatch to foreign Governments denouncing the Convention. He has found it the easier to do so, because, apart from the violations already referred to, seventeen of the signatory Powers have never ratified it. Germany and Russia, who did, made important reservations at the time, and the United States never signed at all.

News Items

CHRISTMAS DAY AT HOME

WINTRY WEATHER CONDITIONS

London, Dec.

Christmas Day opened in true old-time style with snow and wintry conditions practically all over the country, but later thaw set in the south bringing back the damp mugginess now usually associated with this holiday. Londoners mostly spent the day by their firesides. Streets were deserted though there was a certain liveliness in the evening, when gala dances began in most of the big hotels. Notwithstanding the cold, hardy swimmers competed, as usual, even in the Serpentine. One of the participants was a septuagenarian who admitted that the water was somewhat cold. Another veteran aged 78 won the Hampstead Heath event at the pond at Hampstead. The churches were crowded and Locarno as the herald of peace furnished the keynote of many sermons.—Reuter's Special Service.

LEADER EXECUTED

REPORTED FATE OF CHINESE GENERAL

Tokio, Dec.

After General Kuo Sing-lin, who is Feng Yu-hsiang's principal supporter, had offered to surrender if his life and property were guaranteed, he was captured by Ohang Tso-lin's cavalry while fleeing disguised as a coolie. All of Kuo Sing-lin's generals have surrendered to Chang Tso-lin. An unconfirmed report states that Kuo Sing-lin was brought in and executed at Mukden last night and that his wife also was shot. A section of Chang Tso-lin's troops is reported to have entered Hsinminfu. In view of General Feng Yu-hsiang's entry into Tientsin the Japanese War Office is considering the despatch of two battalions there.—Reuter.

LORD LLOYD

ENTERTAINED BY EGYPTIAN NOTABLES

Oaiko, Dec.

Lord and Lady Lloyd were entertained to-day at a tea party by a committee of Egyptian notables, when over two thousand persons were present, including Ministers and ex-Ministers. The High Commissioner's speech in reply to the Chairman's address of welcome was greatly applauded, especially when he said that "by long experience and tradition we believe in constitutional government and orderly and just government." Lord Lloyd emphasized the need for a public service in which officials might be confident that they were not at the mercy of individual or party caprice.—Copyright.

Uphill battle underscores scribes' role

JAMES RODGERS

Bottom of Form

On December 10, the year 2025 reached a murderous milestone. In 2024, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) had recorded 126 journalists and media workers killed, the highest number since the CPJ first began keeping records in 1992. In 2025, the figure was matched with three weeks of the year still to go.

One nationality, Palestinian, has paid by far the highest price. "Israel has killed almost 250 journalists since the Israel-Gaza war began in 2023," the CPJ reported.

What does this mean for audiences' understanding of a world where international affairs are dominated by war, the climate crisis and unpredictable politics?

As far back as the early years of the US, and through the European revolutions of the 19th centuries, information and freedom have been linked. In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter."

Today, we have access to more media than at any other time in human history. But this vast amount of information has not necessarily meant more reliable information. Governments and tech companies striving to control the message often succeed.



two colleagues, Mohamed Fadel Fahmy and Baher Mohammad, he was detained in Egypt on terrorism charges. He spent 400 days in prison. The charges had resulted from the fact that he had spoken to the Muslim Brotherhood as part of his reporting.

"How do you accurately and fairly report on Egypt's ongoing political struggle without talking to everyone involved?" he wrote at the time.

It is not new that governments seek to control media. What is new is that the US is so proudly among them. Jefferson would probably not

like what the current US government is doing, especially its recent policy of restricting access to the Pentagon for reporters who themselves refuse restrictions on their reporting.

The words that follow Jefferson's discussion of the relative merits of governments and newspapers are less well remembered: "But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them."

Outdated gendered language aside, that, today, is the problem. For while we have more and more media, we

have far less media freedom.

In the age of mass media, news organisations have largely controlled the means of distribution. Today, the tech companies take the lead. Not everyone is receiving the "papers". Where they are not formally censored, they are harder to find - and cost money, unlike social media content.

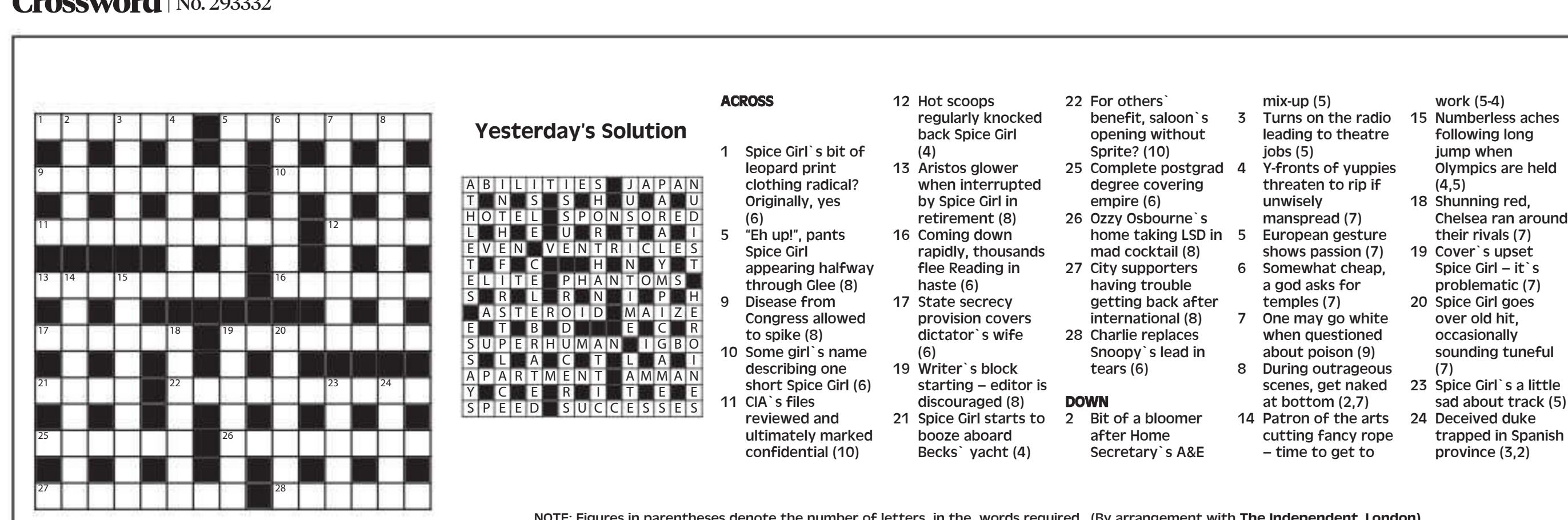
Algorithms may be adjusted to give us more cat videos and fewer questions. Governments and criminals place physical restrictions, up to and including death, on journalists' work. Powerful politicians use legal action - or the threat of it - to silence trusted news organisations.

In my previous career as an international correspondent, I reported on wars in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. In the 1990s and 2000s, journalists were often restricted by governments not wanting bad news reported - but rarely simply banned as they increasingly seem to be now.

In Gaza and in Russia, international journalists are unable to access places they need to tell the story. In both cases, courageous reporters from those countries risk danger and even death to try to tell the world what is happening. The restrictions placed upon journalists today may mean that governments seem to be winning at the moment. Their desire to control confirms the power to challenge that journalism still holds.

(The writer is Reader in International Journalism, City St George's, University of London. This article was published on www.thecorner.com)

Crossword | No. 29332



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

BATTLE IN A SHIP FOUR COOLIES KILLED IN FIERCE CONFLICT

Batavia, Dec.

A fierce conflict raged between 44 Macassar contract coolies and twenty of the ship's coolies on board the Bengkalis on its way here from Banka Island. Native passengers, and even Macassar women joined in the fray. The ship's officers dealt vigorously with the rioters, who were armed with knives, but before order was restored four natives were killed, one Macassar having his head practically severed, and twenty persons were injured. The Bengkalis returned to Banka Island, where the police arrested all the coolies before she resumed her voyage.—Reuter

When the dialogue lingers, but the love doesn't



CHEAP THRILLS
NISHA SUSAN

S ometime last year at a university in western Canada, in the stairwell leading to a basement I found among a clutch of small squiggles on the wall, a little question asking *saadanam kailundu?* I laughed at the sight of this Malayali shibboleth. The internet is full of reels of Malayalis asking strangers this question. This is how we find each other in Delhi parking lots or from boats in icy lakes. It's a line from a 1990 buddy cop movie that translates roughly to "got the stuff?"

Sreenivasan had that ability to make the ordinary phrase incredibly meaningful and memorable. Sometimes it was because he was the gifted actor performing the dialogue. Sometimes because it emerged from the mouths of the hundreds of actors for whom he wrote memorable dialogue and screenplays. Sometimes it was because he had directed the movie. If ever there was someone who had the stuff, it was Sreenivasan. For whole generations of Malayalis, our tongues ran in the rhythm he set. Irony and self-deprecation made us who we were. As much as Sreenivasan was central to my love for Malayalam cinema, Malayali culture and Kerala, in the last decade he was central to the souring of some of those relationships. When he died last week, I had to really stick my arm into my rib-

cage to check: what do you feel? Is the stuff in there?

If I have ever considered getting a tattoo, I'd have got a line of Sreenivasan dialogue and the options would have been a zillion. After his death, I have had to acknowledge that it's been years since our one-way relationship has thrived. It began its withering with Sreenivasan offering his support to the actor Dileep then accused (and since acquitted) of organising a "quotation" (contract) to kidnap and sexually assault a fellow actor in 2017. Sreenivasan said, "The Dileep I know wouldn't spend 1.5 paisa for something like this, forget 1.5 crore."

One could read that as a typical Sreenivasan remark about Dileep's financial parsimony and laugh like he did, I suppose. I didn't. Later, he said that the Women in Cinema Collective who supported the woman actor were wrong to demand better conditions for women in the industry. Imagine.

Does it make sense to feel less than fulsome affection and gratitude for Sreenivasan based on a few of his opinions? Isn't this a classic moment to separate the art from the artist, as we are often advised to? Perhaps it is possible in some forms, but so rarely is it possible in cinema—a beautiful machine whose moving parts are audacity and power. Suppose you heard that Quentin Tarantino wrote a scene in *From Dusk Till Dawn* in which Salma Hayek pours champagne down her leg and has an admirer lick it off her toes and then that Tarantino insisted he play the part of the toe-licker? Where does Tarantino the artist begin and Tarantino the chance-pe-dance exploiter begin? And to stay with Salma Hayek, what do we feel after reading that the relentless off-screen



Sreenivasan had the ability to make the ordinary phrase meaningful and memorable.

harassment that she endured from Harvey Weinstein ended with her being coerced into being nude with another actor during the making of *Frida*?

I read Alice Munro for the first time after her death, after the news came out that she had taken the side of her sexual abuser second husband rather than her youngest child. It is undeniable that Munro is brilliant, but oh boy, is it hard to read *Vandals* or some of her other stories without seeing her trying to dodge the dodgy stuff in her life. Per-

haps you can separate art from an artist when you are doing an oil painting of a bowl of fruit, but not often otherwise.

As a young person, I had no illusions that Malayalam cinema, what we saw on screen, wasn't all about men. It's about what Malayali men thought, felt, experienced, laughed about, cried about, longed for. When Sreenivasan was acting, in his mannered, staccato delivery, his characters often mocked the bragging excesses of other men—the heroes. In Sreenivasan's screenplays, cinema

often showed us how men affected women with their insecurities, fears and delusions. Still, Sreenivasan's movies were about men. And if the rest of Malayalam cinema wasn't also about men, it wouldn't have mattered. The world needs introspective, funny portraits of men. As it stands, Malayalam cinema needed other cures given its total resistance to women becoming directors, scriptwriters, cinematographers... people with power. (At one point the industry's makeup artists union went on strike because a woman make-up artist wanted to join the industry.) Unsurprisingly, the Malayalam industry has produced work that relentlessly reflected whatever was clattering at the moment inside the heads of men.

One can read the Sreenivasan classic *Sandesham* as a troubling argument against collectivist action or a less troubling "hahaha politics is so stupid" with the greatest one-liners. One can always, always read his movies as a big, giant vote against self-pity. Sreenivasan despised the mopey, self-pitying Malayali man. His denouements always involved the self-pitier throwing off the feelings and choosing action.

I am someone who is chronically unable to separate the art from the artist—and not because I am so politically astute. The actor on the screen and his interviews and his photos and the three-line snippets about him in the back pages and his shoulders in a song all become the artist for me. And in the case of Dileep, that artist-shaped muddle that represents him in my head has always been about self-pity. In the climax of *Sallapam*, Dileep's early hit, his character tells the spunky domestic worker who is in love with him that he

can't marry her because of his poverty and ailing parents. Like a magician pulling the curtain to show you what lies behind, he unveils the room in which his responsibilities lie. Watching it, I remember thinking "are you competing with her?" Or maybe that is what I remember because that spunky domestic worker was played by Manju Warrier, the real-life spunky woman who would go on to become his first wife.

An actual IMDB description of Dileep's 1995 movie *Kakkakum Poochakkum Kalyanam* goes, "Kunjanthan thinks the only way out of his problems is to end his life by suicide and fails at it every time. Things change for him when he gets a job, and falls in love again but his whiny personality persists." Dileep in his work and his public life seemed to distill for me the least attractive parts of masculinity in Malayalam cinema. It turned the often brilliant, funny Ordinary Man of Sreenivasan's conception into the "I am just a poor guy who the world owes everything because I pout." The kind of guy who just weeks after being cleared of charges of organising a kidnapping in a car (while everyone accused of being hired by him has been sent to prison) appears in *Bha Bha Ba*. In this movie, Dileep plays a kidnapper and makes violent sexually coloured jokes. It's like that OJ Simpson memoir that was amazingly titled, *If I Did It*. In this movie, Dileep has the immortal line, "Shouldn't I do at least this much to those who ruined my life?" Surely, this is the kind of line that we hope and pray others will remember us for when we are dead. What a nice *saadanam*.

Nisha Susan is the author of *The Women who Forgot to Invent Facebook and Other Stories*.

Book reviewers vs bookstagrammers

As influencers fill their feeds with year-end 'must read' lists, professional critics must rethink the future of their trade

Somak Ghoshal
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I t's that time of year again when, as a book critic, I'm expected to compile a list of my favourite reads of 2025. My colleagues and I have done such a roundup (see *PI2*), but even as I was going through the exercise, I couldn't help wondering what it means to be a reviewer today, when social media is flooded with reading recommendations from influencers.

Do professional critics—that dwindling tribe paid by media platforms to review books—matter when so much of public taste is curated by algorithms and influencers promoting books for cash or traction? This question feels especially urgent in India, where the market for English language books is much smaller than those in Indian languages, making the role of the reviewer even more niche.

In the last 20 years, as a critic (and, briefly, as a book editor), I have heard prophecies of print media being eclipsed by digital platforms. I have noticed writing styles becoming chattier and more opinionated. I have seen the space for book reviews shrink, move to the blogosphere, then migrate to social media.

Instead of a well-argued review of a new book, you're more likely to see reels telling you to get out of your reading slump by shelving your books according to the colours of the rainbow. Someone parroting the publicity material of their "favourite read" on camera. Or simply an aesthetic photo of a book next to wilting flowers and a steaming beverage, with templated praise in the caption. In case a writer or publisher is so inclined, all these services can be bought for a neat sum of money. (Earlier this year, *Lounge* columnist Sandip Roy wrote about the rate cards offered by "reviewers" to promote his book.)

To be fair, it's not just influencers but the publishing industry as a whole that is responsible for lowering the bar. The proliferation of literature festivals is a case in point. Over the years, the list of invitees has been heavily decided by sponsorship deals, nepotism, and the public's appetite for personality worship. Actors, politicians and sportspersons headline these events as "crowd-pullers". As for the rest, an unchanging list of sycophants remains a fixture. Recently, a writer of four highly acclaimed books, published internationally, told me that their Indian publisher had asked them to write to the director of a literary extravaganza asking for an invi-

tation. An ego massage, presumably, is the key to unlocking access.

Such practices notwithstanding, there is a silver lining to the fact that so many platforms are seemingly making books more egalitarian. Away from gate-keeping by professional critics and snooty booksellers, such a vibrant reading culture ought to work wonders for book sales in India. But ask any publisher or seller of English language books, and you will hear a lament about the decline in sales. Clearly, the correlation between the personal brand of a writer and the business they generate isn't predictable. But this hasn't stopped editors from commissioning books from influencers with large social media following—people who may share interesting thoughts online, but are incapable of putting their ideas into a coherent narrative.

A decade ago, when I last held a full-time job in the industry, editors would focus their best energies on pitching new manuscripts and proposals at acquisitions meetings. Sometimes they would end by mentioning the writer's social media presence as a proof of the latter's clout. Now, insiders tell me, the process is reverse-engineered. A bad book by a writer with a sizable social media following has a better chance of being published than a good book by someone with a modest online presence.

Professional reviewers aren't exempt from diluting the critical discourse into feel-good chit chat, as they peddle anodyne interviews and effusive profiles of writers over in-depth evaluations of their work. Throw in some trivia about a writer's habits to make them seem "relatable"—Tea or coffee? Cats or dogs? Longhand or laptop?—and they get the Likes and Shares the media platform needs as well as generate advertising for the publisher.

"These days so many reviews, especially those on social media, rarely go beyond a gist of the book and what the reviewer was made to feel. Which is of course fine," says writer and Booker Prize-winning translator Deepa Bhasti. "But while it is lovely to hear how much someone loved your book, alongside an aesthetic reel or photo, these things do not exactly critically engage with the book. I miss that."

'ADULT OF SCEPTICISM'

"Editors and critics belong to a profession with a duty of scepticism," critic Christian Lorentzen wrote in *Harper's Magazine* in 2019. "Instead we find a class of journalists drunk on the gush." His deep dive

took off on American writer and critic Elizabeth Hardwick's essay *The Decline of Book Reviewing* (1959), also published in *Harper's* magazine six decades earlier, where she bemoaned the state of criticism in 1950s New York and London. "A book is born into a puddle of treacle; the brine of hostile criticism is only a memory," Hardwick wrote. "Everyone is found to have 'filled a need,' and is to be 'thanked' for 'minor faults in an otherwise excellent work'."

To fight this strain of anti-intellectualism, Hardwick, along with her husband, poet Robert Lowell, Jason Epstein, Barbara Epstein, and Robert B. Silvers founded the iconic *New York Review of Books* (NYRB) in 1963, which continues to publish robust debates on literary and current affairs. Magazines like *NYRB* and the *London Review of Books* (1979) created a space for the "review essay"—an immersive, wide-ranging engagement with a work, locating it within multiple intellectual and affective traditions, drawing on history, biography, social sciences, philosophy and, of course, a lifetime of richly varied experience of reading.

"Today, reviews are only seen as a mechanism to sell more books. But this is not the idea of a review," says philosopher and novelist Sundar Sarukkai. "Reviews in the academic domain are a useful contrast. They place the book under review in a particular scholarly or problem-oriented tradition, and then discuss the uniqueness of the book. They... list the limitations of

the book in terms of what it attempts to do, but it is never about dismissing a book without due diligence."

For Sarukkai, reviewing begins with the act of reading, which is "never about the content but the how of the text and the how of reading it." "The critic," he goes on to explain, "trains the perception of the reader, influences how the reader can actually read the book and perhaps even why they should read the book." In contrast, "interviews are the author's perspective and not an analytical perspective of a critic," he adds.

The best book reviewers are not just sharp critical thinkers but also excellent writers. They are stylists of language, deft with irony, praise or barb, able to entertain their readers, while whetting their appetite about a book. In India, critics like Richard Bartholomew, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Dom Moraes, Shanta Gokhale, among others, were not just reviewers but

luminous writers in their own right. Their dispatches were literary pieces, expressed in the form of a deep caring towards their chosen field of criticism. That tradition of writing has waned over the last 20 years, with digital media platforms demanding easily digestible and shareable content to generate revenue online.

READER AND REVIEWER

It would, however, be unfair to dismiss trends like "bookstagram" as posturing. Whether you like them or not, influencers bring vibrancy and visibility to the scene of reading, especially as the coverage of books becomes scarcer in mainstream media platforms. But their ubiquity comes with its own problems. Sharing opinions is free on social media, which creates the illusion that anyone who reads is a "reviewer". There is a clear line between being a reader with strong opinions and a professional critic, who must analyse, question, contextualise and find the right vocabulary to present their point of view, while remaining dispassionate.

"When a book review is well thought out, one gets to hear what a discerning reader thinks about your book. You want that as a writer," says Bhasti. "You want to know what worked, or didn't. You want to know what your work reminded this reader of, if they could trace a lineage in the style and tone, if there were other writers and styles and choices and mechanics of language that the book being reviewed made them think of."

The truth is, most critics don't aspire to exacting levels of excellence any more, especially since the competition to their few hundred words of prose is a reel by an influencer. The balance is skewed further, if you consider the mechanics of the creator economy. It is possible to make a living as a full-time bookstagger, assuming you are at the top of your game. In contrast, after putting in hours to read a book and review it, freelance critics usually make a pittance in the strained media landscape of budget cuts.

The one form of review that still has the potential to outdo the reach of a viral reel is the hatchet job. Unsurprisingly, this form of writing, as with its obverse—the glowing review—mimics the logic of social media, i.e. instant judgement. Love or hate? Good or bad? Yes or no? But what happens when there are subtleties that can neither be dismissed nor praised? When a book provokes feelings that cannot be captured by a thumbs up or thumbs down emoji?

That is where the conscientious critic must step in, not just to help the reader make up their mind about a book, but to also invite them to be part of a conversation that transient social media applause cannot sustain. Looking beyond "must read" lists and other trappings of internet virality, professional critics need to protect the golden rules of their trade, not only to stay relevant but also to continue providing a uniquely valuable service to the publishing ecosystem.

Social media creates the illusion that any reader is a reviewer; yet professional critics must analyse and contextualise while remaining dispassionate



Reviews on social media rarely go beyond a gist of the book.

ISTOCKPHOTO

{ OUR TAKE }

No place for
faith vigilantes

Attempts to disrupt Christmas celebrations go against India's civilisational ethos

On Thursday, Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi attended the morning Christmas service at the Cathedral Church of the Redemption in New Delhi, sending out a message of communal harmony and peace. In his Christmas greetings, he said: "The service reflected the timeless message of love, peace and compassion. May the spirit of Christmas inspire harmony and goodwill in our society." PM Modi was keeping up a tradition he began two years ago, when he attended Easter celebrations at the Sacred Heart Cathedral in Delhi. That year, he also hosted leaders of the Christian community on Christmas. This message of harmony must guide not only his supporters but also State action against vigilantes stoking polarisation in the name of faith.

Proactive action is an imperative now because of the concerted effort to disturb social peace ahead of Christmas this year. In Assam and Chhattisgarh, vigilantes claiming allegiance to the Sangh Parivar sought to harass Christians and disrupt celebrations on Christmas and the days preceding it. A video from Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, where a visually impaired woman attending a Christmas programme is seen to be publicly abused by a BJP office bearer, was particularly disturbing. In Chhattisgarh, digital posters were circulated, calling for a bandh on Christmas Eve. Thankfully, the day passed relatively incident-free, but the fear and tension triggered by Hindutva vigilante groups deserve condemnation and action.

The task is both legal and political.

Christians constitute less than 3% of India's population, and are mostly concentrated in states such as Kerala and in the Northeast. In northern and central India, they are a tiny minority that is visible mostly when vigilantes harass them. Such actions of violence — these have been going on for some time in the name of preventing conversion with vigilantes known to trespass on worship places and even harass clergy and laity — disrupt social harmony and impinge on India's global image. Christianity in India dates back to the pre-colonial era; the faith is not identified with proselytisation, but modern and relatively affordable educational institutions and hospitals established and managed by the clergy.

It has to be restated that the Constitution guarantees the freedom to profess, propagate, and practise any religion of one's choice. Though there is no national anti-conversion law, some states have introduced legislation to prevent religious conversions carried out by "force, fraud, or inducements". Vigilante groups have sought to weaponise these laws and harass members of non-Hindu faiths. The State must act against such individuals/groups so that it deters others from encroaching on what is the remit of the State. Parallelly, political action must be taken so that the vigilantes become aware of the red lines. Political outreach can also help to heal the scars of attacks on individuals and worship places.

On a transactional note, the BJP should know that the vigilantes are disrupting its political outreach. The party has pitched a positive message of harmony in the Northeastern states — Christians are in a majority in Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Nagaland — and in Kerala, where Christian voters are electorally significant. It has inducted representatives from the community to the Union Cabinet to signal a politics of inclusion. The BJP leadership — and the government — should not allow fringe elements to overshadow the PM's message of harmony and India's civilisational ethos, which is *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the world is one family).

SHANTI Bill: Redrawing the nuclear energy roadmap

The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill replaces a fragmented and dated legal architecture with a comprehensive statute integrating safety regulation, licensing, enforcement, liability and dispute resolution. It grants statutory authority to the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, strengthens lifecycle oversight of nuclear facilities and clarifies accountability at every stage of construction, operation and decommissioning.

India's installed nuclear capacity today stands at roughly 8 GW. The country aims to raise this to 22 GW by 2032 and 100 GW by 2047. This ambition builds on the strides India has already made in renewable energy. The success of renewables brings structural challenges. Solar and wind generation are inher-

ently variable, dependent on weather, seasons and time of day. Storage technologies still face limitations in providing long duration base-load supply at the scale required. Energy-intensive industries, data centres, metro systems, etc, require assured, uninterrupted electricity. Nuclear energy provides that assurance.

Nuclear power emits negligible carbon during operation, occupies relatively little land and delivers continuous electricity with high capacity utilisation. India's nuclear expansion is being shaped around a new generation of indigenous technologies.

Bharat Small Reactors are based on proven 220 MW Pressurised Heavy Water Reactor designs and are intended for deployment near energy intensive industrial zones. They will

supply dedicated, low-carbon power to steel, aluminium, cement and other industries where emissions are hardest to abate. Complementing these are Bharat Small Modular Reactors, ranging 30 MW to 300+ MW. These modular, factory-built reactors allow faster construction, improved quality control and flexible deployment in remote regions and industrial hubs. The Modi government has earmarked ₹20,000 crore for R&D, with at least five indigenously designed units planned for deployment by 2033.

Policy reforms have been initiated to enable this shift, and to facilitate structured public private participation in the nuclear sector. The ASHVINI joint venture between the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited and NTPC exemplifies this approach.

Beyond these advances lie thorium-based reactors, the most transformative element of India's nuclear roadmap. India possesses one of the world's largest thorium reserves, concentrated along the coasts of Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Odisha. Thorium is approximately

three times more abundant than uranium and produces significantly less long-lived radioactive waste, carries lower proliferation risk, and offers a virtually inexhaustible source of clean energy. Homi Bhabha's nuclear power vision placed thorium utilisation at its core.

The SHANTI Bill provides the foundation that makes this roadmap viable. By consolidating laws, empowering the regulator and embedding safeguards, it aligns governance with ambition. It mandates explicit regulatory approvals for activities involving radiation exposure, strengthens preventive safety norms and clarifies liability and operator responsibility. While it enables wider participation, including international collaboration, it preserves sovereign control in all the critical areas. India is pursuing a diversified portfolio for stability, resilience and energy independence, with not only its energy security and sovereignty in sight, but also a credible model for energy transition.

Anil K Antony is national secretary and national spokesperson, BJP.
The views expressed are personal



Anil K Antony

{ MINOR HINTS }

Rahul Sagar



Why making our universities great again won't be easy

The great universities of modern Asia have been produced either by strong States with vision or by philanthropists. India once had both kinds, but now it has little of either

The 2026 Times Higher Education rankings make for grim reading. Not one Indian university features in the world's top 200 universities. By contrast, Japan has five, South Korea has six, and China has 13. And the gap is widening. China now has five universities in the top 40 worldwide (this rises to seven if we include Hong Kong) and its national champions, Tsinghua and Peking, are on the verge of breaking into the world's top 10.

We are not without hope. The National Education Policy signals that the government wants to do better. The continued development of IITs and IIMs, which have begun setting up international campuses, bodes well. More promising is the rise of well-run private universities, symbolised above all by Ashoka University. Even so, to know if Indian universities can "catch up" with the rest of Asia, we need to understand why they fell behind in the first place.

We need to start with the fact that modern education arrived in India sooner than elsewhere in Asia. When the Japanese launched Keio University in 1858, Hindoo College, Elphinstone College, and Presidency College were already thriving. By the time the Chinese set up Peking University in 1898, British India had five public universities, and the Native States had established their Maharaja's Colleges. These institutions housed great minds, from JC Bose, PC Ray, and Ashutosh Mukherjee in Bengal and KT Telang, MG Ranade, and RG Bhandarkar in Bombay, to Sundaram Pillai and BN Seal in Mysore, Aurobindo Ghosh and TK Gajjar in

Baroda, and Aghorenath Chattopadhyay in Hyderabad (and this is only to skim the surface). Clearly, we do not have to hark back to Takshashila and Nalanda to think of a time when Indian universities led the pack in Asia.

How was this lead squandered? The hard truth is that once the British and the Maharajas departed, universities began to be treated not as ends in themselves but as means to address grievances. To advance socialism, "reactionary" ideals had to be chased out; to satisfy regional pride, locals had to be advantaged; to redress inequality, fees had to be kept low; to overcome caste, reservations were introduced; and to regulate "quality", bureaucratic interference was normalised. The question was never what politicians and bureaucrats could do for the university but what the university could do for them. In short order, the university became an extension of party and State, as seen in the keenness with which middle-aged candidates partake in "student elections" and the ease with which bureaucrats maintain "ex officio" roles.

It is not all gloom. There remain talents scattered across our public universities. A few institutions, particularly the IITs and IIMs, have remained autonomous and grown in stature. But, in the international race, it is not enough to walk briskly when one's competitors are running full tilt. To wit, when the Times Higher Education rankings launched in 2004, the IITs were 20 places above Tsinghua. Two decades later, they are more than a hundred places behind it.

The realisation that public universities are not likely to regain their former glory any time soon has prompted some admirable private initiatives. Unfortunately, these endeavours face an uphill battle for three reasons. First, because they are latecomers, these universities are invariably located outside metropolitan centres. This creates an immense geographic disadvantage. When travelling to a university involves long, back-breaking commutes, opportunities for international collaboration and fortuitous connections dim rapidly. Recruitment becomes



A few institutions, particularly the IITs and IIMs, have remained autonomous and grown in stature. But, in the international race, it is not enough to walk briskly.

HT ARCHIVE

harder too, because modern families want dual careers, access to high-quality schooling and health care, and leisure opportunities. This is why more than 90% of the top 200 universities in the world are located in urban hubs and within an hour of a major international airport. Second, because these universities are frequently reliant on single founder-donors, they tend to be under-institutionalised (or, to put it another way, the donor's family and retainers tend to be over-involved). The curse of the "family business", which has stifled corporate India, may undo much in the higher education sector too. Third, there is the "cost of doing business" in India. To rise in world rankings, these universities will need to attract global talent. To do so, they not only have to persuade "stars" to quit esteemed universities abroad, but they also have to convince them to put up with the inconveniences of daily life in India, where "contacts" cannot save you from constant pollution, endless gridlock, sexual harassment, and language chauvinism.

These challenges are not insurmountable. But there is worse in the offing, because private institutions are not immune from the *sarkari* mentality that has humbled our public universities. The essential problem is that our political class cares not one whit for the autonomy of the private or civil sphere. We see this dynamic at play in the growing calls for reservations in private corporations. Against such populism, what defence do entrepreneurs have? The prospect of organised mobs, FIRs, and endless court appearances — our cynical politicians

know that these will bring their opponents to heel. Thus, the more successful this new crop of private universities becomes, the more likely it is that the very same influences that corroded public universities will work their way in. They will be pressured to give way when it comes to admissions, quotas, grades, and unions — or else.

This vulnerability is only deepened by the duplicity of our intellectual class, which smugly critiques these fledgling universities as "elitist" and "neoliberal" (even though they would move heaven and earth to send their own children to a Yale or an Amherst). Worse still, they send these universities to an early demise by urging them to become more "radical", as if the purpose of a university is to advance political revolution rather than human knowledge. Ask Peking and Tsinghua where the former path leads. They learnt the hard way in 1968 and 1989, which is why they now focus on generating patents rather than protests.

Here then is the dilemma India faces as it tries to rebuild its university sector. The great universities of modern Asia have been produced in one of two ways: Either by strong States with vision and taste or by selfless philanthropists backed by the good sense of their fellow citizens. India once had both, now it has little of either.

Rahul Sagar is Global Network associate professor at NYU Abu Dhabi. His recent books include *The Progressive Maharaja* and *To Raise A Fallen People*. The views expressed are personal

What the future could look like, driven by technology

Step back and look at the past five years and it becomes clear that humanity has advanced faster than it did over 50 years in earlier eras. Technologies that once belonged to science fiction slipped quietly into everyday life. Behaviours that once seemed radical became routine. Systems that used to take decades to change were rewritten almost overnight.

Technology has crossed a fundamental Rubicon. It is no longer something we consciously "use". It is embedded in nearly everything we do, at work, at play, even while we exercise. Like electricity a century ago, it now powers life and quietly reshapes how we live.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the clearest example. A decade ago, AI was something venture capitalists dismissed. Five years ago, it was still treated as futuristic. Today, it is everywhere. You no longer turn AI "on", it simply exists in the background, amplifying human capability and human error at the same time. That is the nature of exponential change: We are like frogs in the water while the temperature is rising.

While AI captured most of the attention, biology crossed its own threshold. For most of human history, medicine was descriptive and slow. We observed symptoms, tried treatments, and waited. That era is ending. Protein folding, once a generational bottleneck, became computational. Gene editing moved from theory to lifesaving reality, with CRISPR therapies curing diseases once thought incurable. Living sys-

tems are beginning to resemble programmable code — editable, testable, improvable.

At the same time, humanity lifted its gaze back to the stars. Reusable rockets now land themselves, and spacecraft are being designed to carry humans to Mars. Launches that once stopped the world now pass almost unnoticed. Above us, thousands of satellites are stitching the planet together with Internet access, reaching even the most remote villages, and will soon blanket Mars.

Covid-19 was an accelerator. The pandemic compressed a decade of adoption of remote work, telemedicine, and online education into a single year. Video calls became as common as phone calls. "Working from anywhere" became the norm worldwide, and talent became global. Beneath these visible shifts, a quieter hardware revolution unfolded. Sensors, many of them already in our smartphones, became cheap, small, and extraordinarily capable.

WHEN SYSTEMS ARE BUILT FOR HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF PEOPLE, EFFICIENCY BECOMES MANDATORY, INCLUSION CRITICAL, AND COST DISCIPLINE THE ENGINE OF INNOVATION

ble. Advances in optics, spectroscopy, and imaging made it possible to continuously measure our bodies, our environment, and our infrastructure. With cameras everywhere, human existence became data.

India's recent achievements — a lunar landing, a digital payments revolution, and a startup boom — are often treated as isolated successes. Taken together, they tell a more powerful story. India has shown that disruptive technologies do not require western labs or western cost structures, and that population scale, combined with data, can be a decisive advantage. When systems are built for hundreds of millions of people, efficiency becomes mandatory, inclusion critical, and cost discipline the engine of innovation.

This matters to humanity because the next five years will strain every society's ability to adapt. As AI embeds itself into every system that gathers and interprets data, it will fade into the background, much like electricity. The world will depend on it quietly and notice it only when it fails.

Health care will change first. Medicine today is episodic: You feel sick, see a doctor, get tests, and wait. That model made sense when diagnostics were expensive and expertise scarce. Soon, AI systems will handle first-line triage and treatment recommendations, supporting clinicians and directly helping people where doctors are unavailable. This is the only scalable way to deliver health care to billions.

India already manufactures much of the world's medicines and runs large parts of the global digital backbone. It is uniquely positioned to export a new model of health care, one that blends modern diagnostics with traditional systems like Ayurveda and shifts care from reactive treatment to prevention, accessi-

bility, and balance.

Because I understand exponential change and the country's unique advantages, I am helping build this future through my work at Vionix Biosciences in India. We are developing diagnostic technologies designed for scale, leveraging India's talent, data, and cost discipline. Our goal is to provide the poorest person in a village more comprehensive medical diagnostics than a wealthy patient in the West receives today, at less than the cost of a meal, supported by AI systems that deliver high-quality guidance at scale.

Much more is coming over the rest of this decade. Robots are learning to do the work of humans, first in factories, warehouses, construction sites, and roadwork, and eventually in homes. They will take on routine domestic tasks and assist the elderly, people with disabilities, and patients in hospitals. What begins as automation will become everyday support.

Brain-computer interfaces and bionic limbs are still in their infancy, but will mature into practical tools that restore function and redefine disability. Even energy, civilisation's oldest constraint, is advancing exponentially. The costs of clean power and storage are dropping rapidly while capabilities continue to improve, pushing us toward an era of abundant, affordable energy with consequences as incredible as electrification itself.

We are heading into a future that is both amazing and scary because these technologies can be used for good or for evil. We face a real choice between building the utopian future of *Star Trek* or the darkness of *Mad Max*. The choice before us is to shape these technologies not just to create wealth for a few, but to solve the problems of the many.

Vivek Wadhwa is CEO, Vionix Biosciences. The views expressed are personal



Vivek Wadhwa

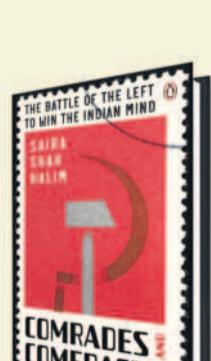
{ EDITOR'S PICK }

HT's editors offer a book recommendation every Saturday, which provides history, context, and helps understand recent news events

ALL THAT IS LEFT

This week marked the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of India (CPI). However, the party and the Left, in general, have seen not just their electoral presence diminished, but also their role in political and ideological discourse shrink in recent years.

Against this backdrop, Saira Shah Halim's *Comrades and Comebacks* forms an important read, not because she is a member of the CPM herself and has experience of the rough and tumble of electoral politics. The book looks at the pre-Independence credentials of the Indian Left (in various manifestations, at home and abroad) — as the "red thread" that was a part of movements that contributed to the freedom struggle. The book foregrounds the stories of lesser-known Left activists and the struggles they led and suggests that new front for the Left in India must focus on equity and inclusion to regain ideological appeal, and thereon build political heft.



Comrades and Comebacks
Saira Shah Halim
2025

The Editorial Page

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2025

• WORDLY WISE
Bad laws are the worst sort of tyranny.
— Edmund Burke

The Indian EXPRESS

~ FOUNDED BY ~

RAM NATH GOENKA

IN 1932

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Tepid foreign investor interest is worrying

THE YEAR 2025 has seen foreign portfolio investors (FPI) pull out a record \$18 billion (Rs 1.58,000 crore) plus from Indian markets through net sales of equity. This, together with declining foreign direct investment, notably since 2023-24, should be cause for concern. If GDP growth in India is averaging 8 per cent annually, why isn't that being reflected in foreign capital inflows? An economy growing at these rates should be attracting commensurate interest from overseas investors wanting to partake in the growth story. If the large IPOs by the South Korean companies Hyundai Motors and LG Electronics — or the Chinese home appliances major, Haier, recently offloading a 49 per cent stake in its wholly owned Indian arm — are any indication, foreign investors seem more inclined to raise money from, rather than infuse fresh capital into, India.

This lack of enthusiasm is quite in contrast to the bullishness of domestic investors, at least when it comes to collections by mutual funds under systematic investment plans. These totalled Rs 3,03,978 crore during January-November, more than twice the net equity sales of Rs 1,43,675 crore by FPIs for the same period. What is holding back foreign investors? Is it something about the Indian economy, or even the official growth numbers? One reason may be relatively high global interest rates. When 10-year bond yields are at 4.1-4.2 per cent in the US and 2-2.1 per cent in Japan, it draws that much capital away from emerging markets. But FPIs have been net sellers only in Indian equities. In debt and other non-equity instruments, they have actually been net buyers to the tune of \$7.2 billion so far this calendar year. Thus, they appear comfortable investing in safe government bonds, as against riskier equity assets, which entails taking a more bullish view of the Indian economy's growth prospects.

The lukewarm foreign investor interest in India may also have to do with its not being part of the artificial intelligence euphoria, which has fuelled equity markets in the US as well as China, Taiwan and Korea. But limited AI exposure shouldn't be a liability in itself when India can boast of advantages in other sectors such as renewables, digital platforms, IT and financial services. At the end of the day, India needs foreign capital not only to fund its current account balance of payments deficits, but also for investment leading to job generation, knowledge diffusion and technology. All the more reason for the government to address the concerns of investors, both foreign and domestic, and ask why they aren't investing.

Unnao survivor's battle for justice goes on

I CAN'T GO back to where I started; this fight can't end like this." These words, uttered by the survivor of the 2017 Unnao rape, following the suspension of former BJP MLA Kuldeep Sengar's life sentence in the case by the Delhi High Court — five years after he was found guilty and convicted by a court in Delhi — carry a grim resonance. They're a reminder of how, in a society with deeply entrenched hierarchies, even conviction can become just a temporary pause for the powerful, especially in cases of sexual assault.

This was a case defined by the impunity with which the politically connected accused, who had long held sway in Unnao district, acted. Right from the start, the system was weaponised against the survivor. After the rape of the young woman, who was a minor at the time, in 2017, there was an attempt to erase the crime: The assault was registered as a case of kidnapping. Sengar's name was omitted from the FIR. For the survivor, getting the police to register a case against the influential local leader was merely the first obstacle. Right until Sengar's conviction in December 2019, her life, as well as that of her family, remained shadowed by threats: In 2018, her father was assaulted by thugs for refusing to withdraw the case. He was then arrested on a fabricated charge, following which he died in custody.

This is the battle that survivors of sexual assault have to fight, particularly when the perpetrators are shielded by power. The police refuse to record the truth, political goons act with impunity and the system grinds on, painfully slow and halting. Sengar may not be freed immediately — he is also serving a 10-year sentence for the custodial death of the survivor's father. But the saga of the Unnao survivor paints a stark picture of how rocky the road to justice can be.

My rights, in my language

WHEN PRESIDENT Droupadi Murmu released the Constitution of India in the Santhali language, written in Ol Chiki script, it marked a much-awaited moment of inclusion. It carried echoes of a mid-20th-century debate in socio-cultural theory, and its unconscious resolution in a diverse country. The debate was on whether language precedes thought. While Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky emphasised the relevance of language in cognitive development, Swiss scholar Jean Piaget framed it differently. Far away from this debate, culturally and geographically, the best political minds of India, in Constitution Hall, were discussing the trajectory of a new democracy in which everyday politics and culture is shaped by language hierarchy. One of the few Adivasi members of the Constituent Assembly, Jaipal Singh Munda, stood up and spoke in Mundari, and demanded recognition for tribal languages and identities.

The Constitution in Santhali offers the Santhali people easier access to a document that enshrines the rights for which leaders like Munda fought. With a population of over 7 million, the Santhals are the third-largest tribe in the country. Yet, it was only in 2003 that the Santhali language was included in Schedule VIII. Notably, it was on Murmu's insistence — as a minister in Odisha, she requested the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, to give official status to Santhali — that the language got its long-due recognition.

On the centenary of the Ol Chiki script, invented in 1925 by Raghunath Murmu, this event is not merely symbolic. It underlines the promise of a more inclusive India where every community will be able to read, defend and celebrate their enshrined rights in their own languages. A person from the Ho community would read the Preamble aloud in the Varang Kshiti script, a Mundari woman would find the promises of gender equality written in Nag Mundari, an Oraon scholar would defend her doctoral thesis in the Kurukh language.

Uddhav & Rajburi hatchet but can they refresh Brand Thackeray for future?

THE POLITICAL landscape in India today is broadly divided into two sections. In the first section are those parties that, at some point, were associated with the BJP and were later stung and suffered at its hands. The others are those trying to avoid being swallowed up and swamped by the BJP. The Thackeray cousins are attempting to migrate from the former to the latter.

Estranged till recently, Uddhav Thackeray, head of a truncated Shiv Sena, and his cousin Raj, whose perceived importance has often outstripped his actual political strength, have decided to join hands for the forthcoming municipal corporation elections, including in the coveted Mumbai region. Beaten by the BJP, the two wish to turn the tables on the saffron samrat whose blessing both were jostling for not so long ago. With the announcement of the alliance, the Shiv Sena (UBT) and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) have buried two decades of animosity.

Raj, once considered heir apparent to his charismatic uncle Bal Thackeray, set up his own outfit, the MNS, when the Shiv Sena patriarch chose his son Uddhav to lead the party. In March 2026, the MNS will enter its 21st year. Having survived two decades, during which Raj's political pendulum swung from being a staunch supporter of the BJP to becoming one of its harshest critics, the MNS has witnessed a massive erosion of its support base. On the other hand, the Shiv Sena, led by Uddhav Thackeray, was in a state of happy coexistence with the BJP for three-and-a-half dec-

ades before it decided to embrace the Sharad Pawar-led Nationalist Congress Party and Congress to form the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) that robbed Devendra Fadnavis of a second stint as Chief Minister in the 2019 assembly elections.

The BJP, as part of its larger game plan, first outflanked the Shiv Sena on the Hindutva agenda and later robbed the latter of its "Marathi" plank. Way back in December 1987, long before the BJP's Lal Krishna Advani undertook the nationwide *rath yatra* for the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, it was Bal Thackeray who made Hindutva an election issue in a by-election in a Mumbai suburb. Bal Thackeray, while campaigning for Ramesh Prabhu, sought votes on communal lines, for which he was later disfranchised for six years by the courts and the Election Commission.

A little before this, the late Pramod Mahajan had successfully forged an alliance with the Thackeray-led Sena to oust Congress from the BMC. Later, Advani's *yatra* and the subsequent Ayodhya agitation only strengthened the bond between the two. All was well when it was going well. However, post 2019, Uddhav's escapades with Congress-NCP angered the BJP, which taught him a lesson by engineering defections in the Shiv Sena and taking away Uddhav's right-hand man and the party's most resourceful person, Eknath Shinde. With Bal Thackeray no more, Shinde's defection was a double blow to Uddhav. Along with the chief ministership, he was to

realise that an extended alliance with the BJP had taken away the Shiv Sena's "Marathi" plank. When it was with the BJP, the Uddhav-led Shiv Sena enjoyed power and quietly sidestepped, if not buried, its Marathi agenda. The BJP's shock treatment compelled it to go back to its roots.

On the other hand, the BJP hobnobbed with the MNS but stopped short of a formal alliance. While the BJP initially saw in the MNS an alternative to the Shiv Sena, Raj Thackeray's anti-migrant (read: Anti-Hindi) stance prevented it from bringing him into the fold. Once it successfully split the Shiv Sena, the BJP no longer needed either of the Thackeray brothers.

This explains why the Thackeray brothers were compelled to bury their two-decades-old hatchet and join hands to challenge the BJP's hegemony. Though much has changed in the last three decades — most significantly, Mumbai's demography — there certainly is a section, though weak and small as of now, that supports the Thackeray cousins. And this is not the only reason they garner sympathy.

The BJP is seen as making various states its "vassals" and revealing an apparently anti-federal facet to its politics. This is the reason the BJP had to make a hasty retreat and stay the state government's decision to introduce Hindi at the pre-primary level in schools. The first person to challenge the Fadnavis government on the issue was Raj Thackeray, who received active support from Uddhav. The state's ill-timed deci-



GIRISH KUBER

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Delhi should cooperate with Dhaka to trace Hadi's killers, and should [not meddle] in Bangladesh's internal affairs.
— Dawn, Pakistan



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SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2025

The Ideas Page

India moves towards unlocking nuclear energy. The hard work begins now



AKSHAY JAITLEY

THE SUSTAINABLE Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act marks the most significant reform of India's nuclear sector since the Atomic Energy Act of 1962. This is bold, substantive legislation, opening up a sector that holds great promise for India's climate commitments, energy security, and the technological innovations that a liberalised, private-sector-led nuclear power sector could bring. The Act deserves praise for ending six decades of state monopoly, creating a credible, licence-based pathway for private investment, and giving the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, which will act as the sector regulator, an independent statutory foundation.

For India to realise the full potential of this reform, which will require the confidence of overseas suppliers and the interests of long-term investors who seek a low-risk, predictable business environment, some important work remains.

The most consequential change is the restructuring of civil nuclear liability. The Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010, despite its well-intentioned origins in the Bhopal tragedy, had become a threshold obstacle for foreign suppliers. Section 17(b), which permitted operators to seek recourse against suppliers for defective equipment or substandard services, diverged fundamentally from international norms under the Convention on Supplementary Compensation. Neither the CLND Rules nor the government's FAQs, which lacked statutory force, reassured the American, French and Japanese OEMs whose participation India sought.

The SHANTI Act addresses this. Operator recourse against suppliers now exists only where expressly provided in contract, or where the nuclear incident resulted from intentional acts to cause damage. This aligns India with the international liability architecture and removes the problem that has long troubled potential projects at Kovvada and Jaitapur.

One gap remains: The Act does not define "supplier". Earlier proposals for a CLND amendment had recommended a



ILLUSTRATION: C.R. SASIKUMAR

statutory definition, distinguishing between those who manufacture and supply systems or components on functional specifications, those who provide design specifications to vendors, and those who provide quality assurance or design services. Such clarity would complete the liability picture and eliminate residual uncertainty about who bears what responsibility through the nuclear supply chain.

Private investors committing capital to long-gestation, capital-intensive and sensitive (from a safety and security perspective) nuclear projects will require high levels of predictability. The Act leaves significant details to rules and regulations, and how these are framed will be crucial to determine whether the reform achieves its objectives. Three areas will benefit from closer attention.

The scope of key terms remains unclear. "Sensitive" activities (which cannot be patented by private parties), matters with "national security implications" (which may be carved out from AERB jurisdiction), and those of a "strategic nature" (which may trigger the creation of separate regulatory bodies).

Without at least indicative definitions or procedures for advance determination, start-ups developing technology, especially small modular reactors (SMRs), will not know whether their innovation efforts will ultimately become the property of the central government. This will choke investment in R&D.

Second, Section 25 permits the constitution of additional

The rationale for central government control lies in nuclear power's high cost. This is why administered pricing is not the way to go. State discoms, in precarious financial condition, should not be burdened with mandated procurement of high-cost power

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provides a well-understood framework for tariff determination, open access, captive power, power exchanges, and bilateral contracts, one that has enabled India's renewable energy explosion. Nuclear power should benefit from this architecture, rather than be excluded from it.

The rationale for central government control possibly lies in nuclear power's high cost. But this is precisely why administered pricing is not the way to go. Nuclear power is expensive and state discoms, already in precarious financial condition, should not be burdened with mandated procurement of high-cost power.

What will contribute to the scaling and success of India's nuclear programme is matching the right producers with the right buyers and promoting captive nuclear power generation. Power-hungry data centres and other industries seeking reliable, clean, baseload supply are natural customers for SMRs. Industrial clusters, SEZs and commercial consumers, including GCCs, are more likely to pay a premium for round-the-clock, non-fossil generation and such demand could sustain larger plants. One of the proposed models for offshore wind, where generators find their own commercial and industrial customers rather than relying on discom offtake, provides a way forward.

These are transactions between willing private parties and there is no policy rationale for central government price intervention here. Long-term stability will come from commercial relationships between producers and consumers who value what nuclear power offers, not from a top-down system of fixed tariffs that insulates generators from the market.

Ideally, this would require legislative amendment to Section 37. Alternatively, a notification could exempt private-to-private transactions from administered pricing. If felt necessary, central government tariff-setting powers could be retained for transactions involving PSUs (including discoms), leaving purely private arrangements to mutual agreement, with grid access on non-discriminatory terms.

India has taken a decisive step toward unlocking nuclear energy's potential for its development goals. A robust legislative framework is in place. The next phase, involving rulemaking, regulatory design, and tariff policy, will be crucial to its success.

The writer is a founding partner of Trilegal

For Opposition today, lessons from Atal Bihari Vajpayee



RAM RAJYA

BY RAM MADHAV

DECMBER 25 marked the end of the centenary year of one of India's greatest sons, a leader whom many described as an "ajatshatru" — one without enemies. Atal Bihari Vajpayee was a gifted orator and poet, a leader for whom the nation came first above everything else, including his own party. He was, above all, a sterling human being. Not all leaders are remembered after 100 years. But some, like Vajpayee, are unforgettable because the "Vajpayee era spanned generations", as Arun Jaitley once commented, and his aura will span decades, probably centuries.

Vajpayee had many firsts to his credit. From an ideological standpoint, he was India's first genuine non-Congress prime minister. He was also the first leader to show that coalitions work. Earlier, most coalitions were seen as unstable political compulsions. Vajpayee would say that coalitions should not be seen as a political compulsion, but they should be taken as "the aspiration of the people". He was the first PM to run a coalition government, comprising more than 20 parties for a full five-year term. The term "coalition dharma" was a product of his politics.

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi wrote in an obituary, Vajpayee was "ahead of his times". "Character of power is the same always," Vajpayee once said, adding that "we should try to transform that character through personal example". He tried to set such an example — initially as the leader of the Opposition for several years and later as the leader of the House. The speech he delivered while demitting office, after the 13-day government he formed in 1996 failed to muster numbers, was one of his best. "Sarkaren aayengi aur jaayengi, partiyan banletangi aur bigadengi, magar ye desh rehna chahiye, desh ka loktantra amar rehna chahiye" (Governments will be formed and dissolved, parties come and go, but this nation should remain and its democracy should be eternal). This message to

parties to change their character didn't register with them. He lost power again in 1999 when a coalition partner withdrew support, and he failed to secure the vote of confidence in Parliament by just one vote. What if the character of power doesn't change? "Just make sure you don't lose your laughter," he once said. He had the last laugh when he led a much stronger coalition to office in the elections that followed — it completed a full term in 2004.

Although Vajpayee couldn't completely change the character of

power politics, he did influence the character of his own party. The BJP functioned as a constructive Opposition to the scam-ridden UPA government. Sushma Swaraj's final address as the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament in 2014 was a glowing testimony to the democratic spirit Vajpayee had infused in the BJP leadership. She praised leaders on the ruling side, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, Kamal Nath and Sushil Kumar Shinde, for enabling the House's functioning, and concluded in true Vajpayee spirit by emphasising that "there is one strong message at the root of Indian democracy — we are adversaries, not enemies".

After assuming office in 2014, PM Modi upheld the Vajpayee spirit by running a coalition government despite the BJP securing an absolute majority in 2014 and 2019. He extended an olive branch to Congress by granting it the status of the principal opposition party, although it failed to secure the number of seats (10 per cent of the House) required to qualify for that. He has tried to engage with the Opposition in matters of national interest.

Some opposition leaders used to tell Vajpayee that he was the "right man in the wrong party". "What good is this right man for you anyway?" he once asked. He was right. The last few years have shown that the Opposition's politics has no place for the Vajpayee spirit.

In 1928, after getting elected to the German Reichstag as one of the 12 delegates of Adolf Hitler's party, Joseph Goebbels, who would become Hitler's minister for propaganda seven years later, was surprised to find that he and his colleagues had the capacity to paralyse democratic processes. "The big joke of democracy is that it gives its mortal enemies the means to its own destruction," he wrote. Will the Opposition in India remain Goebbelsian, or can they find the "right man" in their party?

The writer, president, India Foundation, is with the BJP

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On the jumbotron, the woman on trial



MANJIRI INDURKAR

BACK IN the '90s, there was a girl in my class who was academically sharp and a little quirky. She chewed through her pens and pencils; her fingers, face, and uniform were often stained with ink and lead. We were friends for a while. Then we went to different colleges and lost touch.

Except we lived in a small town. In small towns, it isn't easy to disappear. You always heard things about people you once knew, filtered through others who knew them now. Somewhere in my second year of college, I heard that she'd had a meltdown, that she'd been put on medication, and institutionalised. In 2006, we didn't have the language for mental health. I was a depressed kid without the vocabulary for it, and so, I think, was she. The rumour mill worked overtime.

To some, she was weird; to others, she was mad. One conversation with a mutual acquaintance remains etched in my memory. It was our final year placement season. Companies were visiting campuses, and she got placed. To me, this was never surprising. She was smart. But in her college, where she was known as the mad, psychotic weirdo, it didn't make sense to people. How could she be hired? She threw a fit, the acquaintance

This impulse to comment on a woman's life is not a new invention. Social media may have accelerated it, but the public sphere has always been a court without rules, where women are tried in real time and sentenced by consensus

told me. Probably offered things. That's why she got the job. She used tactics.

By then, I had heard too many stories. My small-town, partially informed brain had made up its mind. When I ran into her once in Delhi, and she tried to reconnect, I didn't know what to do. So I did nothing. I didn't ask how she was, I didn't ask if she was well. I, instead, gave her the wrong phone number and hoped she would never try to find me on social media.

Her mental health was visibly fragile. Her marriage collapsed. The rumours about her behaviour followed her everywhere. I don't know where she is today. I found myself thinking of her while reading Kristin Cabot's *New York Times* interview, months after a private moment with her boss had been turned into a public spectacle.

The piece details how Cabot was subjected to relentless shaming, humiliation, and even death threats. Memes proliferated. Even corporate advertising found a way to capitalise on her humiliation. Gwyneth Paltrow, an actor, a woman, and Chris Martin's ex-wife, appeared in a "smart and cocky" campaign for Astronomer, Cabot's former employer. All of this came at the cost of a single woman.

Indurkar is the author of It's all in your head, M and Origami Aai

I thought of my former friend because it took me years to understand what was happening. How a woman's difference becomes a story others feel entitled to complete. The details change; the scale expands. But the mechanism remains remarkably consistent. How quickly a woman's life becomes a public text, and how little evidence is required for others to begin reading her with suspicion.

Cabot was already separated from her husband. But that detail is beside the point. Even if she had been "cheating", what moral logic permits strangers to punish her, harass her, threaten her, say she slept her way to the top? The same way my classmate was supposed to have done to get placed.

This impulse to comment on and participate in a woman's life is not a new invention. Social media may have refined and accelerated it, but the public sphere has always been a court without rules, where women are tried in real time and sentenced by consensus. I think of the girl I failed, and of Cabot, and I wonder how often we mistake our right to look, comment, and judge for a moral obligation. For our collective voyeuristic pleasures, women continue to pay the price.

Indurkar is the author of It's all in your head, M and Origami Aai

Not just another sports story



NEERAJ BUNKAR

BISON KAALAMAADAN, directed by Mari Selvaraj, is not merely a sports biopic. It is an exploration of inheritance — of dignity, rage, memory, the crushing weight passed from father to son within a caste-stratified society. Kabaddi moves beyond spectacle to a register of social reality, where bodies carry histories long before they claim medals.

Rooted in soil, breath, and bodily risk, kabaddi becomes a precise cinematic language to address masculinity, exclusion, and structural violence. Selvaraj's achievement lies in allowing politics to surface through lived experience rather than slogans — a balance still rare in mainstream sports cinema.

At the narrative's core are a father and son bound by blood and a shared understanding of how power operates and whom it marginalises. Pasupathy delivers one of recent Tamil cinema's most affecting performances as the father — a flawed, angry, often helpless man who nonetheless carries an unwavering belief in his son, even as society insists on seeing that son only through caste. Dhruv Vikram plays Kittan with controlled intensity. His performance is deeply physical, yet never hollow. The weight is visible in his eyes long before it appears on the kabaddi court. Kittan is constantly in motion — running from humiliation, inherited rage, and a social order determined to keep him in place.

Sport here is not escape; it is confrontation.

One of the film's most devastating sequences is when the father, driven to desperation, pleads with the police so his son can play. There is no swelling music, no emotional orchestration. Just a man begging the state for permission to hope. The scene lingers because it reveals power exactly as it functions in real life: Quietly, bureaucratically, and without apology.

Then, the respite, with Kittan's Arjuna Award win. The father watches, his eyes filling not only with pride but with something heavier — relief, perhaps, or the sense that a generational burden has shifted, if only slightly. In their final meeting, Kittan places the award in his father's hands. Behind them hangs a portrait of B.R. Ambedkar in his barrister's attire. Selvaraj does not underline the symbolism. He trusts the audience, and that trust becomes the film's strength.

What sets *Bison Kaalamaadan* apart is its refusal to detach sport from society. Kabaddi is not a neutral arena. It is embedded in caste, violence, access, and survival. The film understands that the body is political long before it becomes athletic. Moving between past and present, the narrative treats memory not as nostalgia but as intrusion — each tackle echoing an earlier wound.

Inspired by the life of kabaddi player Mathai Ganeshan, the film honours its subject without reducing his journey to a checklist of achievements. *Bison Kaalamaadan* rejects uncomplicated victory. Hope appears fragile and hard-won, glimpsed in a father's tears or a phone call urging a son to play against impossible odds. Selvaraj captures an unsettling truth: In such worlds, love is not merely emotional sustenance, but a survival strategy — and that clarity gives the film its enduring force.

The writer is a researcher specialising in caste and cinema

Look inwards

THIS REFERS to the editorial, 'New year resolutions for the powerful' (IE, December 26).

New Year resolutions for the powerful should begin with indoor voices. Keir Starmer and Emmanuel Macron could first persuade their own publics before rehearsing speeches about leading "Europe" and the "Anglosphere". Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, like a jaded couple at a bad party, will smile stiffly and hope that the other isn't flirting across the room.

Across the Atlantic, Donald Trump might resolve to break fewer global norms, while Elon Musk could rediscover the radical idea of running his companies rather than the internet.

—K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

• GLOBAL

'A poll win for Tarique Rahman is not a forgone conclusion'



VEENA SIKRI

AMID VIOLENCE in Bangladesh, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rahman returned to his country on December 25 after a 17-year exile. The chaos has also seen strong anti-India rhetoric. **Veena Sikri**, former High Commissioner of India to Bangladesh, breaks down what is happening. She spoke to **Yashee**.

What is driving the turmoil in Bangladesh?

To understand what is happening, we have to go back to July-August 2024. The events of that period have been called a "revolution", a "spontaneous student uprising", and so on, but the reality is more complex. It was a planned operation, with regime change as the goal.

In fact, Bangladesh's chief adviser Muhammad Yunus himself said this was a planned operation, in New York last September. Speaking at the Clinton Global Initiative event, he introduced his special assistant Mahfuz Alam as the "brain behind the whole operation". And the hard-right Jamaat-e-Islami, always in league with Pakistan, was a major driving agent behind the operation.

Now, the Jamaat-e-Islami is prevailing over the Yunus administration, and three streams flow from this one fact.

First, they want to destroy not just the Awami League, but every representation of post-1971 order. The second is to clamp down on minorities and Islamise the country in a much more visible way. The third stream is the unravelling of the economy. The Yunus regime has shaken up the economic cooperation with India built up over decades under Sheikh Hasina. So the Bangladesh economy, which had been growing at 6.5-7% a year for 15 years, is seeing a slide. Growth has halved, unemployment is rampant because factories are closing and there is no private investment. Inflation is high.

Jamaat-e-Islami activities are always accompanied by violence and unrest, because that is their method of establishing control. The two prominent strands here have been mobocracy and control of the media. Over the past year, there have been attacks on media houses and personnel. By mobocracy, I mean the surrounding of government offices, officials, judges, till the demands of the mob are met.

Tarique Rahman is expected to win the upcoming polls. What role can he play?

If the elections happen in the current climate, they will be neither free nor fair with Hasina's Awami League banned from contesting. Hasina's critics often talk of her crackdown against Rahman's mother, Khaleda Zia, but she never banned the BNP from elections. Ironically, Hasina's detractors are doing exactly what she has been accused of — enforced disappearances, violence, throwing people in jail without just cause.

Rahman will initially see a huge outpouring of support, in part, because his mother is very ill. But his election win is not a foregone conclusion.

The BNP and the Jamaat have shared power in the past, but the Jamaat has always wanted pole position, and in today's changed circumstances, that desire is much stronger.

I was India's High Commissioner to Bangladesh in 2003-06 when the BNP and the Jamaat ran the government. Even then, there were push and pulls, with the Jamaat seeking to assert itself and the more liberal faction of the BNP maintaining a distance. Those liberal voices are much weaker today. The Jamaat would prefer stitching together an alliance of the smaller Islamist parties and winning what they can together.

The BNP over the past year has faced accusations of extortion at various levels. The Jamaat has very cleverly allowed them to do that and earn bad press.

Then there is the fact that more than half the BNP is strongly pro-Jamaat, ready to align with them. So Tarique Rahman coming back does not change the basic facts materially.

Anti-India rhetoric has been rising in Bangladesh. What should India look out for?

Even in 1971, around 20% of the people were against the Liberation War and against India. Their anti-Indianism has continued. But alongside, there has been strong economic co-operation and people-to-people ties.

India needs to do two things. First is to send out the message that we have goodwill for the people of Bangladesh. New Delhi has already been doing that, by continuing aid and trade where possible and keeping communication channels open. Very recently, we agreed to export one more tranche of 50,000 metric tonnes of rice. And we have to keep talking to all principal actors in the country. Second is to insist on a free, fair and inclusive election, in which all parties, including Awami League, can participate, because only then can the people of Bangladesh truly exercise their choice.

How important is Bangladesh for India?

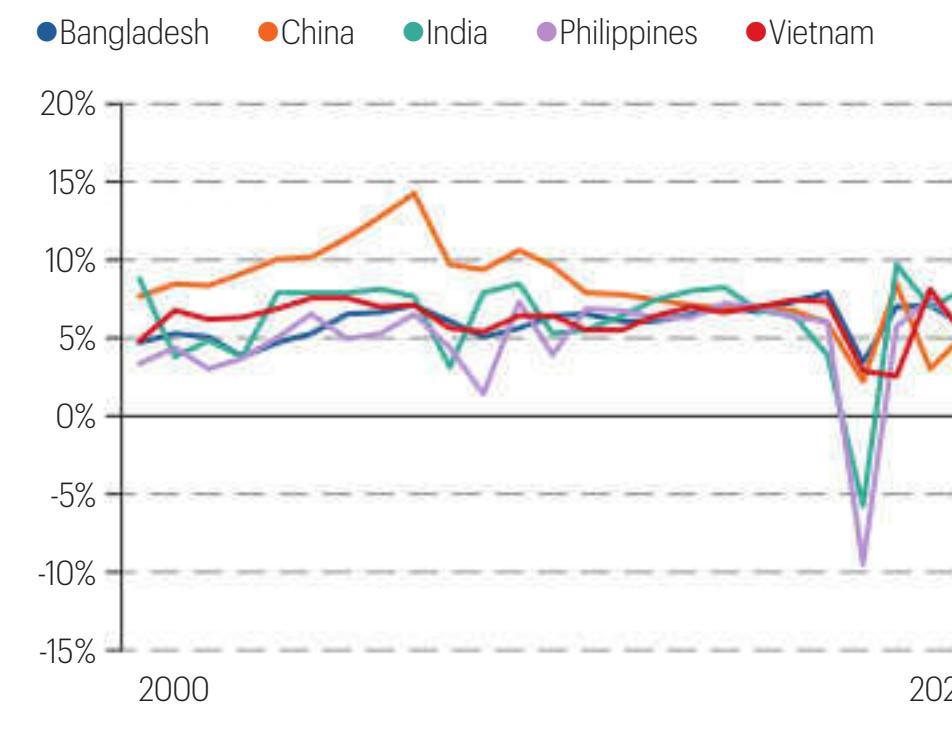
Bangladesh and India respect our shared civilisational heritage. This is vital. But right now, security issues are paramount. The two countries share a over 4,000-km highly porous border. In the past, we have seen terror operatives from Pakistan and insurgents from the Northeast use Bangladesh as a haven. The Hasina government had helped us crack down on that.

Since August 2024, the Pakistan State and army has gone far in establishing the pre-1971 command and control structure with Bangladesh. The Pakistan army seeks to embed itself with the Bangladesh army, even near the India-Bangladesh border.

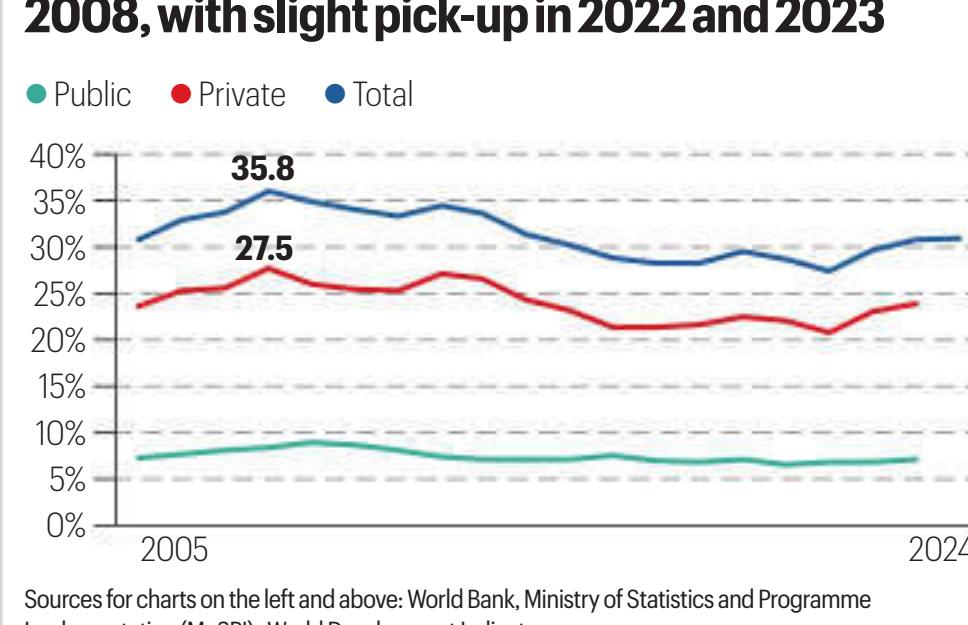
Any restricted elections that are not free, fair and inclusive will worsen the already adverse situation.

FULL INTERVIEW ON
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• India and its peers: Annual GDP growth rate (%)

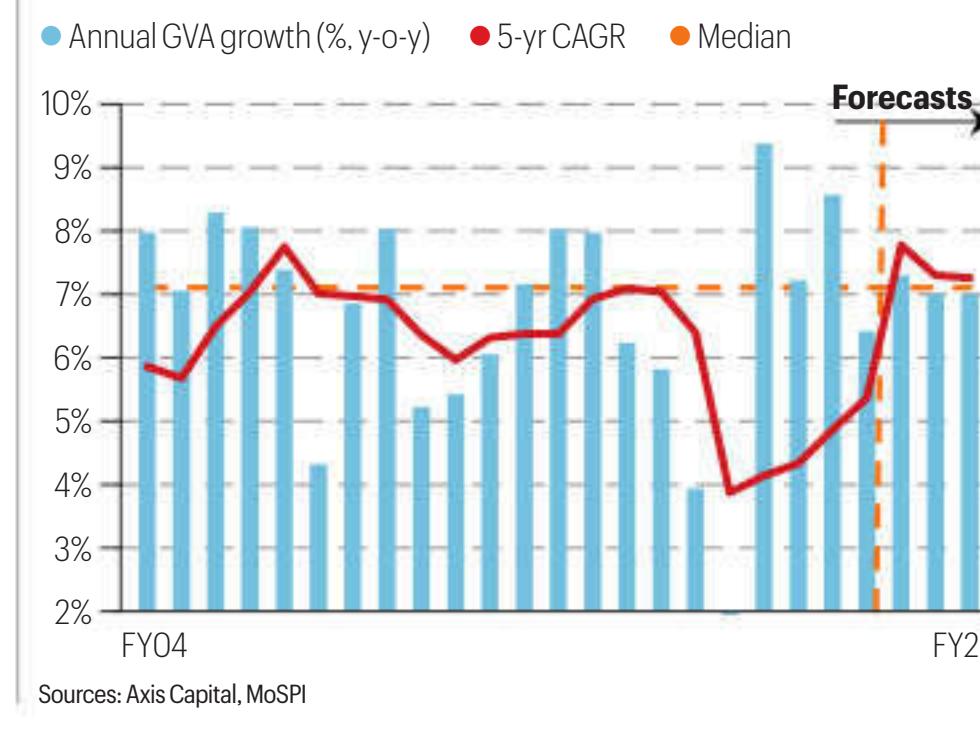


• The investment rate has declined since 2008, with slight pick-up in 2022 and 2023



Sources for charts on the left and above: World Bank, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), World Development Indicators
Note: The break-up of investment (gross fixed capital formation) into public and private components is not yet available for FY23/24.

• Trend growth has been at 6.7% for 25 years



Sources: Axis Capital, MoSPI

India weathers tariff storm for now, but consumption headwinds await

India has ended the year with a fairly strong set of macroeconomic numbers, but external uncertainties such as tariffs and AI will continue into 2026. The government's big challenge is reviving consumption to stoke private investment



ANIL SASI

IT IS often said of the Indian economy that "it lets down both its optimists and pessimists". In 2025, the world's fourth-largest economy did little to deviate from that script.

The year started with the broad assumption in New Delhi's policy circles that India would emerge relatively unscathed from President Donald Trump's tariff onslaught and wrap up an early trade deal with the US. Nearly 12 months on, both assumptions have turned out to be wrong: India now faces the highest effective tariffs into the US, higher than China, and a trade deal is nowhere in sight.

When the Trump administration unleashed the 25% reciprocal tariff, following it up with the additional 25% penalty for India's purchase of Russian crude, the consensus was on the possibility of the Indian export engine stalling. The immigration clampdown on H-1B visa holders meant a two-pronged attack on both goods and services from India.

And yet, as the year draws to a close, India's exports to the US have seen a robust uptick in November after declining through September, thanks to buoyant exports of tariff-exempt goods such as pharmaceuticals and electronics, and some genuine success in market diversification (exporters cracking alternative markets).

Domestically, Indian businesses have managed steady growth in recent quarters and the Indian economy wrapped up 2025 with a fairly strong set of macroeconomic numbers, including tepid inflation and low interest rates.

The other adage that proved true again is that India's policymakers are adept at using a crisis to push through reforms. Amid the US tariffs, the NDA government shrugged off the widely-held belief that it had lost the appetite for major reforms after the diminished 2024 general election verdict.

The second half of the year saw a series of legislative actions and policy steps: Belated GST rate tweaks, movement on the moribund labour laws and nuclear sector amendments that could foster private and foreign investment — at the cost of diluted supplier liability provisions.

A raft of financial services reforms, including 100% foreign ownership of insurance firms and new investment rules for banks and pension funds, could set the stage for a possible foreign capital surge amid concerns around capital outflows and a widened current account deficit (CAD).

There were other significant legislative amendments, including a curtailment of the rural safety net, MGNREGA. Some of the so-called quality control orders (QCOs), a bugbear for smaller companies in sectors from textiles to steel, have finally been revoked.

A late surge in foreign direct investment in 2025, anchored by commitments from tech majors Google, Amazon and Microsoft in cloud and AI infrastructure, helped allay some concerns around capital flows. A managed depreciation of the rupee, now over 90 to the dollar, could act in part as a buffer against the 50% American tariff barrier.

Domestic outlook for 2026

India continues to be the world's fast-



ILLUSTRATION: SURAJIT PATRO

est-growing major economy, with GDP forecast to grow 7.3 per cent in fiscal 2026.

But global tariff shocks will likely continue to influence the economic outlook for the next year. A lot depends on how domestic buffers and policy levers can be deployed to act as counterbalances.

High-frequency indicators suggest that domestic economic activity is holding up in the October-December quarter although signs of weakness are emerging in other indicators.

The impact of the GST rationalisation and festival-related spending supported domestic demand during October-November, but it's a divided house on whether this will continue for long. Rural demand continues to be robust while urban demand is still only recovering.

Investment activity remains mildly robust, with some signs of private investment picking up on the back of expansion in non-food bank credit, and higher capacity utilisation. It remains to be seen if that continues, given that capacity utilisation still remains bound in the 75-77% range.

Agricultural growth continued to be positive, helped by healthy kharif crop production, and better rabi crop sowing.

"Now we can say comfortably the full-year growth will be either 7 per cent or to the north of 7 per cent rather than to the south of 7 per cent... basically we are saying the growth rate will be at least 7 per cent for 2025-26," Chief Economic Adviser V Anantha Nageswaran said on November 29 after the second quarter GDP data was released.

Encouraging signs

Going into 2026, some domestic tailwinds such as healthy agricultural prospects, the continued impact of GST rationalisation, low inflation, and healthy balance sheets of corporations and financial institutions should continue to support economic activity.

Continuing reform initiatives will facil-

itate growth. The opening up of the nuclear sector could see investments returning to the power sector at a pivotal transition period, when renewable investments are slowing.

In terms of services exports, India's global market share has gone from 2% to 4.5% in less than a decade. This attests to the fact that the global population is ageing and there is a need for younger workers. But immigration policies are becoming tougher in the US and in Europe. Given that visas are a problem, work has to be done remotely, which is probably to India's advantage for now. Whether this will sustain is a policy opportunity, and challenge.

Growth headwinds from the mostly intended fiscal and largely unintended monetary tightening that slowed the economy in FY25 have abated, resulting in growth revival in FY26, according to Axis Capital's 2026 Outlook. In FY27E, Axis economists expect monetary easing to drive above-trend growth of 7.5%. While regulatory easing — revoked QCOs, new labour codes — will boost growth over the medium term, their announcement boosts sentiment.

External headwinds

On the external front, things look more uncertain. Though the implementation of the tariffs has been far less potent than was feared, there is a lack of clarity on where all this is heading. Merchandise exports also face challenges. "Given significant economic slack, growth can stay above trend for a while before inflationary pressures warrant policy tightening. The incessant structural pressure of Chinese exports (to India's export markets) and higher global capital costs are challenges, but not enough to derail growth," according to Neelkanth Mishra and team at Axis Capital.

According to Sajid Z Chinoy, Managing Director and Chief India Economist at JP Morgan, the AI boom is masking some of the effects of the tariffs in the US, but the American labour market has weakened materially. And the tariffs will slowly begin to bite as American inflation goes up.

The American trade blockade of China could have another repercussion. There is concern over Chinese exports being diverted away from the US — flooding Asia,

coming into India, parts of Africa, even Latin America. So emerging markets, including India, have a problem.

While there is still no clarity on the US trade deal, the speedy conclusion of ongoing trade and investment negotiations with the EU and other countries could present upside potential, the RBI said, while upgrading real GDP growth for the first quarter of 2026-27 to 6.7% and Q2 to 6.8%.

While India's current account deficit at 1.3% in the second quarter of 2025-26 doesn't seem alarming, amid robust services exports and strong remittances, there are some concerns on financing it if foreign investment outflows continue. Healthy services exports coupled with strong remittance receipts are expected to help manage the CAD in FY26.

For the Indian stock markets, a slowdown in corporate earnings and uncertainties stemming from US tariffs led to persistent outflows of foreign investors. This could continue amid outflows in the equity segment. Flows under external commercial borrowings and non-resident deposit accounts moderated as compared to last year.

Can demand drive growth?

A World Bank report from February 2025 said India would need to grow by 7.8% on an average over the next 22 years to achieve its aspirations of reaching high-income status by 2047. Over the past three decades, trend growth (seen as five-year average) through varying external environments, fiscal stances and under different governments, has been at 6.7%. The five-year CAGR came close to 8% only in the FY03-08 period, when the workforce was expanding rapidly and up-cycles in power generation, real estate and global growth boosted capital formation. Replicating that is a challenge.

There are some positive factors that can help. Corporate balance sheets are strong and leverage is low. And India needs to build on its one sustained success story, where even China has failed: Stoking domestic consumption demand.

That could have a cyclical impact on reviving private investments — the one enduring struggle of the NDA government.

Talk to corporates and, in private, most would attest to the fact that one needs to have more demand visibility to step up investments. Capacity utilisation has to be around 80% for at least three or more quarters for companies to plan greenfield projects.

Tepid private investments have an impact on FDI inflows too. Both high-end urban consumption and government spending, which have held up the economic momentum since the pandemic, are ebbing. Exports are forecast to be sluggish.

Riding the New, Newer, Newest Economy Wave

Circular economy must be market-driven

Technology is shortening product obsolescence cycles and, obviously, the approaching newness of the new-year upgrade of your personal gadget will add to that rhythm. At the same time, as obsolescence accelerates and waste piles up in dump yards, economies must shift from linear models to circular ones. This requires incorporating renewable materials, maintenance and recovery by design into products. Manufacturing companies are transitioning into the circular economy at varying speeds, and many countries have rewards and penalties for elements of production processes, involving resource use, product refresh rates and waste management. These operate outside the scope of competitive intensity that leads to shortened obsolescence cycles. A sustainable solution, however, cannot bypass market economics. This takes economic modelling into the realm of ownership and widens the definition of product use to sharing.

For economic and material efficiency, circular options must compete with traditional ones. Recycled inputs need to be cheaper than virgin resources, reusable products priced below single-use goods, and recovery cheaper than recycling. Such efficiency gains can shift consumer behaviour towards learning and sharing, helping break the link between growth and resource exploitation. Material efficiency follows a hierarchy — smarter design first, longer lifespans next, and recycling last — countering an over-reliance on recycling that can be as energy-hungry as primary production.

Business models are key to the switch, shifting their focus from selling products to selling a combination of product and service. The product side of the mix can be lengthened while the service component ensures business continuity. Product-service as a concept needs to deliver superior customer value to either standalone component for businesses to make the transition. While doing so, businesses must calibrate resource use, avoid shifting the burden onto lifecycle stages, and reduce rebound effects such as increased consumption due to improvement in product accessibility. Business is the enabler for resource decoupling, but needs a supportive economic environment to make it happen.

Fold Them When They're Young

Habits formed when young are liable to last a lifetime. So, UP state-run schools having 10-min newspaper-reading sessions in classrooms is an excellent idea — and we think so not just because we're, well, a newspaper. The idea is to inculcate a reading habit, curb online screen time and pick up the ability of separating wheat from chaff. The newspaper is unique in that it is an object-service, its very physicality acting as a frame to both contain news 'fit to print' and keep out the tsunami of dross and rubbish.

The relationship of youngsters with the world is developed according to the content that lies beyond their regularly lived experiences. This informs and shapes their beliefs and biases arguably more than what is taught to them. Today, an overwhelming part of this content is an unfiltered blizzard. A newspaper's greatest strength lies in its ability to curate content, fact-check, and act as quality control while reflecting and commenting on the world.

This allows young people to develop an innate ability, over time, to distinguish between facts and information, the latter holding no fealty to fact or fiction. This curation — unlike the dopamine-driven chaos of social media — invites reflection, comparison and interpretation. By implementing this initiative, schools in UP — like those in Kerala earlier — will be doing more than promoting literacy. They will be shaping a generation capable of critical judgement, informed debate and responsible engagement. In a country where a robust reading culture is still missing because of a lack of public libraries and access to affordable quality material, reading a newspaper can spark a quiet but transformative revolution. Page-turning can, even if we say this ourselves, be a game changer.



JUST IN JEST

Accountability is so passé and does little to lift morale or business

New Year Resolution No. 10: Buck-Passing

As the leftover Christmas bubbly settles for the New Year Eve party, we bring you HETLoR — Honest ET List of Resolutions — No. 10: the noble vow to unfailingly pass the buck. Why wrestle with accountability when you can outsource it like a bad logo design? Imagine the efficiency: every time a crisis erupts — supply chain collapse, rogue intern Insta scandal, CFO caught hoarding staplers — you simply pivot, point and proclaim, 'Not my department.' Stress evaporates, reputational risk dissolves, and you gain the serene glow of a monk who has never once signed a liability waiver.

Passing the buck as strategy could do well with the sign sitting on your desk: 'The buck does NOT stop here'. This is the invisible hand of capitalism, but with jazz hands. The true visionary CEO doesn't solve problems, she curates scapegoats. Middle managers? Perfect. Consultants? Even better. Critics will mutter about 'responsibility' and 'leadership'. Ignore them. Responsibility is heavy, sweaty, and ruins your posture. Rome blamed the barbarians, Britain blamed the weather, modern corporations blame 'market forces', and everyone's chacha Nehru is to blame for everything else. So, raise your glass this New Year. Toast not to accountability but to the utter freedom of saying, with unswerving confidence: That's above my pay grade.

Objective is not tariff reduction per se, but integration into value chains serving developed markets

2020, We Smelt the Coffee



Aditya Sinha

In the 1960s, several European countries dismantled internal railway tariffs while retaining complex national routing rules. Freight moved more cheaply on paper. Yet, delivery times worsened and costs rose in practice. Cargo was rerouted not along most efficient paths, but along those favoured by the new tariff map. The reform failed not because prices were lowered, but because the structure of incentives redirected flows in inefficient ways.

Jacob Viner has written about such distortions in his analyses of customs unions. Trade agreements, he argued, should not be judged by tariff cuts alone. Their welfare effects depend on whether they generate trade creation (shifting production and sourcing toward more efficient suppliers) or trade diversion (merely redirecting trade through preferential partners regardless of efficiency).

India has brought a paradigm shift in its regional trade agreement (RTA) strategy 2020 onwards. It has become more cautious and strategic about which agreements to sign, with whom, and on what terms.

Until 2020, India's RTA strategy was overwhelmingly oriented towards the developing world. The pattern that emerged: preferential or FTAs with South and Southeast Asia, parts of Latin America, and Africa. Many of these agreements (e.g., Apta, Saptta, Safta) were notified under WTO's 1979 Enabling Clause for developing countries. Unlike Article 24 of General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the 'enabling clause' dispenses with requirement of substantially all trade coverage. The same flexibility exists under Article 5 of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) for developing countries.

This legal latitude allowed India to sign agreements with significant ne-

gative lists, shallow services commitments, weak disciplines on non-tariff measures (NTMs), and limited coverage of investment, government procurement or trade facilitation. Such agreements were WTO-compliant. But WTO compliance is not same as economic effectiveness. Whether an RTA leads to trade creation depends on its depth, coverage and enforceability, not merely on its existence.

India's trade deficit with ASEAN stood at \$5.5 billion when the goods agreement came into force around FY11. By FY13, it had widened to over \$21 billion. Imports from CEPA partners (ASEAN, Japan and South Korea) rose sharply, while India's exports either stagnated or declined after an initial uptick. Studies showed that India cut tariffs far more deeply than required. While India's WTO obligation required tariff elimination on about 2% of tariff lines, effective liberalisation under these agreements was 74.85%.

Market access in return was constrained by NTMs. ASEAN economies imposed high regulatory barriers on precisely those sectors where India had export strength — agriculture and food processing, textiles, chemicals, base metals, machinery, and electrical equipment. Estimates suggested that over 60% of India's exports to ASEAN were affected by NTMs. In Japan, non-tariff coverage ratios are far higher than those faced by Japanese exports to India. Also, regional cumulation provisions allowed firms in ASEAN to stitch together supply chains that met rules of origin, while Indian firms struggled to do the same.

Essentially, India's pre-2020 agreements were largely shallow, asymmetrical and poorly aligned with its export structure. This mattered little when global value chains were stable. It mattered a great deal when they were not. Around 2020, three developments converged:

1. Multilateralism remained stalled, reflecting the reality that RTAs are second-best instruments in a world where first-best solutions are unavailable.

This asymmetry meant that even where India and Vietnam competed in similar product categories, Vietnam en-



Flight paths show the way

India launched Aatmanirbhar Bharat, often caricatured as inward-looking, but better understood as an attempt to rebuild domestic capability and bargaining strength.

2. Global firms began actively pursuing a China +1 strategy.

China +1 was not a neutral reallocation of capital. Firms compared destinations not only on wages and infrastructure, but also on effective market access.

An EAC-PM analysis conducted around this time showed that Vietnam enjoyed significantly greater preferential access to developed markets than India. By 2019-20, Vietnam had

FTAs with Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Chile, and Eurasian Economic Union; was part of CPTPP (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership); and had concluded an FTA with the EU. India, by contrast, had limited access to advanced economies.

This asymmetry meant that even where India and Vietnam competed in similar product categories, Vietnam en-

tered developed markets at lower tariffs and with more predictable regulatory treatment. In such circumstances, improving domestic ease of doing business was necessary, but insufficient.

The response after 2020 was, therefore, a strategic correction, rather than a reversal. India began prioritising RTAs with developed economies where preferential access would materially affect export outcomes. Agreements with Mauritius (2021), and Australia and the UAE (2022), marked the first phase. These were followed by EFTA (2024), and Britain, Oman and New Zealand (2025). Parallel negotiations are underway with the EU, the US, Canada, Israel, GCC, Qatar and Mexico.

What distinguishes this phase is both speed and intent. There is an emphasis on substantial coverage, services, investment, mobility, standards, cooperation and enforceable trade facilitation. The objective is not tariff reduction per se but integration into value chains serving developed markets. Also, India has clearly established some red lines in our new FTAs, like dairy.

As JFK once remarked, nations should not negotiate out of fear, but neither should they fear to negotiate. India's post-2020 trade strategy reflects precisely this balance.

The writer is a public policy professional

Electric Ain't the Only Silver Bullet



Sreeraman Thiagarajan

India's transition to cleaner mobility is both necessary and inevitable. But the growing push to treat EVs as the only deserving recipient of policy incentives, and to frame alternatives such as flex-fuel vehicles (FFVs), hybrids or biofuels as distractions, reflects a narrowing of vision at precisely the moment when India needs strategic breadth.

The recent parliamentary recommendation to prioritise EVs over hybrids rests on a well-intentioned but incomplete premise: EVs automatically equate to cleaner air, energy security and long-term sustainability. The reality, however, is far more complex.

► **EVs relocate emissions** India celebrated producing over 1 billion tonnes of coal in FY25, 11 days ahead of schedule. Yet, in the same breath, we are told that EVs are the cleanest path forward. This contradiction deserves scrutiny. An EV charged on a coal-heavy grid does not erase emissions; it shifts them from the tailpipe to the smokestack. From an air-quality accounting perspective, especially in regions dependent on thermal power, this is at best a partial solution and at worst a com-

forting illusion. Celebrating record coal output while proclaiming EVs as 'zero-emission' is a facepalm moment for policy coherence.

► **Oil-to-mineral dependence** India remains heavily dependent on imported lithium, cobalt, nickel and rare earth elements, many of which are controlled or processed predominantly by China. Battery supply chains are among the most geopolitically concentrated in the world. Substituting oil dependence with mineral dependence, without meaningful domestic control, is not energy independence; it is energy substitution. True self-reliance requires diversification, resilience and optionality, not a single technological bet that exposes India to new strategic vulnerabilities. However, as an agrarian economy, biofuels provide a higher degree of self-reliance.

► **Rise above OEM-specific interests** It is no secret that some domestic manufacturers have deep commercial stakes in EV acceleration. Tata Group has invested heavily in battery manufacturing through Atroras, with global, including Chinese, partnerships. Mahindra has successfully launched a strong EV portfolio and is rightly capitalising on first-mover advantage. These are legitimate business strategies. But national policy cannot be apportioned disproportionately by the commercial positioning of two OEMs. India's mobility future must be designed for 1.4 billion people, multiple income brackets, diverse geographies and

varying use cases, not for optimising balance sheets.

► **Phase out older vehicles** Older vehicles, similar to our elderly citizens, deserve dignity and care, but not policy priority. Most older vehicles are among the biggest contributors to tailpipe pollution. Incentivising their continued operation, whether through selective exemptions or misplaced concern, is counterproductive. The goal should be structured depreciation and phase-out, not indefinite accommodation. However, replacing them exclusively with EVs, while sidelining FFVs or biofuel-compatible vehicles, is unnecessary and inefficient. Cleaner ICE options using ethanol or other biofuels can deliver immediate, scalable emissions reductions at a fraction of the systemic cost.

► **EVs can't solve the pollution crisis** Delhi's air quality challenges are structural: construction dust, crop residue burning, industrial emissions, diesel gensets, congestion and poor urban planning. Incentivising EVs while ignoring these factors is policy myopia. Recent measures such as ban-

ning tandoori ovens highlight how reactive and fragmented responses have become. Replacing one source while ignoring the ecosystem of contributors creates symbolic wins, not breathable air. Mobility solutions must be part of a broader, integrated urban and energy strategy.

► **India must learn, not imitate** Globally, there is no single template for clean mobility. Brazil has built a mature ethanol ecosystem that now displaces substantial share of gasoline demand. The US is scaling sustainable aviation fuels, hydrogen and EVs, signalling a diversified bet on multiple technologies. Europe, despite ambitious electrification targets, is already re-examining elements of its EV-only trajectory, considering grid bottlenecks and consumer affordability pressures.

India, with its large agricultural base and significant bioenergy potential, is well-placed to make advanced biofuels a strategic pillar of its transport transition. Framing the choice as either continued fossil fuel imports or a new dependence on imported lithium, while invoking Aatmanirbhar Bharat, shifts the discourse in a zero-sum narrative instead of a genuinely sovereign, multi-fuel strategy.

India does not need an EV-only future. It needs a smart, diversified and sovereign mobility transition, and biofuels and FFVs are a sure part of the mix.

The writer is CEO, JK India eAgriTech



At least some clarity on policy, please

New Markets Code, Old Risks Remain



O N Ravi

Securities Markets Code 2025, introduced in Lok Sabha on December 18, marks one of the most far-reaching overhauls of India's capital market regulatory architecture in decades. It consolidates three laws — Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act 1956, Securities and Exchange Board of India Act 1992, and Depositories Act 1996 — into a single framework. Unlike most Bills, the code addresses obstacles to market development. GoI and regulators deserve a thumbs up.

The code identifies and segregates regulation of operators in the capital market and in the over-the-counter (OTC) market. This is a significant move, as their market dynamics and risk management parameters are not the same. As a result, regulatory jurisdictions of Sebi and RBI over the capital market and OTC market, respectively, are also delineated.

In the process of harmonising different functions of financial markets, the code has encountered a few hiccups.

These creases can ironed out after due consultations with stakeholders.

However, the focus here is limited to

analysis of provisions relating to insolvency of a trading or clearing member as also of clearing corporations or stock exchanges.

A key rule in the code ensures settlements by clearing corporations are final. Simply put, in the event of an insolvency of a member of a stock exchange or clearing corporation, its liquidator or resolution professional cannot access its settlement and other dues, collaterals and margins owed to the clearing corporation or stock exchange. This is called Settlement Finality Rule. This protection is important in netted settlement systems, where a cross-collateral of buy and sell transactions are netted and the final obligation for each member is arrived at, and the settlement is required to be completed at the end of the day for

each counterparty.

Worldwide, this rule is embedded as part of financial laws to safeguard financial markets from being derailed by vagaries of claims that arise from an insolvency event. The absence of such a provision has the potential to induce systemic risks if the netted settlement obligations are allowed to be reopened by the liquidator or authorities after an insolvency event.

Though there is a provision to that effect in the securities contract regulations, a substantive provision in Clause 68, chapter IX, of the code now operates as a declaratory law overriding the general insolvency law. However, a careful reading of a subsequent provision in the same chapter appears to dilute the effect of this overriding provision by establishing the precedence of clearing corporations over third-party rights and attachment rights through the expression 'Subject to the provisions of the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code 2016'. This could create avoidable vagueness and confusion and, hence, requires clarity.

Chapter IX has also crafted a provision on the insolvency of a stock exchange/clearing corporation. The insolvency of financial market infrastructures (FMIs) like stock exchanges and clearing corporations is required to be dealt with differently, as continuity of critical financial operations undertaken by them needs to be maintained for the smooth functioning of the economy even if they are resolved.

Unlike general corporate bodies, liquidation and resolution of financial market infrastructures require a different approach due to:

► Failure of a financial market infrastructure can induce a financial crisis and a resultant contagion effect on other parts of markets.

► Unlike general insolvency regime, speedier measures are required for failure of FMIs, continuity of critical financial services cannot be delayed because it could adversely affect the entire market.

► Resolution of FMIs should also focus on financial stability and broader public interest, in addition to the interests of their stakeholders.

► Finally, as operations of FMIs are complex and technical, creating interdependencies with various limbs of financial markets, they can be handled only by the respective financial market regulators under whose supervision they operate, or by a resolution corporation. All these issues were effectively addressed in the Financial Resolution and Deposit Insurance (FRDI) Bill 2017, redrafted in 2018, which was subsequently withdrawn.

Hence, the need of the hour is to review the FRDI Bill or its new avatar, addressing the concerns of stakeholders. That alone can provide a robust solution for resolution of FMIs and other financial entities.

The writer is a Mumbai-based corporate lawyer



Intangible Assets

DHARMEN SHAH

In Gita, chapter 16, Krishn enunciates divine qualities of a human being. Fearlessness, purity of heart, discipline, charity, honesty and steadfastness. This is perhaps the earliest and most profound articulation of what we call intangible assets today. Yet, when a financial expert calculates 'net worth', the measure is limited to net tangible assets. The richest are ranked on this formula of material assets, but it ignores a deeper dimension — intangible assets that we have nourished over the years.

Today, intangibles would include emotional equanimity, humility, reliability, empathy, credibility, fairness, fitness, goodwill and compassion. These qualities are nearly impossible to monetise. However, their impact in shaping our happiness and peace is far more than tangible wealth. We are judged by our material net worth, but how we experience life depends on intangibles or invisible strengths.

George S Clason, in 'The Richest Man in Babylon', writes: 'Wealth, like a tree, grows from a tiny seed. The first copper you save is the seed from which your tree of wealth shall grow.' This wisdom applies equally to intangible wealth — it grows slowly through discipline and can be lost quickly if neglected. Tangible wealth can be rebuilt; inner wealth, once damaged, takes far longer to recover.

By being in a good company, learning and meditation, we strengthen these intangible assets. While pursuing financial goals, pause and audit your

End the silence

Call out goons acting in the name of religion

Do gestures and images matter? Yes they do. Do words count? They absolutely do. The Prime Minister attending Christmas morning prayers at a church in Delhi sent out a reassuring message of communal harmony and goodwill. The pictures lent a sense of quiet calm. What has been missing from the highest quarters is an outright condemnation of the attacks on minorities. Goons masquerading as religious activists destroying Christmas decorations and threatening worshippers deserve the attention reserved for the worst of the law-breakers. Instead, there is troubling silence over the brazen acts of vandalism, disruption and lawlessness in the name of religion. It's deeply worrying. What's worse is that such condemnable incidents took place on a day when the nation celebrated the birth anniversary of Bharat Ratna Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

December 25 saw the inauguration of the Rashtra Prerna Sthal, the national memorial complex, in Lucknow, with 65-foot-high bronze statues of Vajpayee, Syama Prasad Mookerjee and Deendayal Upadhyaya. The Prime Minister said it symbolises a vision that has guided India towards self-respect, unity and service. In the national capital, the BJP opened an exhibition on Vajpayee's life and contributions at its headquarters. The Delhi government rolled out subsidised Atal Canteens. The late former Prime Minister may or may not have approved of such adulterated forms of remembrance, but what he certainly would have taken umbrage to is the normalisation of hate-spewing, provocative and irrational behaviour that demonstrates and amplifies majoritarianism.

Vajpayee set high standards in public life, assuring that preserving the inclusive character of India overrode ideological positions. A small group of lumpen elements cannot be allowed to dictate terms and destroy all that India stands for. Not speaking out and strongly rejecting such unruly and perverse conduct is a disservice.

Case against cops

Time for new terms of public engagement

FIVE months after the Punjab and Haryana High Court transferred the probe into the alleged assault on a Colonel and his son in Patiala in March, the Central Bureau of Investigation has submitted a chargesheet against four Punjab Police officials. They have been charged with causing grievous hurt and wrongful restraint. The law will take its own course, but the case throws up probing questions on the policing methods, the often unhinged bravado of those donning the uniform, and a widening public distrust. It also provides an opportunity to re-engage with the citizenry at various levels, and enforce more nuanced ways of conduct and delivery. Recently, a decorated retired General took up cudgels against the threatening and aggressive ways of police escort vehicles. Action followed, but the situation on the ground has hardly changed, and it's not limited to Punjab.

Chandigarh is an outlier where a citizen's immediate engagement with an orderly administrative setup helmed by the police happens the moment one steps out on to the road. It's a collaborative arrangement that expects discipline, provides the infrastructure for it and leaves little room for flouting rules. Sadly, and inexplicably, not even a modicum of this model has been replicated anywhere in the region. Not even when those tasked with this responsibility—the political and bureaucratic top bosses—get a firsthand experience during their stay and work in the UT.

Managing traffic during VIP movement is a perfect test to gauge how trained and empathetic the police force is. The guidelines are meant to cause minimum public inconvenience while ensuring a protective zone. For the commuters, it's a nightmare. For the constable on the spot, it's even worse. Cybercrime, gangster modules, drugs—policing is real tough. That's simply no excuse for not doing it right.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, SUNDAY, DECEMBER 27, 1925

The presidential address

IN two respects, the presidential address of Sarojini Naidu at the 40th session of the Indian National Congress which opened its sittings at Cawnpur (Kanpur) on Saturday will easily challenge comparison with the best of its predecessors, its admirable brevity and the fine, poetic language in which the thoughts and sentiments that find expression in it are clothed. As regards the first, it had for long years become almost traditional for the Congress president to speak at tiresome length when Mahatma Gandhi initiated a healthy departure from the prevailing practice last year and made what was perhaps the shortest speech ever delivered from the presidential chair of the Congress since the convention of writing out the presidential address had been established. Naidu has, in this respect, worthily followed in the wake of the Mahatma. As regards the second, the literary standard of the presidential addresses has always been high, and it is no small thing to be able to say, as one can say without exaggeration, that Naidu is in this respect of the household of the elect. When we turn from the form to the substance of the address, we are bound in fairness to admit that there is nothing very striking, not to say original, in the address. This is not necessarily a defect. Of originality we have during the last several years had far too much and the need of the time is not a fresh essay in novelty, but a political programme which is likely to conform to common sense, to appeal to the heart and the understanding of the average man or woman. Of such a programme Naidu does give an outline in her address.

When the PM went to Church

The Vishwa Hindu Parishad held a 'havan' on Dec 25 in front of St Thomas Church in Hisar



THE GREAT GAME

JYOTI MALHOTRA

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi went to church on Christmas, the imposing circa 1931 Cathedral Church of the Redemption located behind Parliament House and Rashtrapati Bhavan—with its fluted arches and delicate domes that “won the heart of Lord Irwin,” its period organ still intact. This is only the second time he has been to church as PM, the first time two years ago, to the Sacred Heart Cathedral at Gole Market in the heart of Delhi. To hear Rt Rev Paul Swarup entreat the Lord, Jesus Christ, sent in the goose-bumps.

“Father we know that those who you call, you also equip. And we know Lord that you have called him for this important task of leading our great nation. And so, Father, I pray for a double potion of your discernment, your understanding, that he would lead this nation on the path of truth, of justice, of righteousness...” the high priest said.

Let's take a moment to understand what the Bishop may be referring to. The year began with the United Christian Forum releasing a statement saying it had recorded 834 acts of violence and intimidation against Christians in India in 2024, up from 127 incidents in 2014. When the press asked the Bishop whether he would raise this issue with the PM, the Bishop said this was not the right time to do it. Certainly, India's Christians are hoping the PM's presence in church will send the message down the line that the time to stop violence against innocent people is now.

From Delhi, the PM went to Lucknow, to inaugurate 'Prerna



ONCE IN A WHILE: It's only the second time Narendra Modi has been to church as PM. ANI

Sthal,' a park with several statues, among them that of Atal Bihari Vajpayee. On his birthday in 2014, the Modi government had announced that December 25th would henceforth be called “Good Governance Day,” and that Christmas would no longer be a national holiday. With Modi in church, hopefully that means that both are possible. That you can now celebrate both Christmas and Good Governance.

December 25 was also this week celebrated as Tulsi Puja Diwas by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in front of the 160-year-old church in Hisar, in Haryana, and the administration ensured that 300 or so cops were standing watch, just in case. At the VHP 'havan', one man wore a jacket on which was emblazoned the Italian designer's name BALENCIAGA, but maybe that didn't matter because right-wing target practice is aimed at the English who subjugated India, not Italians.

Never mind that irony missed a beat in Hisar. It's fascinating to note that its St Thomas Church is much older than Delhi's Cathedral which the PM visited

on Christmas — built in 1864 in the name of one of the 12 apostles of Jesus Christ who arrived on his dhow to spread the word back in 52 AD in Kerala. Why, then, was faraway Hisar picked to memorialise St Thomas 1,800 years later? It's not clear, except that by 1864, we know the

Certainly, the coming year will be long, hard and newsy, as the fight for the 'idea of India' continues.

Fast forward now to the “what's in a name argument” this week, playing out in the tension between the Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat in Sikhism, and the Centre over the naming of December 26 as

Mutiny has been won by the British Raj, their hold over northern India is far more tight and the tiny Christian community needs a church.

Of course, Hisar has over the centuries already grown in importance as a waystation for all those seeking their fortunes in India. Babur awarded his son, Humayun, the town of Hisar when he defeated Hamid Khan, en route to the decisive battle of Panipat in 1526. With Ibrahim Lodi out of the way, Babur was now the newest King of Hindustan.

This last week of the year is a good time to learn from history. Muslims fought Muslims, while Hindus fought both independently as well as key generals in the armies of men with other religious beliefs. Power flowed from the barrel of the gun and proximity to the ruler, not so much the religious practice you avowed.

Fast forward now to the “what's in a name argument” this week, playing out in the tension between the Akal Takht, the highest temporal seat in Sikhism, and the Centre over the naming of December 26 as

“Veer Bal Diwas” — the two youngest sons of Guru Gobind Singh were bricked alive by the cruel Aurangzeb's cruellest satrap Wazir Khan in Sirhind on this day in 1704.

The Akal Takht believes the day should be called “Sahibzade Shahadat Diwas,” as the martyrdom of the two boys makes them heroes across time — they are not just “bal,” children, or young boys. Sikh MPs have been told to raise the matter with the Centre, and a meeting of the Sikh clergy is being called.

Now the PM first called for the observance of “Veer Bal Diwas” on January 9, 2022, which is the “prakash purb” or birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh — a mere six weeks after the Centre was forced to withdraw Punjab's farm laws on November 21, 2021. This “never say die” pattern continues even today. Weeks after the Panjab University fiasco and the attempt to institute greater control over the Union Territory of Chandigarh — both by the BJP, both of which had to be withdrawn within days — an unfazed party continues to woo Punjabi voters.

The institutionalisation of the PM's “Veer Bal Diwas” is one example; Haryana Chief Minister Nayab Singh Saini's repeated raids into Punjab and speaking on Punjabi issues, while wearing a turban, is another. Clearly, the signalling is in top gear, aimed at the Assembly elections scheduled 14 months from now.

Certainly, the coming year will be long, hard and newsy, as the fight for the “idea of India” continues apace. Certainly, too, the fight is not confined to politics and political parties who strive to enhance influence. In the age of AI, how does the anti-Westernisation argument manifest in your homes — is it relevant at all? More to the point, is anyone listening? Perhaps, that's why Matru Pitru Poojan Divas, which strove to be an indigenous alternative to Valentine's Day, bombed so miserably.

Happy New Year, everyone!

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Christmas is a season not only of rejoicing but of reflection. —Winston Churchill

Sayani's trademark 'bhaiyon aur behno'

KPS KANG

A gentle yet resonant voice once wove itself into the very fabric of a nation's evenings, a sound that became the soundtrack to countless dreams. Today, we remember Ameen Sayani, not merely as an announcer, but as an architect of auditory intimacy, a philosopher of the popular melody whose life was a symphony of connection.

Born in the twilight of colonial India, in a family steeped in the Gandhian struggle for freedom, Sayani's early life was a lesson in communication as service. Assisting his mother with the multilingual journal 'Rahber', he learned the profound art of speaking directly to the common man through any medium. His was a voice that did not speak to listeners, but with them, beginning always with that familial, melodic invocation: "Bhaiyon aur Behno."

His true legacy was crystallised in the weekly pilgrimage of sound known as *Binaca Geetmala*. On the crackling waves from Radio Ceylon, and later through *Vividh Bharti*, he did not simply count down songs; he curated collective emotion. In an era before fragmentation, he built a national balcony from which millions leaned out, together, to listen. He became the trusted friend who introduced you to the music of your own life, his voice a bridge between the silver screen and the silent, starlit courtyards of home.

Beyond this iconic show lay a staggering tapestry of creativity: over 54,000 radio programmes and 19,000 jingles. From the intellectual sparkle of the Bournvita Quiz Contest to the poignant social narratives of *Swanash* on HIV/AIDS, his range was immense. His influence refused to be confined by geography. Through syndicated shows from London to Los Angeles, from Swaziland to the UAE, he carried the warmth of Indian film music and his distinctive narration to diasporas longing for a sonic touch of home.

The honours he received, including the Padma Shri, recognised that in a world rushing towards the visual and the virtual, he safeguarded the sacred space of pure listening. He demonstrated that the human voice, laden with empathy and timing, could be the most powerful medium of all — creating intimacy across impossible distances.

Ameen Sayani's passing in 2024 felt like the closing of a foundational chapter in India's cultural history. Yet, true to his art, what he leaves behind is not silence, but a lasting echo. He taught us that in the simple, sincere address of "brothers and sisters," there exists a profound philosophical truth: that we are all, ultimately, listeners in the same grand, unfolding story, connected by the timeless threads of melody and a voice that forever feels like home.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

No takers for Trump's initiatives

Apropos of '2025: The year of Trumppism': President Trump's policies on trade, tariffs, immigration, artificial intelligence and defence have caused desperation and disappointment among US citizens. His pronouncements regarding the global situation have found no encouragement among world leaders. His soft attitude towards China and Russia have not produced any tangible results either in achieving peace. The National Security Strategy seems unviable and very expensive. Nor does it have any positive effect on international diplomatic and military scenario. It will be interesting to see how Trump shapes the future domination of the US although his MAGA policy has failed to achieve significant prosperity and welfare of Americans.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

Academic autonomy compromised

Refer to 'Universities are hollowing out'; the growing dependence on contractual faculty, chronic vacancies and shrinking funds for research and libraries have severely weakened teaching, mentoring and innovation. When salaries and pensions consume most budgets, universities are left with little capacity to nurture scholarship or long-term academic vision. Financial vulnerability has also made institutions susceptible to political and administrative interference, further diluting academic autonomy. If higher education is truly expected to drive excellence, innovation and global competitiveness, sustained public investment and transparent faculty recruitment must be treated as national priorities.

PARVINDER SINGH, CHANDIGARH

No high standards in education

With reference to 'Universities are hollowing out'; the reality in universities is worse than the writer has pointed out. Young entrants in the teaching profession are being treated like MNREGA workers. While regular appointments have become extinct, new categories have sprung up as part-time teachers who are paid monthly salaries based on the number of lectures. Students are given benefits of compulsory attendance certificates while private universities confer PhD degrees in exchange for lumpsum money. Vice Chancellors are appointed

ed to promote specific ideological and fund collecting instrumentalities of ruling regimes. Gone are the days of high academic standards.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Govt apathy cost us dear

Apropos of 'Mustard's slow exit'; in the earlier days, grain markets saw bumper arrivals of mustard, farmers had to wait for 4-5 days to sell it on open auction. Soon, farmers got disillusioned with low prices and no government support so they switched to paddy cultivation. Now, most mustard oil and cotton ginning mills in Haryana have closed down one after the other in the absence of any government support to save or revive this industry. Now, the situation is that the government has to spend a lot of precious foreign exchange to import edible oil in huge quantities.

RAMESH GUPTA, NARWANA

Aravallis the sacrificial goat

Refer to 'How the Aravallis were shrunk by definition'; the attempt to classify Aravallis as isolated structures instead of a continuous structure is not correct geologically. Once an area is opened for mining, its activities do not remain confined to that particular area alone. Kuchha roads are required to carry heavy machinery to and from the mining site. This causes further devastation of the adjoining areas and once the mining activity starts, it is very difficult to check and regulate. The question is how to meet the ever growing demand of the construction material required for roads and buildings? Certainly the Aravallis cannot be sacrificed to fulfil this need.

ASHOK BAHL, KANGRA

No human warmth in greetings

With reference to 'Yearning for warmth of full sentences'; language is steadily losing its human warmth in an age shaped by artificial intelligence, abbreviations and instant digital communication. By recalling handwritten cards, carefully chosen word, and the patience once associated with expression, the writer effectively contrasts earlier practices with today's compressed and hurried language culture. When courtesy becomes non-verbal and apologies turn into mechanical gestures, communication loses sincerity and moral resonance.

ASHOK SINGH GULERIA, HAMIRPUR

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.

These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

OPED

Salaam alaikum, Lyari



SONALI GUPTA
FOUNDER-DIRECTOR, HIMALAYAN
INSTITUTE OF CULTURAL
& HERITAGE STUDIES

I watched *Dhurandhar* unfashionably late, long after the hashtags had peaked, and walked out with the distinct feeling that I had just attended a classified briefing conducted via Ranveer Singh's eyelashes and Akshaye Khanna's footwork.

Somewhere between Lyari's alleys and the Baloch desert, it stopped feeling like a film and started feeling like a PowerPoint the deep state accidentally sent to PVR instead of South Block.

I come from Mirpur stock in what is now Pakistan occupied Kashmir, with a family archive full of Partition scars, border rumours and "udhar kya ho raha hai" debriefs that began before Colors TV and long before Arnab discovered the volume button. Mirpur roots and an ear trained on fault lines meant *Dhurandhar* was never going to be "just a movie"; it was always going to be an entry in an ongoing survey of how the subcontinent does its collective therapy in Dolby surround.

Lazy "research cinema" is easy to spot: Karachi looks like Goregaon after lunch, Urdu sounds like a wounded translation app and the underworld

follows daily soap physics. *Dhurandhar* is the unnerving opposite — a Karachi and Lyari that feel visited rather than imagined.

Rehman, the Dakai-Baloch-politico mashup, is written with the intimacy of a man who has seen more FIRs than birthday parties, while SP Alam Choudhary is the human embodiment of that locked steel cupboard in North Block labelled "Do Not Open Until Regime Change." Admiration sours into anxiety; the question becomes not "Is this realistic?" but "Who opened their mouth, and how many NDAs fainted?"

Akshaye Khanna's lethal "*Salaam alaikum, Lyari*" has already escaped the film and started an independent life. It is not a greeting but a land acquisition notice with better diction, a don kissing a city on the forehead before slapping it. The real fun begins when Lyari talks back.

Pakistani reporters and YouTubers walked into the same alleys, phones raised, asking what residents made of this Bollywood MRI of their *mohalla*: some laughing that India made a film but "humse pochte toh asti galijaan dikhda dete" and others bristling at a Marvilled SP Aslam.

While Indian liberals accuse Bollywood of manufacturing consent for Delhi, Lyari's residents are using the same film to manufacture dissent in Karachi, asking why Mumbai can spend crores rebuilding their lanes in Bangkok when local studios will not.

On a calmer subcontinent,



IMPACT: Akshaye Khanna's lethal dialogue has already escaped the film starting a life of its own. COURTESY: X

all this would still be "just cinema." But *Dhurandhar* has arrived when Balochistan is on fire-insurgent attacks and militarisation, just as India unveils Operation Sindoar. In that climate, a multiplex epic about Baloch hurt, Pakistan Army brutality, fake currency and a glowing Indian spy looks like narrative air support.

Balochistan burns hotter. Pakistan staggers, India flexes, and a spy thriller arrives on cue speaking fluent dossier.

Rehman's Baloch identity is not a cosmetic flourish. The film circles his people's wounds: resources sucked out, dignity drip fed back in. When he dances in the Baloch heartland, dust and *dhol*, he moves like a man auditioning to be both messiah and mafia boss.

Then Hamza needles him on loyalties. Clan or state, who

"now," inviting the audience to do the emotional math. The only correct answer is: it hurt, but it had to be done.

There is another, quieter rewiring at work: the upgrade of Indian spires from "disposable asset" to multiplex deity. Earlier generations were chosen as much for expendability as for courage; Ravindra Kaushik, the "Black Tiger," reportedly rose to the rank of a Major in Pakistan, passed vital intelligence and then died of tuberculosis in jail, abandoned by the republic he served.

Ranveer Singh's Hamza is the anti-Kaushik. He is not a file number in a basement; he is the state's favorite son, the gravitational centre of the fantasy, suffering beautifully and somehow finding time for salon quality hair. We no longer abandon our best men in foreign cells; we give them opening weekends and trending hashtags. Reality may disagree; the fantasy sells popcorn.

If the censor boards are the villains in this story, piracy is the accidental freedom fighter. Officially, *Dhurandhar* is persona non grata in Pakistan; unofficially, it is the subcontinent's most successful underground film club. Dodgy streaming links ensure that Indians in multiplexes and Pakistanis on cracked screens are consuming the same images, then arguing online with more nuance than the most prime-time panels, turning cinema into a crowdsourced fact checking tool with popcorn in one hand and download links in the other.

The film simply lines up forged 500s, terror pipelines, corrupt "then" and decisive gets your neck; Rehman's answer is painfully familiar: "What has my own ever done for me?" Identity is emotional; patronage is practical, and the film nails the price in one image: children in shrouds, dead from drinking poisoned water while Rehman rides in a state supplied convoy, the same system that gives him a chair refusing to keep poison out of their taps.

Under the gunfire and glamour, *Dhurandhar* offers demonetisation a flattering redemption arc. Its fake currency pipeline, Pakistani press, cross border smugglers, obliging middlemen, mirrors the 2016 bedtime story: Indian notes as national security hazard, recast as wartime surgery.

The film simply lines up forged 500s, terror pipelines, corrupt "then" and decisive

Nothing captures the

absurdity better than Flipperachi's track. The Bahraini hip hop song that powers Rehman's desert strut is an undeniable hit. Picture the irony — Bilawal Bhutto walks into an event with the banned film's anthem that Indian audiences hear as the background score for covert ops in his own backyard.

The announced sequel title, *The Revenge*, hangs like a tipsy policy brief: on the surface, just franchise logic; underneath, a memo that the era of purely defensive India is over and the new script is permanent undercover offence.

There will be no cheque with "psy-op" in the subject line, but a privately funded film can align so perfectly with the state's fantasies that it functions as psychological warfare without an official stamp. Pakistan appears as torturer in chief of Indian men and Baloch dreams, Indian covert power as surgically precise, demonetisation as heroic amputation.

The danger is not that viewers mistake fiction for fact but that they stop caring where one ends and the other begins. "*Salaam alaikum, Lyari*," Hamza's long haired surgeon's gaze, Baloch children at the poisoned tap and the desert dance of allegiance will no longer feel like cinema; they will feel like common sense.

Once common sense has been colonised, no one needs spies or dossiers to win; they just need people in Karachi and Kanpur alike to keep buying tickets.

Nothing captures the

Once common sense has been colonised, no one needs spies or dossiers to win; they just need people in Karachi and Kanpur alike to keep buying tickets.

Will G-Ram-G serve the poor better than MGNREGA



DINESH MALHOTRA
RETired IAS OFFICER

FARMERS dying by suicide, migration from rural to urban areas, jobless growth in the 1990s and stagnation and decline in agricultural productivity were the distress signals which led to enactment of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2005.

The Rajasthan chapter of People's Union for Civil Liberties, India's largest human rights organisation, filed a Public Interest litigation on similar issues in mid-2001. The petition put forward that the right to life, a fundamental right under the Indian Constitution, has been recognised inclusive of the right to live with dignity, including the right to food.

MGNREGA is based on the experiences of many previously designed and implemented rural development employment-oriented schemes and wage employment programmes in the past five years plans.

The draft of the legislation was largely based on the Maharashtra Employment Guarantee Act, 1977,

undoubtedly, one of the most progressive and purposeful legislations to guarantee work and wages to the rural work force, in particular, the poor farmers and landless labourers.

Poverty is a state of deprivation. In absolute terms, it reflects the inability of an individual to satisfy certain basic minimum needs for a sustained, healthy and reasonably productive living. This inability has a social, cultural, political and a physiological dimension. This scheme helped in achieving three SDG goals — poverty eradication, environment protection and woman empowerment.

The government always has machinery; it only needs the will and vision to identify the problem and act accordingly. Does the repealing of MGNREGA to VB-G

RAM-G and joining it wrongly with the Livelihood Mission, give us a better tool to serve the deprived lot? G-RAM-G is not a better scheme as it further imposes cuts on taking up work during 60 days of harvesting period. Are the persons employed in MGNREGA scheme land owners?

Section 4(5) of VB-G RAM G makes the scheme fund allocation-based, making it dependant on Delhi. Section 4(6) states that any rural employment scheme designed, must follow the norms laid by G-Ram-G, otherwise no funds will be sanctioned by the Centre.

Section 5(1) bars universal applicability of the G-RAM-G scheme in the country. The area of operation shall be notified by the Central government. Section 22(2) authors fiscal strangulation of states by introducing 60:40 funding ratio.

VB G-RAM-G kills the spirit and structure of a beautiful piece of legislation commended worldwide. It is an example of strong centralisation of the process masqueraded in the shape of a Bill like all propaganda and fake narratives of the government.

Does it imply labour control disguised as labour employment? All India rural female Labour Force Participation Rate increased from 24.6% in 2017-18 to 47.6% in year 2023-24, thanks to MGNREGA scheme. MGNREGA's death has killed the hope to survive in difficult days.

Any rural employment scheme must follow the new norms, otherwise no funds will be sanctioned by the Centre.

Early release from jails an incentive, not privilege



K P SINGH
FORMER DGP & DG PRISONS, HARYANA

ON directions from the Supreme Court, the Punjab & Haryana High Court has initiated suo motu proceedings to monitor and supervise implementation of the early release guidelines for the convicts, popularly known as Pre-mature Release (PMR) Policies.

PMR is an important correctional toolkit, whereby, good conduct prisoners are freed from jail before they serve full term of the sentence awarded to them by the trial court. Early release of convicts does not amount to overturning of judgment of conviction, it is a prerogative of the government authorities to mitigate punishment in appropriate cases. PMR would depend on many factors including public interest, gravity and nature of the offence, signs of reformation exhibited by the convict and impact of the release on the victims and society in general.

Early release of good conduct prisoners serves two important purposes,

one for the prison administration and another for the convicts. Possibility of release before time singularly motivates prison inmates to exhibit good conduct and lead a disciplined life.

Freedom before full term of sentence also protects the convicts from ill-effects of long incarceration and, inter alia, facilitates their re-integration with the mainstream society. Overall good conduct and probability of becoming a useful citizen are the two main considerations for making an inmate eligible for PMR.

The two powers of the authorities to remit and commute sentence vary in nature and scope and are mutually exclusive; they are exercised by the competent authorities independent of each other. The apex court in *Prem Raj v. Delhi Administration* (2003) has

clarified that 'remission' entails reducing the quantum in the same category of sentence, without changing its type, whereas, 'commutation' implies changing the type of sentence to a lower category of punishment; the two terms are not interchangeable.

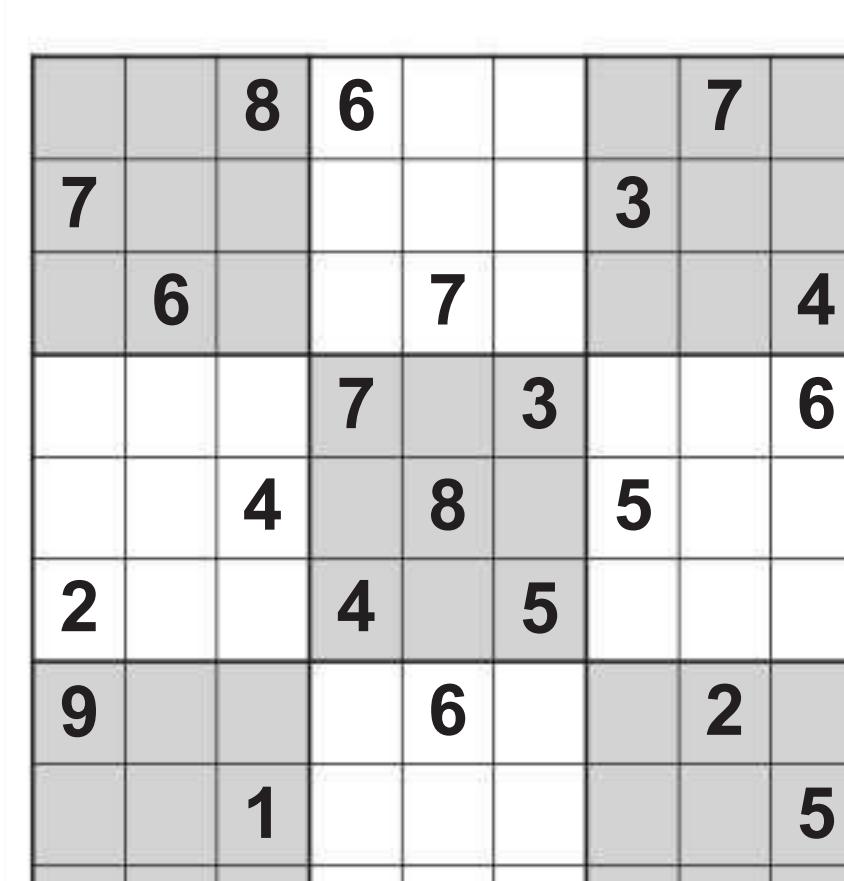
In a welfare state, executive governments are expected to solve problems and address miseries of the people. Therefore, the appropriate governments are conferred powers to suspend or remit sentence on case-to-case basis, with or without conditions.

This power is to be exercised after obtaining and considering opinion of the convicting court. The release of convicts under this provision is a purely humanitarian exercise to mitigate their personal hardships in larger public interest. Since this power is to be exercised on the request of convicts, no policy framework is necessary; procedural guidelines though can always be issued to maintain uniformity.

Undoubtedly, premature release of convicts is neither a privilege nor a right of every prisoner; it is an incentive which is granted by the executives based on some prescribed eligibility criteria. Over the years, several conceptual and procedural flaws have crept in the laws as well as in implementation of the PMR policies, which need immediate correction.

SU DO KU

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION



QUICK CROSSWORD

ACROSS

- Careless (6)
- Practically (2,4,2)
- Succulent plant (6)
- As a matter of top priority (8)
- Luxuriant (4)
- Ungracefully thin and tall (5)
- Person or thing venerated (4)
- Be familiar with the procedures (4,3,5)
- A memory (12)
- Long hard journey (4)
- To picture in the mind (5)
- Expectant silence (4)
- Rapturous (8)
- Younger (6)
- Prententious (8)
- Stick fast (6)

DOWN

- Similar things (8)
- Special ceremony (8)
- With the addition of (4)
- Unforeseen opportune event (6,2,4)
- Undisguised (4)
- Disengage and remove (6)
- Adage (6)
- To dupe (4,3,1,4)
- To guide by rudder (5)
- Obstacle in steeplechase (5)
- Minor details (8)
- Having command (2,6)
- Continuous flow (6)
- Sanity (6)
- Willing and eager (4)
- Stock of money (4)

Yesterday's Solution

Across: 1 Motor, 4 Inflate, 8 Kit, 9 Level best, 10 Overrun, 11 Amity, 13 Trivia, 15 Bear up, 18 Cheap, 19 Adviser, 21 On a string, 23 Rye, 24 Setson, 25 Event.

Down: 1 Make out, 2 To the life, 3 Ruler, 4 Invent, 5 Foliage, 6 Ace, 7 Entry, 12 In reserve, 14 Impetus, 16 Portent, 17 Nation, 18 Cross, 20 Vogue, 22 Event.

FORECAST

SUNSET:	SATURDAY	17:30 HRS
SUNRISE:	SUNDAY	07:17 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	18	08
New Delhi	22	07
Amritsar	20	06
Bathinda	24	09
Jalandhar	19	06
Ludhiana	20	08
Bhiwani	21	07
Hisar	21	06
Sirsra	19	07
Dharamsala	20	08
Manali	16	03
Shimla	17	09
Srinagar	11	01
Jammu	19	10
Kargil	04	-09
Leh	05	-10
Dehradun	21	08
Mussoorie	20	08

SUNSET: 17:30 HRS
SUNRISE: 07:17 HRS

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 27, 2025, SATURDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 6
- Posh Parvishite 13
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 7, up to 1:10 p.m.
- Vyatrapata Yoga up to 12:22 p.m.
- Purvabhadrapad Nakshatra up to 9:10 a.m.
- Moon in Pisces sign
- Shri Guru Gobind Singh Jyanti

TEMPERATURE IN °C

Rogue hegemons are sabotaging the global economy



ARVIND SUBRAMANIAN

Although 2025 will probably be remembered as the year that United States President Donald Trump upended the global trading system, the truth is that both of the world's hegemons, the US and China, have gone rogue. Surging US protectionism and resurgent Chinese mercantilism are now twin scourges afflicting the rest of the world, especially developing countries.

While some apply the label "G-Zero" to today's leaderless world, it is more accurate to say that we are dealing with a "G-Negative-Two" world. Instead of providing global public goods, China and the US are

inflicting global economic costs, and they are doing so in mutually reinforcing ways.

In some sense, Chinese mercantilism began US protectionism. Mr Trump's long-standing tariff obsession derives from his fury-fuelled conviction that trade surpluses abroad have damaged the US economy, especially its manufacturing sector. In that world view, China, with its consistently large trade surpluses, was the provocateur-in-chief, even though in practice more countries have been targeted.

Mr Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs in April, and the tumultuous iterations that followed, have made the US one of the world's most protectionist economies. On average, tariffs on exports to the world's largest market have jumped from just over 2 per cent to 17 per cent, an eightfold increase. Not only has access to US markets been constrained, but it is also radically more uncertain, because tariffs have become an instrument for indulging the President's erratic whims. In lawsuits challenging Mr Trump's justification for such sweeping tariffs, the Supreme Court has signalled that it

will not second-guess the executive's authority to determine what qualifies as a threat to national security. Never mind that the same authority has been (implicitly) invoked to target Brazil for baldly political reasons, and to punish India for contradicting Mr Trump's claim to have brokered the peace in its border skirmish with Pakistan in May. Restraining such an arbitrary and absurd exercise of presidential authority is surely the Court's core responsibility. But even if it does rule against Mr Trump, he will have other ways to pursue the same protectionist agenda, and US trading partners will still be operating in a fog of uncertainty.

To be sure, the direct impact of Trump's tariffs on other countries has been obscured by other developments in the US economy, notably the AI boom, which has propped up demand and imports. But there have also been indirect effects, and chief among these is Chinese mercantilism.

Of course, mercantilism has been etched in China's economic DNA for centuries. *The Financial Times* recently reported that China is making trade impossible because

"there is nothing it wants to import, nothing it does not believe it can make better and cheaper." It was an echo of 1793, when Imperial Britain's emissary, Lord Macartney, visited China to persuade Emperor Qianlong to open the Chinese market to British goods. In response, the emperor boasted: "Our Celestial Empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within its own borders. There is therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce. But as the tea, silk and porcelain, which the Celestial Empire produces, are absolute necessities to European nations and to yourselves, we have permitted, as a signal mark of favour, that foreign hongs [merchant firms] should be established at Canton, so that your wants might be supplied and your country thus participate in our beneficence."

Not only can we discern a similar attitude today, but Chinese mercantilism has been aggravated by Mr Trump's tariffs. With access to US markets reduced and the Chinese growth model still so dependent on

exports, the Chinese juggernaut has turned its focus to conquering markets elsewhere, especially in Southeast Asia. Proximate economic necessity has supercharged a deep-seated predilection.

As Shoumitro Chatterjee and I have documented, China's exports of low-value-added goods to developing countries have been rising sharply, undermining the competitiveness of these countries' own domestic industries. Despite rising wages, China still accounts for a large share of global exports, including in areas where it should have ceded space to poorer countries. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that China's exports are not the result of some natural advantage; rather, they are being sustained by its exchange-rate policy. As Brad Setser of the Council on Foreign Relations and others have argued, the renminbi is undervalued by about 20 per cent.

Thus, while the Trump tariffs exacerbate China's mercantilism, developing countries are opting for another round of protectionism to shield their domestic industries from the Chinese onslaught. Mexico, for example,

has just imposed tariffs on goods from China and India. But while other countries are seeking to shield themselves from China, targeting only one country is difficult in today's world of complex supply chains. Inevitably, protectionism will become a broader phenomenon. What does this tell us about the near-term future? In recent research, Dev Patel, Justin Sandefur, and I find that the steady convergence of developing countries toward Western standards of living stalled in the last decade. Slowing growth in the developing world has coincided with the reversal of globalisation. Exports of low-value-added manufacturing products such as textiles are the engine of development. If it stalls, the poorest people in the poorest parts of the world will be the first victims, and the blame will lie with the world's two hegemons. The US and China have more in common than they would like to believe. Both are hijacking the global economy and limiting trading opportunities for everyone else.

The author is senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics and co-author of *A Sixth of Humanity: Independent India's Development Odyssey*. © Project Syndicate, 2025



ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

SHANTI and the nuclear question

VIEWPOINT
DEVANGSHU DATTA

The SHANTI Bill brings nuclear power back into public discourse. The conversation around nuclear energy involves fact, fiction, perception, and the art of the possible. If the Bill goes through without changes, the private sector can invest up to 49 per cent equity in nuclear power companies. It also caps civil liability for nuclear incidents at around ₹3,000 crore, with the government providing a backstop beyond that. The Bill breaks the monopoly of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India and offers private players some assurance.

The policy thrust is now towards small modular reactors (SMR). The target is to get SMRs with local technology up and running by 2033, with a target of 100 Gw nuclear capacity by 2047. Extrapolating from buildouts of other technologies, 100 Gw would be about 5 per cent of the total electricity capacity by 2047.

Current nuclear installed capacity is about 1.5 percent of total grid capacity and much of it is inoperative for long periods. Nuclear contributes less than 7 Gw to a grid, which generates 240 Gw. Nuclear projects tend to see massive time and cost overruns. The 2033 SMR target may not be met, and the 2047 target is also probably out of reach.

Nuclear costs ₹6 per unit, which is about 150 per cent higher

than coal-thermal power, and nearly twice that of solar. Scale may make a difference as it did with solar, where costs dropped drastically. But nobody will happily opt for nuclear at these prices.

Civil society hates nuclear. Given disasters like Chernobyl, Fukushima and Three Mile Island, there's reason to believe there would be sustained opposition to nuclear projects. Protests have happened with projects like Kudankulam. Even charging 9,000 activists with sedition, as happened in that instance, didn't stop the protests. Also, if any nuclear incident does occur, it will require many multiples of ₹3,000 crore to clean up.

So, why opt for nuclear? One reason is decarbonisation. Nuclear reactions don't release carbon. Another key reason is base-load reliability. Once a nuclear reactor is operating, it can run continuously like a thermal plant, and unlike solar or wind.

Indeed, in many ways, the principles for running nuclear power are similar to those for thermal power. In both cases, water is heated — by coal, gas, or nuclear reactions — to produce steam. The steam is used to drive turbines, and the kinetic energy from the movement of fan blades is converted into electricity.

Instead of producing smoky, high-carbon waste, however, nuclear reactions produce radiation. The spent fuel may also be highly toxic. Storage and disposal of fuel is a big question mark, since it may be toxic for centuries. Moreover, some fuels (depending on the specifics of technology) can be reprocessed to weapons grade, which results in geopolitical complications. Also, due to radiation, shutting down an old nuclear reactor is a painful and costly exercise.

India is import-dependent

when it comes to uranium (variants of which are used as fuel). It would be importing fuel, unless and until there's some technical breakthrough that makes thorium reactors commercially viable (India has ample thorium). Geopolitics is, therefore, relevant.

Note also that the cost of nuclear power (₹6/unit referred to above) doesn't take fuel reprocessing, disposal and the mothballing of superannuated reactors into account. Those may add enormously to costs.

So in a perfect scenario, India would run SMRs within the next decade with its own indigenous technology. It would have 100 Gw of operational nuclear capacity by 2047, which would marginally reduce carbon production. There would be no accidents, and no civil society protests. The art of the possible suggests this chain of events is unlikely.

There is one black swan possibility that could alter everything. That would be a big breakthrough on the fusion front. All commercial nuclear power comes from fission, which involves breaking up complex atoms of heavy elements, into lighter elements, with excess particles converted into energy.

Fusion — turning simple elements into more complex ones with excess particles released as energy — releases much less radiation, while also being zero-carbon. It would also produce more power. But nobody has yet been able to demonstrate fusion is commercially viable, despite 75 years of research and development. A fusion breakthrough would suddenly solve the world's energy problems, and if there is a fusion breakthrough, SHANTI would leave India better-placed in regulatory terms to exploit it.

A mea culpa in national interest

Many of you might think I got something so wrong in *National Interest* pieces written this year. I might disagree! But some deserve a *mea culpa*. I'd deal with the most recent this week

Where does a columnist acknowledge that he has a disagreement with himself? Or rethink a stated view failing the test of time. This being the last *National Interest* of 2025 is a good occasion to do so. Will I do so every year-end? I hope not. I hope I won't have arguments to rethink, recalibrate, or simply resolve from that often.

An opinion column is exactly what it is meant to be: One writer's opinion. It can't and shouldn't win everybody's approval. It is better if it is provocative. The reader's disagreement with some columns will be more intense than with others. The readers then have the recourse to write back, in a letter to the editor. Where does the writer go, except to you — the reader?

I know so many of you might think I got something so wrong in one or another of the nearly 50 *National Interest* pieces written this year. I might disagree with that! But I can list at least five over some 25 years that deserve a *mea culpa*.

I'd deal with the most recent of these this week. This was published on September 28, 2024. It asserted that Islam doesn't kill democracy. The Army-Islam combo does. How come Pakistan and Bangladesh rarely have a peaceful transition while Islamic Indonesia and Malaysia do?

Similarly, I argued that Myanmar had a military-ruled hybrid system (they're polling this Sunday) despite being almost entirely Buddhist, especially after they brutally expelled most of their tiny Muslim minority, the Rohingya. And if Buddhism was the challenge to its democracy, how come Sri Lanka had no such issues? As I look back, I see many flaws with this formulation. The first is that so many Islamic countries have no democracy, despite their army not interfering. My distant vision was clouded by what I see in the neighbourhood. Iran has no military rule, and while it has regular elections, the unelected clergy rules. This is the classical hybrid arrangement and stable, unlike Pakistan's where power equations occasionally shift.

The Gulf monarchies fear not their armies, but democracy. They rule with the benefit of natural resources and in the name of Islam. It is most pronounced in the case of Saudi Arabia. Türkiye has regular elections, but Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used religion to mutilate the constitution and destroy much of the Opposition.

In that 2024 piece, I also overlooked the lessons of the Arab Spring (2011), again because of near-sightedness. The Western world, liberal founda-

tions, and the Obama administration hailed this as a "wonderful democratic upsurge" in Muslim autocracies. Good riddance, people had now arrived to claim their place under the sun.

There was some liberal excitement in India as well. After all, had been roused by Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's line — "singhasan khali karo ki abjanata hai" (vacate the throne, people have arrived to claim it) — quoted by Jayaparakash Narayan (JP) in the fight against the Emergency. Or those Faiz Ahmed Faiz lines so popular with our left-liberal community: "Sab taaj uchhale jayenge, sab takht giraye jayenge/aur raj karegi khalk-e-khuda, jo main bhi hun aur tum bhi ho." (When crowns are tossed, thrones toppled, and power vests in God's people, that's you and I).

That unravelled fast. In some cases people welcomed the return of the past dictatorship, as in Egypt. And in some the dictator survived but the country became a failed state (Syria) with many rebel armies rising not in the name of democracy or even nationalism but versions of Islam.

Tunisia and Algeria carried out "corrections" to remain intact; Yemen is still broken and at war; and Libya, we don't have the space to talk about its terrible plight. Cruel though it may sound, you need to ask if the country wasn't better off under Colonel Gaddafi? At least he was an Arab nationalist. Now we have the country divided between two warlords buying black market arms with stolen oil money.

The main reason the Arab Spring failed was that the only institutionally organised group in all of these countries was Muslim Brotherhood. While democracy was its vehicle to power, its agenda was ideological, pan-national religious conservatism.

I was particularly wrong with this argument because in many of the Islamic nations the army has actually been a force of stability and safety, even for minorities. We are watching the army play that invaluable role next door, at least as yet, in Bangladesh with its history of instability and martial law. In Egypt, General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi got rid of Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi and found popular acceptance and a sigh of relief.

Similarly, in Tunisia and Algeria the army has balanced out the Islamist forces and prevented the slide into a failed state. The idea that the army-Islam combo was needed to destroy democracy, therefore, was too sweeping a generalisation.

Whether there is a contradiction between Islam and democracy is a complex debate. Let's nuance it

NATIONAL
INTEREST
SHEKHAR GUPTA

with two questions. One, is there a contradiction between a Muslim state and democracy? And second, what's the difference between Islamic and Islamist? The answer to the first, unfortunately, is mostly yes, despite exceptions like the Maldives, Indonesia (the largest Muslim country) and Malaysia. A doctrinaire adherence to faith brings a pre-ordained, unitary system of governance — just like communism. That's why the global lib-left-Islamic alliance is just so much blah. Both sides are cynical in partnering against a common enemy: The "evil" West and its "favourite child" Israel. The Islamic intelligentsia needs the left for global respectability and the left needs alienated Muslims as gun fodder. Why not fight American imperialism and neo-liberalism to the last angry Muslim? Can a communist state be democratic? Don't confuse it with socialism. And can an Islamic nation have democracy?

This brings us to the distinction between Islamic and Islamist. The former is simply adherence to a faith. It's a choice, just like being Hindu, Christian, Jewish or atheist. It doesn't seek to force others to alter their ways to conform to yours. Contrarily, Islamist is a political philosophy that wants to enforce rules of the faith on non-believers and if they don't, punish them.

That's ISIS, the ideology that fuelled the Bondi Beach massacre of Jews in Australia, Easter bombings targeting Christians in Sri Lanka, and the deportations in Syria and its neighbourhood, and across the world. Forget democracy, the Islamists wouldn't even countenance nationalism. They want a caliphate transcending all Muslim nations. That's why the force every Muslim nation fears the most is ISIS, the Islamists. The unfortunate truth is that fair elections brought them into power (in the name of Muslim Brotherhood) in so many states.

We can safely say, therefore, that there is a contradiction between Islamists (as distinct from Islam) and democracy. Pakistan is an Islamic republic with a strong nationalism. It isn't Islamist. It will never fight for another Islamic nation, unless of course it's paid for it. Even Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed use Islam to fuel their hatred of India.

Even the Taliban, who run the world's most sharia-compliant state fear ISIS because it threatens their nationalism. Will they risk a free election? Nor would any of the Gulf states. Iraq stands out as an exception but its Shia-majority demographics and the Iranian influence qualify its democracy.

In my September 2024 column, I overlooked these nuances. My vision was focused too tightly on the neighbourhood. The regrettable fact is that as you draw a line from the Red Sea to the Bay of Bengal the only countries where Muslim citizens have had uninterrupted free vote that determine who rules for a finite time are at the two extremes: Israel and India. I, accordingly, stand corrected.

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The pretentious shayars

EYE CULTURE

AMAN SAHU

In 1797, Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan was born in Agra on December 27. But history does not remember him by the name he was given at birth. Instead, he came to be known by the *takhallus* (pen name) that would define him — Mirza Ghalib, arguably the greatest Urdu *shayar* ever born. Ghalib, who played perhaps the most significant role in shaping the Urdu language, believed that Meer Taqi Meer was its true master. As he famously wrote: "Rekhta ke tum hi ustад nahn ho 'Ghalib' kehne hain agle zamane mein koi 'Meer' bhi tha." (You are not the sole master of Urdu, Ghalib/they say that in an earlier era, there was also a Meer.)

However, more than two centuries later, when the world celebrates Ghalib's birth anniversary today, his wit and depth are fondly recalled, but the humility that once accompanied them seems to have been lost to time. Nowadays, some *shayars* take a very basic thought and recite a couplet without any technical characteristics required to be called a *shayr*. Consider this example from Manhar Seth, who has 3 million followers on Instagram: "Hum bhi mil lenge tere bacchon se, tu bhi unhe kya batayega/ De denge hum bhi apna dil unhe — maa ka khilona bacchon ke kaam toh aayega." (I may meet your children someday too — what will you tell them then? I'll give them my heart as well; a mother's broken toy might at

least be of use to her children.)

The confidence in their eyes cries out that they are superior to Meer. Anyone with a working knowledge of *shayari* would know that this is nothing more than a performance, with more emphasis on a deep voice and sound variations than on the craft being philosophical or even imaginative enough to be categorised as poetry. Many Indian standup comedians use abysmal *shayari* to rescue substandard jokes. Sometimes, even when the jokes are good, the technique is used merely to go viral with the 'thug life' meme. Misogynistic two-liners — not worthy of being called a *shayr* — are also used to trend with "The Boys" meme. In Urdu *shayari*, it is understood that the *shayar* may reproach the beloved for being unfaithful or distant, but not at the cost of linguistic integrity or technical discipline. Even Pakistani poet Jaun Elia, whose work deals with some of the most intense and existential themes in Urdu poetry, did not abandon the boundaries that form the basis of the craft. And it is not just about rules, the lack of imagination feels even more alarming.

The originality that defined the genius of Ghalib is reflected in this *shayr*, where he dared to question even God about the very nature of existence: "Jab ki tuh bin nahn koi maujood/ phir yeh hungama ai Khuda kya hai?" (When there is none but You, O God/then what is all this commotion?) It seems highly unlikely that a modern *shayar* would be able to create something like this. Perhaps because modern audiences often

Chanakya and Sun Tzu

THE WISE LEADER
R GOPALAKRISHNAN

The great debate at the November Mumbai Lit Fest was on the proposition India and China must be friends. Fiercely argued with a rhetorical emphasis on "friends", the opposition wondered how a double-crossing and unreliable neighbour could be a friend. Meanwhile, management guru Ram Charan wrote in *The Sunday Guardian*, London (November 23, 2025), that the future of India-China relations could be guided by a measured partnership with autonomy, discipline, and wisdom.

What did the original strategists advise? Chanakya advocated scoring a decisive win whereas Sun Tzu advocated patient encirclement: India must learn to play Weiqi (known as GO), not chess. Let us unpack the spaghetti of fissures by choosing those that matter.

The Chinese have the concept of *tianxia*, which visualises the world as being under the canopy of heaven; everything coexists in natural order. They also refer to their own country as Zhongguo (Middle Kingdom), which means that they are the centre of the civilised world, while others are referred to as *yamenren* (barbarians). China is the centre of the civilised world, surrounded by barbarians. They don't wear their exceptionalism in day-to-day behaviour, but many foreigners discern an air of superiority.</p



A thought for today

You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture.
Just get people to stop reading them

RAY BRADBURY

Morning Bulletin

Getting schoolkids to read newspapers is a smart idea

You can read this, thanks to a unique brain circuit your ancestors evolved about 6,000 years ago. But now that circuit is weakening species-wide because we don't use it enough. In US, daily reading for pleasure has declined 40% in 20 years. In UK, reading among 8-18-year-olds has halved. School librarians will tell you the situation is dire in India too. So, it's heartening that UP govt has made newspaper reading mandatory in its schools. Every day, students will take turns to read aloud the main points of news and editorials from a selection of English and Hindi papers. Govt hopes this will improve their GK, vocabulary, writing skills, and critical thinking.

It should, because reading not only pours information into the mind but also catalyses its organisation into conceptual models. Videos and podcasts aren't as effective because you can't linger over their words, nor turn pages for reference. And the printed page doesn't vibrate with notifications and other distractions. When we give up slow, deliberate reading for reading's sake, and stick the hose of "fast" digital content in our ears, our abilities to analyse critically and draw inferences weaken.

So, well begun, UP, and now all states should do more. Going beyond the daily 10-minute mandate, encourage children to become bookworms. Help them find focus, which is key to future success. In the 1800s and early 1900s, reading helped many disadvantaged workers improve their lot. Welsh miners were avid readers in the 1930s, helped along by over 100 libraries. So, invest in libraries as a public good. If retired Italian teacher Antonio La Cava can drive his three-wheeler library more than 3L km over 25 years, to bring books to children in far-flung villages, our states can do better.



Punish The Goons

Why BJP should respond strongly to Xmas attacks

Christmas was marred by the shocking and shameful conduct, from mobs declaring allegiance to Bajrang Dal, VHP and fringe outfits. They ransacked Christmas decorations, disrupted and harassed carol singers and Christmas gatherings, stormed schools and churches, heckled even poor vendors selling Santa caps – incidents captured on video in Delhi, Haryana, Odisha, Kerala, Assam, MP and Chhattisgarh. Have police taken cognisance barring in Kerala? Have FIRs been filed under BNS Sections 196(2) and 299 for promoting enmity between groups and outraging religious sentiments? Are any of the hooligans, easily identifiable from public footage, arrested? Or do they roam free and confident, assured of protection?

BJP has sought an 'explanation' from its Jabalpur party senior for her shocking behaviour towards a visually impaired Christian woman inside a church. But that's not nearly enough. All are guilty of disrupting communal harmony during a festival joyously celebrated across India's cities.



It is for BJP, which has a new party chief, and RSS to put a stop to the militancy against minority faiths by some parivaar outfits, who seem increasingly emboldened. They harm the party, and are anti-Hindu. No Hindu will endorse such brutality in the name of their faith. The United Christian Forum has alleged over 600 incidents against Christians this year. Christmas Day attacks hardly came out of the blue. Therefore, the goons must face the full force of law. All but one state where this happened is BJP-governed. This reflects on BJP's global standing as the party governing India. That should incentivise party leadership to act.

Autocrats' BFFs: Elites With A Grudge

Envy, cynicism, nostalgia drive the privileged to demagogues

More often than not, we tend to associate autocratic regimes with a cult of personalities. Think Hitler, Stalin, Idi Amin. However, no autocrat rules alone. They are all supported by an elite that actually props up the regimes. *Twilight Of Democracy: The Failure Of Politics And The Parting Of Friends* by Anne Applebaum explores how this class of elite is created, what motivates them to support autocrats, and why perfectly intelligent people junk their liberal instincts.

Law and Justice Party in Poland and Viktor Orban's Fidesz in Hungary both successfully bludgeoned the established elite to rise to power. In Poland's case, the device of choice was the Smolensk conspiracy, around the 2010 plane crash killing then president Lech Kaczynski. The conspiracy not only served as a vehicle to polarise Polish society, but also gave Law and Justice Party the ammunition to demonise the opposition, and accuse them variously of being communists, working with Russia or simply being anti-Poland.



Why would Johnson do such a thing? Per Applebaum, perhaps because of his own background, which was very much rooted in the British elite and aristocratic clubs such as the Bullingdon at Oxford. Johnson clearly felt the pomp and show was ridiculous. Therefore, he didn't mind chucking stones at his own elite peers.

Then, there is nostalgia. Reformative nostalgia seeks to physically recreate an imagined great past – like resurrecting the prowess of the old British Empire. But who do you blame for the decline? Outsiders, of course – immigrants, EU and the liberal elite.

Finally, Applebaum theorises that great changes of the 21st century won't come like they did in the past, precisely because media has been democratised. There are many who instinctively struggle with diversity and want simplicity. Established traditional media ensured debates were confined to a narrow comfortable spectrum. New media breaks that mould with a cacophony of opinions. This in turn has the opposite effect of pushing people into their comfortable information silos, making them more susceptible to manipulation, and empowering autocrats.

But why did people go along with these deceptions? Moreover, why did people of significant intellect – also close friends of the author – switch their liberal, European values, and join the ideology and tactics they had earlier fought against during the Cold War?

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FEWER THE WORDS



GREATER THEIR POWER

THE TIMES OF INDIA
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2025

Who'll Buy What, And Why

For upscale & aspirational consumers, next year is when AI engagement will guide many more decisions. But so will 'God' and those who 'read' the stars. Malls & kiranas will thrive, despite quick commerce. Getting thin & keeping well will be top priorities. But don't expect pizza or bhatura sales to go down

Sandeep Das



How is 2026 likely to pan out for the consumer? Any conversation about the future must begin with AI, cutting edge of tech. Almost in step is the growing popularity of mysticism and All Things God. Getting physical is back and growing – footfalls in malls are rising and people are cranking up on increasing health quotients. So, the four big themes likely to play out in the year ahead are pretty evident – and involve some risks too. Here goes.

Will you bot me? AI, social & quick commerce | Future of search is via Generative AI for product discovery and search. As AI scales up in Tier 2 and 3 India, prep for phenomenal penetration of voice and local language-based models. What's interesting is that the number 1 use case for AI is companionship and therapy per *Harvard Business Review*. In addition, rise of AI-powered boyfriends and girlfriends is expected to grow by 25-30% over the next few years as per industry reports.

Find a bot-girl, lose a job? Threat to entry-level jobs from AI, especially in the IT services sector, is real and may reach deadly proportions in 2026 as the IT services sector is facing headwinds. The much-awaited rise of social commerce is still in the making. And it will still be ongoing in 2026. Social commerce now contributes only 10% of Myatra's revenue, for example. Brands and audiences are warming up to nano-influencers. But mega influencers will still dominate.

Content creation may be a very lucrative career for Gen Z and this space may see the continued rise of creator-led brands. As a model, the quick delivery space will expand to potentially everything – maids, ambulances and other services and will scale up to Tier 2 and 3 India. How profitable it will be is a different question. Finally, the local kirana will stay intact and may thrive too (in Tier 2 and 3 India) but will need a digital makeover.

Help, God! Good God | An incredible trend over the last few years since the pandemic has been the sharp rise of engagement with God and mystical sciences. Astrology's boom will continue, primarily driven by Gen Z. In a country where mental health still suffers taboos and therapists are an inadequate presence, astrologers are the New Therapists for Gen Z and millennials. According to MarkTel Advisors, Indian Astrology App market is likely to grow to \$1.8bn at a 49% CAGR till 2030.

Moreover, increase in demand for yoga & spirituality through on-demand puja services, digital courses

Going physical | Reports of the death of malls and physical events are untrue. Footfalls in malls will continue to grow in solid double digits in 2026, expanding on their 25% year-on-year growth in 2025 per Cushman & Wakefield. Moreover, experience-driven events like cricket matches and concerts will attract consumers. According to EY, India's live entertainment market is expected to grow at 19% over the next three years.

Pickleball and rented sporting avenues will see continued traction. Given the brewing crisis of the 30+ on the lookout, events for dating and mingling are on the up tick.

2026 WHAT LIES AHEAD
FOURTH OF A MULTI-PART SERIES
CONSUMERS
real estate sales in India's top 7 cities dropped by 12% in Jan-Sept 2025 – driven by high prices and uncertainty. Bollywood too is likely to have a good year with films like *Ramayana*, *Love and War* expected to script record numbers.

Holistic health & thinness | It's high single digits growth in 2026 for health-centric foods and services but it won't cross more than 10% of the Food & Beverages category. Industry consensus estimates for healthy snacking growth rates are in the range of 8-10% from 2025-2030.

This doesn't mean unhealthy food will do badly – Quick Service Restaurants (QSR) serving pizza, local restaurant outlets and packaged food players will see high single digit growth. Mordor Intelligence estimates India's QSR business to grow at about 9.4% from 2025-2030. Why? Because consumers say something (let's eat healthy), and do the exact opposite (eat unhealthy).

The next will be the first year of weight-loss drugs mainstreamed and rapid adoption is expected among the top 1%. Grand View Research says the market for GLP-1 based therapies in India is likely to grow at 34% from 2025 to 2030.

Even rural India is expected to be more aspirational and leisure-seeking in 2026. As 2026 ends, expect first pilots of a drone economy, comprising flying taxis, drone deliveries and self-driving robots entering India. Year 2027 may be even more incredible for India.



and spiritual retreats will continue. 'Bhajan clubbing' is what rocks many millennials and Gen X, and their spiritual tourism will absolutely rocket on. Per MakeMyTrip, pilgrimage tourism grew at 19% in fiscal 2025 and will continue to see exponential growth. Not to forget, not everyone will be wanting to spread the message of God and there'll be hordes of fake influencers peddling themselves as authorities on God.

'I Am Childfree And The Central Character In My Life Story'

Having a child makes you a better person? Gives you old age insurance? Not always true. **Gita** smartly warns against possessive attachment. Read that as a warning on fantasies about how your kids will turn out

Siddharth Dhanvant Shangvi



I recently met a family friend who told me he was estranged from his adult son. Things soured after the son's marriage, he said, which led to separate homes and, ultimately, a permanent rupture. In his voice I heard a father's regret for the loss of the relationship, of course, but equally: relief that they were apart. I wondered if he felt cheated; after all, he had been a model father; his wife a spring of innumerable generosities. Now this child was no longer the adult son they had once hoped for.

Another friend, a young mother with a fizzing, curious mind, was the sort of wit with whom I once planned holidays or volunteered at the dog shelter. But after the birth of her son, our conversation devolved into diaper runs, daycare waitlists, and a nanny who keeps threatening to quit. "I need Shanta Bai more than my husband," she confessed, revealing how parenthood rewires priorities. "I've never been happier," she went on, as if trying to convince herself. "Maybe it's from my chronic lack of sleep."

These two friends – one bereft, one besieged – are bookends to why I chose not to have children.

First, the insolent truth: I do not particularly like children. I enjoy individual young people once they have personalities, a point of view, the patience to listen as well as the grace of speaking. But the general cult of 'the kid' leaves me cold. I do not melt at baby photos, nor do I integrate into other people's growing families, preferring to be the one they turn to for adult refuge when their kids wear them out with exhaustion or argument.

Second: I like my life the way it is, centred on my work, home, friendships, dogs, and the luxury of waking up without either an alarm or a child hollering in my ear. A Michigan State University study found that adults who choose not to have children report life

satisfaction levels similar to parents; the main difference is that non-parents are judged more harshly by others. Perhaps being without a child should be reframed: it is the misery applied to solo men like me, but not necessarily generated or felt within.

Third, raising a child in urban India inks at around ₹45L, minimum – from birth to undergraduate college.

That's before you add coaching classes, postgraduate degrees, a bail-out bribe for a driving offence. By choosing not to have children, I'm not hoarding wealth like some ogre in a castle; I'm simply choosing to spend on my own inner growth, art, and travel. In a country where

most do not have a pension or reliable social security, this is not selfishness; it's basic risk management.

Fourth, I watch many of my friends with young children and, if I strip away the Insta posts of strolls in the park, the relationships are not particularly profound. Being a parent, they say, is a lesson in selfless love. But why assume having a child makes you a better person? The jerk factor is no lower for having wiped a baby's bum.

Of course many parent-child relationships are deeply loving. But equally, they are arrangements of

obligation, punctuated in adulthood by Diwali visits negotiated around cheap tickets. Modern labour markets mean that adult children live where their jobs are. A recent Indian study noted that over a third of older parents have at least one migrant child and that 'empty nesters' are a sizeable demographic. Love does not translate to presence.

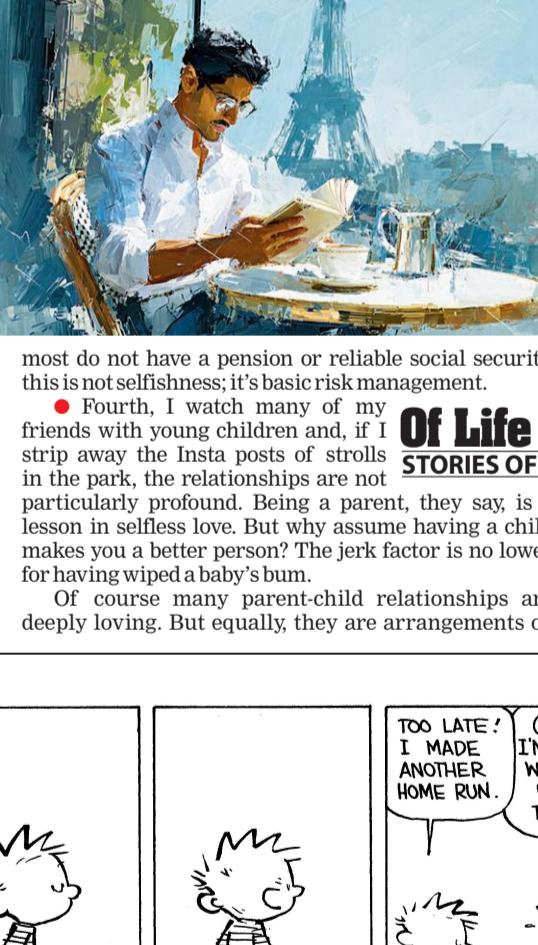
This leads to the fifth point: the idea of children as old-age insurance. In India, seven out of ten people still expect their children to support them financially in retirement (with legal frameworks to support this). Only three in ten do. Treating offspring as a pension fund is not only morally dubious but also financially reckless. Own being a hag: take a YouTube tutorial on changing your own adult diapers.

Sixth, there's the sheer, staggering number of us all. India has overtaken China as the most populous country on earth. We're adding people faster than trees, hospitals, or urban planning that makes for breathable air. In such a world, the question is not 'Why don't you have kids?' but 'What made you so sure the world needed more of your dubious DNA?'

Finally, Hindu philosophy ruminates on the idea of *runanbandha* – karmic bonds that bind souls across lifetimes. Some teachers suggest that family, especially parent-child, ties are precisely such knots: powerful but binding. Gita warns against possessive attachment and to the 'fruits' of our actions – including the fantasy that our children will behave, believe, marry, or vote as we wish. Seen through that lens, not having children might be a spiritual assertion: a refusal to create fresh karmic entanglements.

I am childfree not because I am anti-children, but because I am pro-clarity. I might easily love another human – a child – but I prefer to remain the central character in my life story.

Shangvi is the author of *'Loss'*



most do not have a pension or reliable social security, this is not selfishness; it's basic risk management.

Langley, a well-funded and highly respected scientist backed by govt grants, prestigious institutions and the best resources available at the time. In contrast stood Wilbur and Orville Wright – two bicycle mechanics with limited education, modest finances and no institutional support.

Wright Brothers succeeded in building and flying the first successful aeroplane, not because they had more resources, but because they had a clear, burning purpose. Their 'why' was not fame or funding; it was an obsessive curiosity and a deep inner calling to understand flight. They studied birds, embraced repeated failures, patiently modified designs, and treated each crash not as defeat but as feedback.

History repeatedly teaches us that success is not merely a function of talent, money, or favourable circumstances. It is essentially the outcome of inner fire – a compelling reason to continue even when logic suggests stopping. One of the most striking examples of this truth is the story of Wright Brothers.



Bail for Sengar: Laws lost in text

In the Delhi High Court's order suspending the life sentence of former BJP legislator from Uttar Pradesh Kuldeep Singh Sengar, who was convicted in the Unnao rape case, and granting him bail, there are tough questions India's criminal justice system must answer. Sengar is serving his sentence after being convicted of the 2017 rape of a minor and the conspiracy to murder her father. The case triggered outrage and widespread protests as Sengar tried to delay the investigation and intimidate the survivor and her family. It took a self-immolation attempt by the survivor outside the office of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath to bring momentum to the probe. The trial was held in Delhi, following the Supreme Court's directive to move the case outside the state.

The court held that Sengar was not a public servant at the time of the offence, though he was an MLA then, and therefore would not be covered under the provisions of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, which prescribes a life term as punishment. This is a technical and misinterpreted take on the provision. The trial court had defined a public servant as someone who enjoys an official position and is mandated to perform certain constitutional duties. While an appeal in the rape case is pending, the court rejected the survivor's request to wait for the ruling on the plea. Though the court imposed conditions on Sengar, including restrictions on his movements, the order is seen as a subversion of justice. The CBI, which investigated the case and assisted the prosecution, is facing criticism for not actively opposing the demand for bail and suspension of the sentence. It has, however, said it would appeal against the order.

Protesting the order, the survivor has said she would challenge it in the Supreme Court. She has also expressed fears about the safety of her family and cited lapses in security, even before the verdict was pronounced. Reports said she and her mother were stopped by security personnel from holding a protest in Delhi against the order. The survivor has met Leader of the Opposition Rahul Gandhi and is planning to meet President Droupadi Murmu and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, seeking justice. Women's and rights groups have protested against the High Court's order, highlighting the problematic precedent it sets. It is being pointed out that though bail is the rule for an under-trial, it should be the exception for a convict. Sengar does not deserve exceptional treatment or mercy.

The HC's ruling that makes an exception on technical grounds exposes the limits of legal interpretation

Digital promise, familiar failings

The e-khata was conceived as a reform that would spare Bengalureans the agony of running from pillar to post for a basic property document. Instead, it has become a telling example of how digitisation, when layered over a broken administrative culture, can amplify rather than eliminate citizen suffering. That even a retired High Court judge and former chief secretary were reportedly denied e-khata should alarm the government. For lakhs of property owners, securing an e-khata has turned into a months-long ordeal marked by opaque rejections, technical glitches, and the ever-present shadow of corruption. In the last three months alone, thousands of applications have been rejected within the Greater Bengaluru Area, often without a credible explanation. According to senior officials, many rejections lacked genuine grounds. A Jayanagar resident who has lived on his property since 1959 had his application approved by a case worker, only to be later rejected on false grounds. It took multiple complaints and top-level intervention to expose the fraud, leading to the suspension of the revenue officer and the zonal deputy commissioner involved.

Such cases point not to isolated misconduct but to a systemic breakdown. The e-Aashti portal, designed to be "faceless and contactless", is riddled with software mismatches and backend inconsistencies. Applications are rejected without clear reasons, forcing citizens to guess what went wrong. The supposedly digital process still depends on human intervention at multiple levels, creating artificial bottlenecks and a fertile ground for corruption. Errors in draft e-khatas - misspelt names or incorrect measurements - cannot be corrected online, pushing citizens back into the very offices digitisation was meant to bypass. Predictably, this opacity has fuelled an ecosystem of touts and middlemen.

Administrative and technological barriers turn the e-khata system into an obstacle course

FROM WELFARE TO STABILITY

The road to Viksit Bharat runs through Bihar

A structural shift anchored in jobs, skilling, and governance reform can script the state's elusive growth story

BAIKUNTH ROY AND SANTOSH MEHROTRA

The NDA's renewed mandate in Bihar coincides with a decisive phase in India's long-term development. As the country aspires to become a high-income economy, Bihar's economic trajectory cannot be treated as peripheral. With nearly 9% of India's population but only about 3% of the national GDP, Bihar represents one of the most enduring structural asymmetries in India's political economy. In 2005, Bihar's per capita income was 30% of India's PCI; today, it is the same. Whether this gap narrows or persists will depend critically on how the state's youthful demographic is integrated into productive economic activity.

Bihar's development challenge is structural and historically rooted. The Freight Equalisation Policy (1952-1993) systematically disinvested industrialisation by neutralising location advantages in natural resources, diverting private investment away from regions like Bihar. This legacy was compounded by the 2000 bifurcation, which transferred most mineral-rich and industrial districts to Jharkhand, resulting in the loss of nearly three-fourths of industrial units and a substantial erosion of the state's revenue base. Even three decades after liberalisation, Bihar hosts just 1.3% of India's factories. The factory numbers are falling in a state desperately short of industrial jobs.

Despite episodes of high growth since the mid-2000s, this structural weakness has translated into chronically low incomes. On the revenue front, Bihar's own tax collection is only about 5.8% of its GSDP (2023-24), and transfer receipts from the Centre comprise 73% of its total revenue. This leaves Bihar below the national average of about 7% and behind peers such as Uttar Pradesh (9.8%), reflecting limited internal resource mobilisation. Bihar's per capita income stood at Rs 66,828 in 2023-24, the lowest among major states and roughly one-third of the national average. Growth has not been employment-intensive nor productivity-enhancing enough to generate durable convergence.

This matters because Bihar is India's youngest large state. Nearly 58% of its population is below the age of 25, and about one-third falls in the 15-29 cohort. This generation is better educated, digitally connected, and aspirational, but also increasingly impatient with low-quality employment and governance failures. Their expectations

from Viksit Bharat extend beyond welfare to stable jobs, skill-linked education, entrepreneurship opportunities, and institutional credibility.

Labour market indicators underscore the urgency. Bihar's labour force participation rate is just 43.4%, significantly below the national average of 56%, while female participation remains an abysmal 15.6%. Headline unemployment is moderate at 3.9%, but this masks acute distress among the educated: unemployment among graduates is 14.7%.

The sectoral composition of employment explains much of this mismatch. Nearly half of the state's workforce remains trapped in agriculture (46% for India, 2023-24), characterised by low



productivity and rising climate vulnerability. Manufacturing employs only 5.7% of workers (11.5% in India), while services and construction absorb labour largely in informal and low-wage activities. Bihar's demographic advantage risks turning into a demographic burden.

Human development deficits further constrain productivity. Bihar ranks last on the Human Development Index, reflecting persistent shortfalls in health, education, and income. The state faces a 53% shortage of doctors relative to WHO norms. Learning outcomes remain weak, and in higher education, Bihar's gross enrolment ratio is 17.1% when the national average is 27%.

Migration has emerged as Bihar's primary labour-market adjustment mechanism. More than seven million workers are employed outside the state, mostly in the informal sectors, with remittances accounting for 8-10% of GSDP. While remittances sustain consumption, they also reflect local employment failure. The return of over 23 lakh migrants during the COVID-19 lockdown exposed the fragility of a development model reliant on outward mobility.

A wish list for 2047
First, employment must drive economic policy. Welfare expansion has helped reduce multidimensional poverty, from 51.9% in 2015-16 to 33.8% in 2019-21, but Bihar requires employment-intensive structural transforma-

tion, anchored in MSMEs, agro-processing, dairy, leather, textiles, logistics, healthcare, and knowledge services. Cluster-based industrialisation (Bihar has 112 existing organic clusters of labour-intensive manufacturing), rather than capital-heavy enclaves, offers the most viable path.

Second, skilling was nationally neglected for half a century, but even more so in Bihar. District-level skill hubs, upgraded ITIs and polytechnics, mandatory apprenticeships within higher education, and partnerships with private employers are essential. Without aligning education with labour market demand, rising educational attainment will only produce educated unemployment. Apprenticeship in such organised manufacturing/services is critical to avoid unfit students entering higher education.

Third, migration must shift from distress-driven to choice-based. Strengthening local urban economies, supporting returnee entrepreneurship in existing non-farm clusters, and expanding non-farm rural enterprises by improving infrastructure can gradually reverse Bihar's excessive dependence on external labour markets.

Fourth, governance reforms matter as much as spending; police vacancies run into lakhs (as do education/health sector vacancies). Youth expectations now centre on transparent recruitment, exam integrity, digital service delivery and safe public spaces, particularly for women. Institutional credibility is a prerequisite for investment, entrepreneurship and social trust.

Finally, aspirations must confront fiscal reality. In 2024-25, Bihar recorded a fiscal deficit of 9.2% of GSDP, with public debt at 38.9% of GSDP, placing it among India's most indebted states. With borrowing constrained by the FRBM framework, debt-led growth is neither feasible nor prudent. Expanding fiscal space will require prudent GST compliance, stronger municipal finances, higher credit flow to MSMEs, and leveraging private and multilateral funding rather than cutting development expenditure.

Bihar's youth are neither asking for symbolism nor demanding miracles. They are asking for structural change: an economy where education leads to skills, skills to jobs, and jobs to dignity; where migration is voluntary rather than distress-driven; and where governance turns aspiration into resilience. If the government succeeds in converting its youth from welfare beneficiaries into drivers of structural transformation, Bihar will not only rewrite its own development trajectory but shape India's journey to 2047. In no small measure, the future of India's development project runs through Bihar.

(Baikunth is an assistant professor of Economics at Pathiputra University; Santosh taught Economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

Leaving Neverland

I hope he remains Peter Pan at heart, even as he grows up

SUDHA DEVI NAYAK

Kabir has been a little boy for a long while, a very long while. He was Peter Pan, the eternal child of a magical island, Neverland, who flew from place to place with a flowing cape on soundless wings, a child who was a cherub with a mop of hair and flashing eyes and an enchanting smile that broke hearts that never quite became whole again. Suddenly one day he was all of four years old, packing his books in his backpack, swinging it onto his slender shoulders with practised nonchalance, and walking to the lift for his school van - with Mama in tow.

Kabir was an excellent conversationalist with a flair for words. When I split

his milk on the table, I said self-deprecatingly, "Oh, I always do a bad job."

"No, Nani," he countered with his encouraging comment. "You also do a good job," doing wonders to my ego. One day he said, "Now I am a little big, but when I am bigger I will be an astronaut in my space suit." "You will walk the skies," I said admiringly, and he said contentedly, "Astronauts don't walk; they fly and travel in their spaceships."

Kabir's ambition is not limited to becoming an astronaut; he wants to be Superman, Spiderman, and Batman. "Also a policeman," he adds as an afterthought and for good measure. "How can you manage?" I ask him. "Oh, I'm smart," he says with cocky self-assurance. Kabir is proud of his toy gun and silver bullets, and brandishing his gun, says, "I will finish all bad people if they come to take me or Nani."

He has an eye for nature; when he sees the trees swaying in the breeze, he says, "The trees are dancing, Nani; that's why they are moving."

He is growing up, and one day when he is fully grown, I hope he will still be Peter Pan at heart, travelling to different lands and skies, carrying the beauty and innocence, and believing as Peter Pan did, "All the world is made of faith, trust and pixie dust."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Defend democracy against intolerance

Apropos 'A message of discord and intolerance' (Dec 25), intolerance cannot be normalised in a democracy. The repeated attacks on Christians send a deeply troubling message about the state of religious freedom and harmony in India. When minorities are harassed with impunity, victims are punished instead of perpetrators, and prejudice is justified through law, democracy itself is weakened. Allegations of forced conversion have become a convenient

excuse to silence and intimidate entire communities. Constitutional rights cannot exist only on paper; they must be defended on the ground. The editorial rightly points out that symbolic gestures and statements of unity ring hollow unless accompanied by firm action against hate, violence, and selective law enforcement. A nation that prides itself on diversity cannot allow intolerance. **Nazneen Khan, Bengaluru**

Unsafe highways
This refers to 'Six die in Chitradurga bus-truck crash; most victims burnt alive' (Dec 26). The accident is a grim snapshot of India's highways today. Such tragedies are no longer aberrations but outcomes of systemic neglect. High-speed roads are built without safe medians, controlled access points, crash barriers or emergency response planning. Overloaded trucks, fatigued drivers and poorly maintained buses continue

unchecked, while enforcement remains sporadic and reactive. Equally culpable is our collective indifference. Rash overtaking, distracted driving and violation of basic safety norms are treated as minor lapses rather than lethal risks. Road design, regulation and driver accountability should be treated as non-negotiable.

K Chidanand Kumar, Bengaluru

Human negligence
Apropos 'Elephant deaths call

for new safety approach' (Dec 25), it highlights the alarming loss of wildlife due to human negligence. Effective planning, real-time monitoring, and accountability are essential to ensure infrastructure growth does not harm wildlife. **Riteka A J, Hosur**

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed - not handwritten - will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

SPEAK OUT

The BJP-ruled states are a different India, with poverty, religious violence, murders, and unemployment... No matter how much the BJP tries, it cannot incite religious fanaticism among the people of Tamil Nadu who live in unity.... **M K Stalin, Tamil Nadu CM**

Doubt is an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one.

Voltaire

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Mob justice and Kerala's moral drift

A lynching exposes prejudices that authorise violence.

Can the state arrest the alarming symptoms?

K A Shaji

Kerala has long wrapped itself in the comfort of exception. Higher literacy, stronger public health, and a history of social reform movements that challenged caste and hierarchy when much of India remained silent. It is a story the state tells itself with pride. But every few years, that mirror cracks, and what looks back is a crowd standing over a broken body, convinced it has done society a favour.

In 2018, it was Madhu, a young Adivasi man from Attappady. Hungry and disoriented, he was accused of stealing food. He was chased, caught, paraded, beaten, and killed. Men who looked like neighbours and shopkeepers became judge, jury, and executioner. Kerala gasped, protested, promised reform, and then slowly learned to live with the memory.

Last week, the pattern repeated itself. In Wayanad, Palakkad district, a migrant worker was beaten to death by a mob on suspicion of theft. There were whispers too about nationality, about whether he was "Bangladeshi". By the time the police arrived, justice - brutal and primitive - had already been performed. Yesterday, it was a tribal man. Today, it is a guest worker. Tomorrow, it will be someone else who lacks the armour of social privilege. This is not an aberration. It is a warning.

A lynching is not just a crime of violence. It is a crime of confidence. A mob forms only when people are sure they can get away with it, socially if not legally. If forms when the crowd believes the victim's life is negotiable, that their fear, poverty, accent or hunger places them outside the circle of full citizenship.

At that moment, the mob does not feel criminal. It feels authorised.

That authorisation comes from silence, from selective outrage, from the language we casually use about "outsiders", "thieves", and "suspicious people". Kerala's discomfort is that these lynchings happen despite institutions, not in their absence. This is a state with police stations within reach, with strong local governance structures, and an educated public that knows the difference between accusation and proof.

A society does not lose its humanity overnight. It loses it gradually, each time it looks away while a mob tightens its circle. Kerala should be frightened not because these killings happened, but because they feel possible.

(The writer is a South India-based journalist who has chronicled rural distress and environmental struggles)



The men the American people admire most extravagantly are the most daring liars

HL
Menken

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

— Ramnath Goenka

JOBS REMAIN BIGGEST CHALLENGE AS ECONOMY CLOSES A MIXED YEAR

IT'S been an unusual year for the Indian economy. If growth surpassed market expectations to settle at 8 percent in the first half of the fiscal, other macro indicators saw a mixed performance. Merchandise exports struggled amid steep US tariffs, while rupee plunged to new lows. The saving grace was that inflation softened and interest rates eased, making credit more affordable to both households and businesses. Even as growth holds up and private demand turns around, the industry remains reluctant to kick-start the much-awaited private investment cycle, thanks to trade uncertainties, a fragmenting global economy reshaped by wars and shifting supply-chain dynamics. Notwithstanding the government's capital expenditure, if private investments and manufacturing activities do not pick up, job creation and wage rise will remain elusive.

The good news amid the prevailing uncertainties is that India's growth forecasts hold promise both for this fiscal and the next. The IMF pegged it above 6.5 percent for each year, citing personal income tax reductions, an accommodative monetary policy, the ongoing GST reforms, and a likely trade deal with the US. But merchandise exports are coursing through a rough patch—not just to the US, but even to ASEAN economies, even though services exports, particularly IT and business-process management, are remaining robust. As if the export shock isn't enough, currency volatility is brewing fresh trouble. The rupee is in a free fall, and the decline isn't just limited against the US dollar but is ending up as a widespread depreciation. For instance, the RBI's index marking changes against 40 odd currencies fell nearly 9.9 percent this year, which means rupee's depreciation is not just a nominal adjustment but an erosion of purchasing power.

Finally, job creation remains one of the toughest challenges for policymakers. Even though India has seen strong economic growth following liberalisation since the 1990s, the employment rate is yet to keep pace with growth. While the unemployment rate fell from 6 percent in 2017-18 to 3.2 percent in 2023-24, according to official data, India needs to create jobs at a much faster clip to accommodate its growing workforce. As the Economic Survey 2024 noted, India must create 7.85 million non-farm jobs annually till 2030; private estimates suggest the need is for about 10 million jobs in the formal sector every year. Undeniably, that will remain the biggest challenge in the new year, too.

PROTECT THE RIGHTS OF ALL COMMUNITIES

A series of attacks on Christmas celebrations and Christians across the country at a time the ruling NDA is trying to court the community has prompted charges of duplicity. Several church bodies including the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India decried the violence and urged the authorities to protect believers. They accused the central government of failing to safeguard minorities and highlighted more than 1,500 documented anti-Christian attacks in 2024-25, with annual attacks rising sharply over the previous decade. Most incidents in the past fortnight were reported from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Chhattisgarh. These trends have alarmed human rights monitors, who warn that daily attacks have become routine in many areas.

In Kerala, while the BJP appears confused regarding its position towards the Christian community, the Congress is leaving no stone unturned to reap political gains. Congress General Secretary K C Venugopal listed several incidents in BJP-ruled states; in contrast, BJP leaders were seen mumble amid the salvo of attacks from the opposition. In a state going for assembly polls in a few months, it will be difficult for the BJP to claim a larger vote share without the support of Christian community, which accounts for about 18 percent of the population.

Though the BJP's national leadership has made several visible attempts in recent years to woo Christian leaders, there seems to be some lumpen sections in the saffron fold who look at Christians as bearers of a 'foreign culture'. Their old grouse is against Christian missionaries' conversion attempts allegedly through 'temptations'. Such allegations found support in Madhya Pradesh's Niyogi Committee report, published in 1956. As the missionaries cannot be absolved of these charges, the BJP government's decision to enact a law declaring conversion by inducement or coercion to be criminal was seen as reasonable. Under the Constitution, the propagation of religion is a fundamental right, but conversion by force or inducement is prohibited. While governments must keep an eye on missionary activities, it must also ensure protection for the Christian community, which has a minuscule presence in the country's population despite its presence in the subcontinent dating back almost two millennia. The spirit of the Constitution, which ensures equal rights to all communities, must be upheld at all costs.

QUICK TAKE

NOT RISING TO THE OCCASION

A food review is more useful when it advises one to steer clear, because it saves a would-be consumer time, money and probably a pungent belch. But when a well-known British baker who has opened shop in Mexico City pooh-poohs the proud wheat tradition of the hosts, it's a culture war. After Richard Hart slighted the tortas of Mexico, chef Tania Medina retorted, "He wants to be the Christopher Columbus of bread." Maybe Hart didn't take to heart the difference between the low-starch maize, which has a rich history in the region, and the high-fibre wheat. It sounds like a half-baked attempt at attracting heat to make more dough. Not all that leavens can be daily bread.

REGIME-change operations often stray from the script, particularly when orchestrated violence becomes a policy tool. Bangladesh is fast becoming a classic case. Both the US and Pakistan were aggrieved at Sheikh Hasina's cold-shouldering, independent foreign policy stance and her friendship with India. The current bonhomie between these two countries is, inter alia, an expression of the US's gratitude to Pakistan.

One of the most crucial steps of the regime-change operation in Bangladesh was to install Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus as the head of an unelected interim government. In its 17 months in power, his dysfunctional regime has presided over mob violence, economic decline and growing extortion from business houses. There has been a flight of capital, a steep fall in investment, and a fall in GDP growth from a recent peak of 7.5 percent to below 3 percent.

Undeniably, Hasina's own policy miscalculations contributed to her ouster. Apart from corruption, cronyism and manipulating elections, one crucial error was her coddling of selected hardline Islamic groups and a crackdown on others. Madrasas mushroomed, creating a new generation of indoctrinated youngsters. Many of them are fronting violent mobs today.

In this mix, the arrival of Tarique Rahman, the acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the eldest son of former PM Khaleda Zia, after 17 years in exile in the UK changes the political matrix before the February 2026 election. It is likely to improve the BNP's chances of winning a majority.

Tarique's return, after acquittal in all cases in which he was convicted, points to a compact with the interim government and Yunus. This compact may have the backing of the regime-change planners, but doubts remain about Tarique's considerable political baggage. Still, India can expect another BNP-Jamaat e Islami (JeI) government emerging from the 2026 elections. Whether it will have a 're-formed' policy agenda with India is the million-taka question.

Tarique will have to navigate pressure from Pakistan and the US. He may find it useful to balance such pressures by improving ties with India. With the Hasina's Awami League banned, it could extend support to the BNP to ensure that the bigger 'devil', the JeI, does not become the bigger partner in a future government.

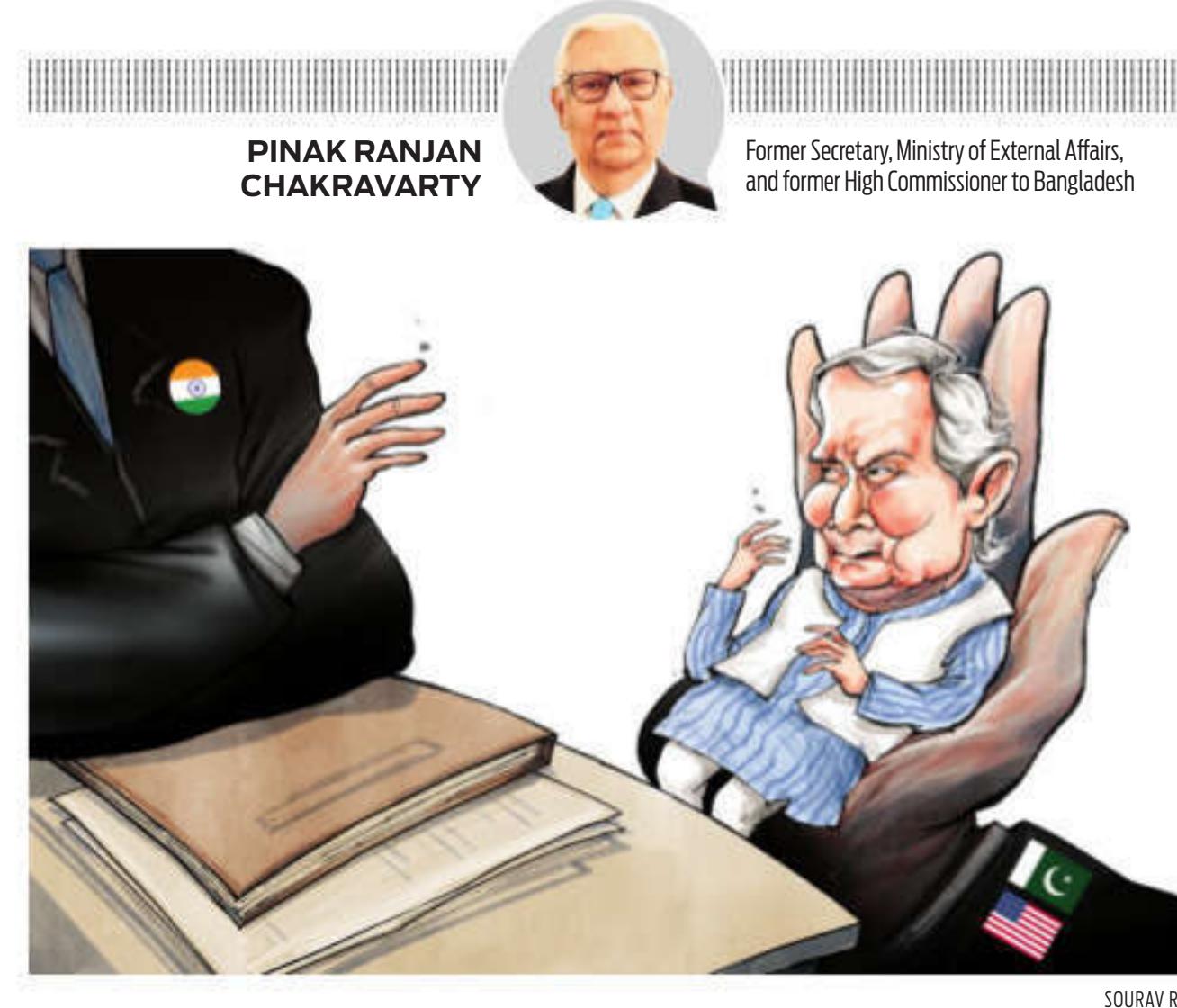
Meanwhile, the JeI, Bangladesh's largest Islamist organisation, is projecting a moderate image and desperately trying to

The return of Khaleda Zia's son Tarique Rahman after 17 years in exile points to BNP's compact with the Yunus regime. Two deaths reveal the alignment of foreign powers

RETURN OF PRODIGAL SON IN BANGLADESH CHANGES PROSPECTS

PINAK RANJAN CHAKRAVARTY

Former Secretary, Ministry of External Affairs, and former High Commissioner to Bangladesh



SOURAV ROY

discard its reputation as the Pakistan army's collaborators during the 1971 war. It remains closely aligned with Pakistan and the US and sees the current situation as its best-ever opportunity to grab power. The National Citizen Party formed by student leaders is also in the fray, though without much prospect.

Anti-Indian rhetoric has risen to new levels. Recently, a student leader threatened to isolate India's northeastern states and provide sanctuary to insurgents from India. It reflects a well-planned effort to fan the flames of a hardened nationalist rhetoric. As a direct conflict with India will be self-destructive, surrogates are being used by these new political players.

The death of young anti-Hasina activist Sharif Osman Hadi, who had founded the cultural platform Inqilab Manch—known for spewing hatred against the Awami

League and India—ignited public opinion. This rabble-rouser was shot in Dhaka and died in Singapore. Dhaka was overrun with people mourning his death. His burial site is significant—next to national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam in the Dhaka University campus, an unprecedented honour.

Social media was flooded with allegations that the alleged killer had fled to India, though police investigation failed to produce any evidence. Such deliberate provocations have led to another round of testy diplomatic exchanges between Delhi and Dhaka. Mobs burned down and looted two leading Bangladeshi newspapers—Prothom Alo and The Daily Star. Chhayanaut, a leading cultural organisation, suffered the same fate. Islamists appear to have declared war not only on India, but also on their own country's premier institutions and history.

Another mob attacked Dipu Chandra Das, a Hindu garment worker, on the false allegation of blasphemy, snatched him from police custody, beat him to death, hung his lifeless body from a tree and set it on fire. Police investigation confirmed that the deceased had not said anything blasphemous. India called the incident "horrendous" and "barbaric"; Dhaka reacted by saying the killing should not be "conflated with the security of minorities" and that several culprits had been arrested.

Mobs also attacked India's high commission in Dhaka and consulates in Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi and Sylhet, compelling India to temporarily stop issuing visas. India has officially reminded the Yunus government about its international obligation to provide security to India's diplomatic missions. Indian public opinion is inflamed. Meanwhile, Bangladesh has stopped issuing visas to Indians, and India has restarted issuing visas on "humanitarian grounds".

The UN country office, embassies of the US, Germany, France and the EU, and advocacy organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International were quick to condole the death of the Inqilab Manch leader. The German embassy went further and flew its flag at half-mast. But the brutal killing of the Hindu garment worker elicited a stunning silence. The selective response is noteworthy. Meanwhile, faced with backlash, the interim government expressed regret and offered funding to the garment worker's family.

India's neighbourhood challenge is being redefined by events in Bangladesh, hitherto a close political and economic partner. India has adopted strategic restraint so far, taking the long view and hoping that the forthcoming election will lead to political stability and a more productive engagement. There are, however, compelling geopolitical factors may force India to reassess its policy.

A Bangladesh-Pakistan military pact seems to be on the anvil. Unverified reports have surfaced of Pakistan and Turkey's intelligence agencies collaborating to create a 'special force' comprising members of Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army, with the target of using it against India and Myanmar. Indian intelligence agencies view the effort as a low-cost, deniable tool that can be used for logistics support and narrative warfare.

All these developments have heightened India's security concerns. Bangladesh must realise that rhetoric and geopolitical reality rarely converge on the same page.

(Views are personal)

Full article on newindianexpress.com

MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

Generation gap

Ref: *Tyranny of RWAs* (Dec 26). RWAs office bearers, most of them belonging to older generations, fail to align themselves with the changing norms of society and get involved in moral policing. Residents, too, must behave responsibly, maintain decorum and not disturb neighbours. RWAs must learn to sail along with Gen Z. R V Baskaran, Pune

Missing half

Ref: *The other half of future* (Dec 26). Predictive systems often replicate biases embedded in historical data. As AI is still in its infancy, humans must ensure that their own shortcomings in matters of gender are not coded into it. It's essential to shape gender-neutral institutions, laws and technologies for an inclusive India that fully harnesses the participation of its 'missing half'.

Anwesha Mishra, Bhadrak

United subcontinent

Ref: *United by blood, split by politics* (Dec 26). We can't turn a blind eye to the happenings in Bangladesh. But it's nonsensical to think of direct warlike action against a sovereign neighbour to protect Hindus there. All parties keep society polarised to reap political gains. In the subcontinent, one can espouse that all inhabitants are united by blood.

Jitendranath Guru, Padampur

Highway tragedy

Ref: *Six dead in bus-truck collision* (Dec 25). The tragic road accident has deeply saddened the local community. In recent days, traffic along this route has increased significantly, and concerns are being raised that long-distance driving fatigue, lack of rest and overspeeding may be contributing to the growing risk of such accidents. It's a stark reminder for the authorities to strengthen safety measures and spread awareness.

Darshan Yadav, Sirsa

Protect wildlife

Ref: *Poachers kill three blackbucks near Chikmagalur* (Dec 25). The killings are deeply disturbing. Allegations of negligence by forest officials and a hurried investigation demand a transparent, high-level inquiry. Blackbucks are a protected species, and such incidents pose a grave threat to biodiversity. The government must strictly enforce wildlife laws, and hold offenders and errant officials accountable.

Umme Haani, Bengaluru

RESIZING AMERICA'S SENSE OF SELF

KAJAL BASU

Veteran journalist

then by the DoJ releasing the records—only to begin massively redacting them from its website within hours of release, especially for documentation to do with Trump.

In the interstices of this stormy diminution of ratings and the public outcry against the harm done by presidential duplicity to juvenile-focused familyism—one of the foundations of American society—other self-critiques began doing the rounds. Trump has always trumpeted his height as 6'3".

This steadily declining graph is a reliable mirror to America's glissading sense of self under the Trump presidency. Trump has been promising big and delivering small. The Epstein files fiasco is a case in point. One of Trump's presidential election planks was the unconditional release of the entire, unredacted Epstein files. In January, Trump reiterated his promise. In February, his attorney general Pam Bondi told an interviewer that an Epstein "client list" was on her desk. The department of justice (DoJ) ostentatiously sent "declassified" dossiers to far-right influencers—but it was material already in the public domain.

On February 21, Trump's ratings fell to 45 percent. A month later, they were down to 43 percent. On April 25, Virginia Giuffre, one of the early Epstein accusers, died by suicide—and between then and May 18, his ratings plateaued. Giuffre's death forced his ratings further down to 40 percent on June 19, two weeks before the DoJ denied that Epstein maintained a "client list" at all, and that it wouldn't release any more files. On July 21, Trump's ratings plummeted to 37 percent. On October 1, Trump hit a relative high of 40 percent, until Giuffre's posthumous memoir, published on October 19, clubbed the ratings down to 37 percent. They slid further to 36 percent on November 3, where they remained until last declared on December 1.

Meanwhile, the Trump dispensation doubled down on halting the skid, first by releasing emails sent between Epstein and others, then by the Congress passing and Trump signing into law the Epstein Files Transparency Act, and

The fall in Trump's approval ratings through 2025 reflected America's glissading sense of self. It coincided with his team's back-and-forth on releasing the Epstein files. A battle of real and proclaimed statutes played out. Portraits of his team, including Chief of Staff Susie Wiles, resized them in the public eye

When photographs surfaced of him walking beside Prince William, who is confirmed as 6'3", in September, Trump appeared six inches shorter. The war of tallness—or *größe/ekrieg*, a war of grandeur—broke hearts across social media platforms, with MAGA warriors sharing the quicksand of doubt with left liberals. Potus guaranteed being larger-than-life in two crucial forms—an ethical promise and his own persona—and fell short in both senses.

There was more to come. On Decem-

India's tech wave continues despite restrictive H1B policies

AMID delay in finalisation of US-India trade deal, the US administration under Donald Trump has fired another salvo towards India. After imposing a higher entry fee of \$100,000 for new applicants of H1B, the Trump administration, now, has announced another significant change.

The current method of 'lottery' system will now be scrapped. So far, H1B visas are granted based on a 'lottery' system. This is because far more people apply for entering into US than the annual limit of 85,000 visas. The system now will eliminate this lottery. Instead, a new system will now be followed. Under the new rule, H1B visa applications will be weighted based on wage levels set by the US Department of Labour (DOL).

Applicants offered higher salaries will have a better chance of selection. These new rules will be effective from February 27, 2026. With this change, the US administration has shown its intent to welcome only experienced and high-skilled professionals. Time and again, the supporter base of Trump are alleging that low-skilled employees are entering into the US under the H1B visa rule as the US companies are replacing American workers with cheap foreign workers. With the new norms, young professionals will find it difficult to move to the US under the H1B visa programme.

As a major beneficiary, India will be the most impacted due to the new norm. Global technology companies including Indian IT services companies rely on H1B

visa route to send professionals to the US for working on client projects. While Indian IT companies like TCS, Infosys, HCLTech, Wipro and many others have significantly reduced their dependence on this immigration route by localising their workforce in the US; reliance of American technology giants like Microsoft, Meta, Google, and several others remains high. So, such restrictions may impact their ability to hire Indian technology talent for sending them to their US offices.

Notably, the writing was on the wall with regard to H1B visa programme for several months. After imposing a high entry fee, reports started appearing that the US visa applications are facing undue delays as the authorities are following a restrictive approach towards new ap-

provals. Many of the visa interviews scheduled for January 2026 have been pushed forward to September, reports have said. These are signs that the MAGA base of Trump supporters are getting an upper hand in the policy making.

If this continues, Indian techies' American dream may be over for now. Sources in the know said that many Indian IT firms have stopped applying for H1B visas altogether. Given the high entry fee, procedural delays and other bottlenecks, they are pursuing clients to get the project work done from offshore locations like India or from near shore locations like Mexico and Canada. Reflection of more work getting done from India is already seen.

Industry sources are hinting that given the cost pressure on clients,

they are willing to get their project work done from offshore locations like India. Not only that, the pace of foreign companies setting up technology centres or Global Capability Centres (GCCs) in India has gone up in 2025. More companies are opting India as their technology centre given the high talent availability, cost advantage and supportive infrastructure.

This augurs well for Indian technology ecosystem. Already, several global technology giants like Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Accenture, Cognizant have unveiled plans to invest billions of dollars in India to boost their AI offerings. So, with H1B or without H1B visa, India's technology industry holds a pole position in the global technology world.

LETTERS

ISRO is at the top because of its team

THIS has reference to your editorial 'ISRO deserves more kudos that what it has received'. Behind the galloping success of ISRO, being able to send mammoth satellites into outer space, lays the humble and modest beginning of the premier space research program of the country, when the rocket parts were transported on the bicycle and bullock cart, during the late sixties. The premier space institution was primarily made for boosting outer space science, weather prediction and launching India's own satellites, on a modest scale. The successful launch of LVM3-M6 rocket as part of the BlueBird Block-2 mission marks a historic landmark, to place the largest commercial communications satellite in low earth orbit, while the Blue Bird Block-2 satellite became the heaviest payload of 6,100kg to be launched by India's own ISRO. What makes it unique is ISRO's zero failure of the present workhorse LVM3 Bahubali rocket. ISRO's consistent performance is evident because of a dedicated team of scientists coupled with the best infrastructure; and unstinted support and funding by the government. Let this success story of ISRO continue, with leaps and bounds.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

Govt initiatives and entrepreneurship

THIS is in response to the article "How students are redefining entrepreneurship" published in 'The Hans India' on December 26. The article highlights the crucial role played by government initiatives such as Startup India in promoting entrepreneurship among students. By providing access to market research reports, online courses, and government schemes, the initiative is helping students turn their ideas into feasible business models.

Campus incubators are also playing a vital role in nurturing these young entrepreneurs by offering mentorship, funding opportunities, and networking platforms. I agree that India's demographic advantage is a significant factor in this trend. With one of the world's youngest populations, the country has a generation that is digitally native and highly adaptable. These students are leveraging technology to solve contemporary problems and design scalable solutions. The article also brings out the importance of educational institutions in fostering entrepreneurship. With the right support and resources, these young entrepreneurs can make a significant impact and take India to new heights.

Koluru Raju, Kakinada

Rail passengers burdened once again

THE latest train fare hike reflects a troubling pattern. Passengers are repeatedly asked to pay more without seeing proportional improvements in basic facilities. Over-crowded coaches, unhygienic bogies, malfunctioning toilets, delayed trains, and poor customer service remain routine realities for millions. Calling this "fare rationalisation" ignores the lived experience of ordinary commuters who depend on railways for affordable travel. Sustainability cannot come at the cost of dignity and safety. Before burdening passengers again, the Railways must first ensure clean coaches, punctual services, and humane travel conditions. Without accountability and visible upgrades, this hike appears less like reform and more like misplaced priorities.

Dr Vijaykumar H K, Raichur

Deadly lapse

THE accident in Chitradurga, where a truck crossed the median and collided head-on with a private bus, leading to a fire that claimed six lives, is deeply distressing. It reminds us of similar tragedies this winter, particularly fog-related crashes in northern India. Dense seasonal fog reduces visibility drastically, and when combined with driver fatigue—often from long hours without proper rest—and inadequate or improperly adjusted headlights, the risk of vehicles veering across medians rises sharply.

In this case, the truck driver appears to have dozed off, a recurring issue in overnight commercial travel. Such incidents highlight how small lapses in vigilance or vehicle maintenance can turn fatal on busy highways.

A Mylamsami, Coimbatore

II

THE horrific bus accident in Karnataka, where 17 passengers were charred to death and 20 injured after a truck jumped a divider and collided with a private luxury bus, is a painful reminder of how unsafe road travel continues to be. The reasons are many—bad road design, over speeding, unfit vehicles, drunken driving, misuse of high beams, weak legal enforcement, and corruption. Possible solutions are safer road engineering, strict law enforcement, regular vehicle checks, and swift justice. Technology too can help—similar to 'Kavach' in railways, which is used to prevent collisions, it can be adopted for road transport. These tragedies can be avoided when institutions, citizens, and technology work together.

Dr O Prasada Rao, Hyderabad

thehansreader@gmail.com

BENGALURU ONLINE

Daily cost of feeding each stray dog estimated at Rs III: GBA

BENGALURU: As per directions of the Supreme Court, urban local bodies are preparing to relocate stray dogs in the city to shelter homes, with the Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) estimating that the cost of maintaining each dog will be ₹3,035 per month, or about ₹111 per day. The civic authorities have decided to outsource the task of capturing stray dogs, shifting them to shelter centres and maintaining them through tenders to non-governmental organisations and private agencies. Tenders for this purpose are already being floated by the city administrations. According to official estimates, the Greater Bengaluru Authority jurisdiction has around 2.79 lakh stray dogs. Agencies awarded the contract will be responsible for catching the dogs, vaccinating them and relocating them to shelter homes. At the shelters, the dogs will be fed twice a day and provided basic medical care. The cost calculation includes the salary of staff comprising one para-veterinarian and four assistants, along with expenses towards medical treatment, sanitation and administrative operations.

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

Why political honesty matters more than optics in 2026

Democracy demands consistency, not convenience



ership credibility. A positive political outlook must be anchored in leaders who communicate conviction, competence, and consistency. Personalities cannot replace preparation.



Unfortunately, large sections of the opposition ecosystem appear to expend disproportionate energy on vilifying Prime Minister Narendra Modi, running down India on international platforms, and injecting religion into political discourse through distorted interpretations of Sanatana Dharma and overt appeasement politics.

This approach ignores a basic political reality: minorities in India do not vote en bloc, just as majorities do not think uniformly. The Indian voter—irrespective of religion—is increasingly discerning, aware of governmental omissions and commissions, and capable of independent judgement.

The opposition's failure lies not in losing elections, but in failing to learn why it is losing them. The BJP's repeated electoral success is not merely a function of its strength, but of a weak, fractured opposition trapped in a politics of resentment rather than relevance.

Ironically, while accusing the BJP of blurring constitutional lines between state and religion—through temple-centric politics or majoritarian rhetoric—the opposition itself repeatedly tags every issue to religion, often selectively and inaccurately. Violations of court orders or attempts to prevent the lighting of Karthigai Deepam, an ancient Shavite tradition, barely elicit protest. Selective targeting of Hindu practices passes without comment.

At the same time, parties like the DMK argue that Diwali represents North Indian cultural imposition, ignoring the festival's pan-Hindu character and its diverse regional expres-

sions. Pitting Deepam against Diwali is an artificial and divisive construct that deepens cultural fault lines rather than addressing governance.

The problem is compounded by selective and reductive definitions of Hinduism. Too often, it is portrayed narrowly as a social system rooted only in caste hierarchy or ritual oppression, ignoring its vast philosophical and civilisational diversity—from Vedanta and Bhakti traditions to Shaiva-Shakta schools and folk practices.

Critique of religion is legitimate in a democracy, but mischaracterisation weakens critique and fuels polarisation. Intellectual inaccuracy does not strengthen secularism; it corrodes it.

Faith, when turned into a

political weapon, loses its capacity for dialogue. Many who indulge in demeaning Hinduism have little engagement with its texts or traditions. This brand of pseudo-secularism finds it convenient to target Hindu practices because visible outrage from the majority community is often muted. Yet such asymmetry damages social trust. Consider the situation of Hindus in Bangladesh, where targeted violence has been widely reported. When senior Congress leader and former chief minister Digvijay Singh described this as a "reaction" to developments in India, one must ask: reaction to what? The unwillingness to even name the persecution reflects moral evasion.

Similarly, when Pakistani terrorists killed Indian civil-

ians in Pahalgam, sections of the opposition rushed to suggest "home-grown terrorism," asserting that terrorists do not ask religion because they are "trigger-friendly." Such reflexive equivocation weakens national resolve and confuses accountability.

The opposition's selective outrage extends to symbolism as well. Prime Minister Modi's visit to a church in Delhi for Christmas celebrations is dismissed as electoral drama. Yet when Rahul Gandhi visited temples during Gujarat elections, projecting himself as a "janewar-dhari Brahmin," it was defended as cultural outreach. Political optics cannot be condemned selectively.

That said, criticism must be balanced. The BJP, too, bears responsibility. Incidents such as vandalism of schools and attacks on Christian institutions during Christmas must be stopped decisively. Those responsible should be identified, shamed, and punished without delay.

Allegations of crimes against women involving BJP leaders must invite swift disciplinary action, keeping accused individuals away from the party until due process is complete. Moral authority cannot be selective.

Another persistent contradiction within the opposition is its objection to statues of Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Syama Prasad Mukherjee, and Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya. The argument that these figures belong to the BJP or RSS rings hollow.

When Congress was in power, it named airports, schemes, and institutions after Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi, often projecting freedom struggle narratives as if no one else contributed.

The same formula was replicated in Telangana, where the previous TRS regime portrayed

(The author is former Chief Editor of 'The Hans India')

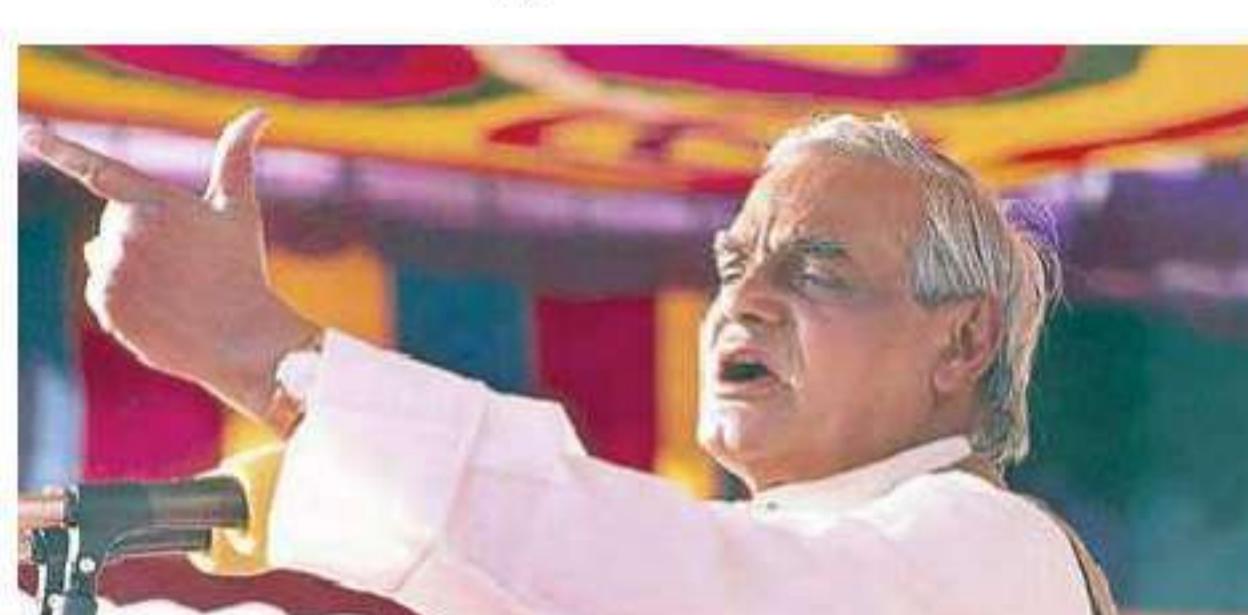
A voice that still echoes

When Vajpayee spoke, Hyderabad listened...

DR HYMA MOORTY

ATAL BIHARI Vajpayee will always be remembered as an astute leader who upheld democratic traditions and values, a great administrator, and most of all, a good human being. He connected effortlessly with both young and old. His oratory skills, poetic flair, wit and humour made him a "must hear" speaker—you'd want to listen to him at least once in a lifetime. I was one of the lucky few who heard him not once, but three times. Even after so many years, his words still echo in my ears. His powerful speeches left an indelible mark on every audience.

It was the year 1961, I was only 10, when my father, one evening, told me to be ready by 5pm—we had to reach Goshamahal Grounds, to hear this great man. From a young age I was fascinated by political speeches; I didn't even know who Vajpayee ji was then. My father was a huge admirer and never missed his meetings. I always tagged along. By the



time we got to the sprawling ground, the stadium was almost full.

People were buzzing with anticipation. He arrived almost on time—unlike present day politicians who wait for the crowd to swell. As a Hyderabad girl, I struggled with his chaste Hindi that flowed like calm water, but I was completely taken over by his oratory and the way he connected with the crowd. From that moment I became a huge fan and follower. His speeches at Charminar, Gulzar Houz, Nizam College grounds, Fateh Maidan (present day Lal Bahadur Stadium) – venues too small for the surging crowds—remain unforgettable.

The second time I heard him was in 1969 during the separate Telangana movement, when he supported the demand for a separate state. We sat in awe, jaws dropped, marvelling at how he kept the audience spellbound. This time I was seated right in front. I was part of the student movement, even on a hunger strike. He praised the

girls and promised full support. Amid the peak agitation he warned students against violence, reminding us that it would derail our goals and bring harsh repercussions. He advised us to always target oriented and hit the Bull's eye. His strong, loud voice, with its unmistakable style, reverberated through every lane of Hyderabad.

His fiery, powerful speeches after Emergency were also worth listening to. Even his opponents sometimes attended his meetings just for the sheer oratory. As Foreign Minister Vajpayee became the first person in 1977 to deliver a speech at the United Nations General Assembly in Hindi.

Vajpayee's role in the 1998 Pokhran nuclear tests (Op-

eration Shakti) was decisive, as Prime Minister, he green lit the secret tests, demonstrating Indian Nuclear capability and self-reliance, managing intense international pressure and establishing National Technology Day to honour scientists like Dr. Abdul Kalam who made it happen, solidifying India as a nuclear power. The "People's President" Dr. Kalam was his 'gift' to the people of that era.

Many a times Vajpayee said that his poetry is a declaration of war, not an exordium to defeat. It is not the defeated soldier's drumbeat of despair, but the fighting warrior's will to win. It is not the dispirited voice of dejection but the slurring shouting of victory.

Vajpayee's legacy is frequently discussed in the context of India's evolving civilisational politics.

Commentators argue that he broadened the appeal of cultural nationalism by combining it with consensual politics, parliamentary decorum and a commitment to democratic institution. His rhetoric style and poetry continue to be cited as expression of a vision of India that integrates modern governance with cultural self-awareness.



DECCAN Chronicle

27 DECEMBER 2025

Whither Christmas?
'Tis the gory season

The spirit of Christmas may have been damped for millions of people as violence in the name of religion seemed to overflow this festive season. People who do violence are, by definition, not religious as the world's major religions profess love, joy, peace and togetherness in the greater cause of humanity. It is a commentary on the times we live that it has become seemingly impossible to separate the religious from other motives like political and economic for the violence that the world is suffering from.

As the US bombed Islamist militants in Nigeria on Christmas Day, the actions of Bangladeshis against people of a religious minority led to a second death and incidents of intimidation of people celebrating Christmas in India took place in many states, it did lend credence to the view that religion tends to promote hate and violence. It was sadder that these events were taking place around the day of celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ whose followers make the world's majority religious group.

Whatever be the motivation, there can be no excuses for violence. And yet as we see more of it, we are being let down by the fact that governments also struggle to separate religion and the church or temple or mosque. Openly religious messages from government representatives favouring one religion over another or others further impels a rise in hate speech that according to one estimate has been nearly 75 per cent in the last 10 years in India.

The rise of the right in many parts of the world has not helped either. In fact, the emboldening of many people who are seeing this ideology take salience has triggered a massive upward swing in hate in the form of racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-migrant bias and such traits, so much so, a lot of it is being reflected in the episodic violence that persons are unleashing on others. And this is not confined to any one major nation as the attack on Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia, showed.

Right-minded people have pointed out that Christmas this year has been marked by fear and anxiety among Christians in several parts of India. There have been events in Madhya Pradesh, Kerala, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Assam in which attacks have disrupted the joyful celebration of the festival with vigilantes vandalising the symbols of observance like lights and festoons and even manhandling people like carol singers in brazen shows of hateful intolerance.

Christian leaders are not wrong in wondering why the constitutional right to practice one's faith is being challenged so openly. It is the silence of many leaders of the country who have desisted from calling out the injustice of religious intolerance that hurts more than the misplaced youths who are going around vandalising places of celebration of important festivals of the minorities like Christians and Muslims who, in numbering above 200 million in a nation of 1.45 billion, are not an insignificant group.

No faith is excused of intolerance as the followers of all religions have a right to coexist in a country that has prided itself on unity in diversity. As the oldest religion, Hinduism teaches compassion, tolerance and goodwill towards all and the time has come to recognise that hate and intolerance will drag down India to the level of many other nations that have allowed religious faultlines to develop which are threatening the social fabric of peaceful co-existence.

Greater Hyderabad sets record

The Telangana government has finally notified the administrative setup to govern the newly extended civic body of Hyderabad — the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) — officially unveiling the country's largest municipal corporation.

Until the first week of December, the Hyderabad metropolitan region, encircled by the Outer Ring Road, was administered by an array of mismatched civic bodies, including GHMC, seven other municipal corporations and 20 municipalities. Of these, GHMC was the largest civic body, with a territorial jurisdiction of 650 square kilometres.

In January 2025, chief minister A. Revanth Reddy first spoke of the need to streamline municipal administration and consolidate the city under a single authority, on the lines of several global cities. Large cities can build city-wide systems with long-term planning. As a result, the Congress government merged all 27 urban local bodies into Hyderabad, creating the country's largest municipal corporation with a geographical spread of 2,000 sq. km and a population of 1.34 crores.

Compared to the extended GHMC, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation administers an area of 480 sq. km, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike 709 sq. km, the Greater Chennai Corporation 426 sq. km and the Kolkata Municipal Corporation 206 sq. km. Even the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), which was split into three urban bodies in 2012, governed 1,397.3 sq. km in terms of territory. GHMC is 2.5 times bigger than Singapore and nearly as large as Mauritius.

While the intent behind creating a mega-Hyderabad is acceptable, one must not lose sight of the real purpose of municipal administration — resolving people's issues related to basic civic facilities at the local level. However, if a city becomes bigger than 27 very small countries, larger than the national capital Delhi (1,484 sq. km) and two-thirds the size of a state like Goa, its administration may become unwieldy, effectively turning it into a state within a state. People must be able to access basic necessities closer to home.

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Farrukh
Dhondy
Cabbages & Kings



'You fed your heart on fantasy
The heart didn't like the diet
All gone, no joy, no ecstasy
All replaced by disquiet
A waste of emotional space
Destructive panorama
Warm in deception's embrace
Curtain call on the drama...'
— From A Lighter Grade of Whale

Dear Usha Vance,

Recent developments compel me to write this second open letter to you. You may have seen the first — perhaps because some Indian friend or relative spotted it in these very pages and sent it on.

We know that the White House corps monitors every mention of the Orangebooboo in American and foreign publications and must have seen my first letter in which he unavoidably featured.

I do realise that if these interceptors read my letter to you, they may have felt that passing it on to you might put subversive ideas into your innocent head and so refrained.

Now, UshaJi, you must accept that I am no conspirator theorist. I avowedly hate those who are, as I characterise them as idiotic or even dangerous, provocative fantasists.

I am sure that my pleas and considerations to you in this letter will appeal to some as "conspiratorial nonsense", but I shall ignore such objections and go

Subhani



Mumbai on verge of being bartered to highest bidder?



Shobhaa's Take

Santa Claus has the right idea... visit people only once a year", wrote Victor Borge. Well... maybe Santa decided to skip India this year and flew his sled directly to a less polluted destination. His reindeers wouldn't have survived our toxic air. And we are talking TOXIC! This goes beyond just air quality. Overall, the "mahau" across the country is pretty awful. I look at headlines and either flinch or cringe. Daily killings are a part of our diet. We passionately consume and condone murders, lynchings, maiming, beatings, like we consume mindless OTT content. No questions asked. Am I wrong or is this the first time an RSS worker attacked innocent kids for singing carols? This happened in Palakkad, Kerala. But I sensed unease on Xmas Eve around Mumbai as well. My locality was a combat zone in any case. The Bangladeshi deputy high commission close by was heavily guarded, traffic was diverted and several shops chose to remain shut, fearing violent protests following the lynching of 25-year-old Dipu Das, a Hindu worker accused of blasphemy, in Dhaka.

Irony. SoBo, where we reside, is an area that has welcomed and housed thousands of illegal Bangladeshi for decades.

Though it is an open secret, no local *neta* has dared to

immigrants becomes that much tougher. Not that the authorities are all that bothered.

Even the cops look the other way if pressured to take action when trouble erupts. Over time, feeble attempts were made to send them back. But, sigh exhausted cops, once they reach Kolkata by train, they lie low for a few weeks and then return surreptitiously to reclaim their old jobs in Mumbai.

Bangladesh is in shambles today. The "Saviour" is back. Tarique Rahman ended 17 years of exile and returned to his homeland, promising a "safe, peaceful Bangladesh". Tall order. But the Bangladeshi in Mumbai aren't rushing back!

The reason nobody wants to address the problem of Bangladeshi living illegally in Mumbai is simple: *Netas* need them. They have been sponsored and nurtured as captive vote banks by local MLAs way back when. The story continues. With crucial elections coming up in Mumbai, MMR and Nashik on January 15, 2026, every vote counts. The kitty to be won is monumental. The Brothers Thackeray have "reunited" for what's worth, possibly in panic mode to combat what looks like a lost cause already — Sena (UBT) and MNS, contesting as an alliance, was a move waiting to happen, given how political pundits are reading the frost in the air. The BJP and the Eknath Shinde-led Shiv Sena are already in a celebratory mood, seeing the warring cousins on the backfoot. They are like a discounted "combo meal", hanging on to each other in a desperate bid for survival. Devendra Fadnavis, CM and BJP leader, was scathing and dismissive about the latest move, jauntily declaring: "This is their existential fight. They are resorting to the politics of appeasement. It's not as

Though the elections are being held for corporations in 29 cities, it's really about capturing the BMC, one of the richest civic bodies in India. Eat this: the BMC's staggering budget for 2025-26 is ₹74,427 crores.

if Russia and Ukraine have unitied." I love it! Fadnavis referencing an "existential fight".

Wonder who scripted the quote? Is our CM a fan of Jean Paul Sartre? Albert Camus? Perspective and perception are everything. When Fadnavis mocked, "Not like Putin and Zelensky are coming together", right after the cousins and the two *vaishis* showed up together after nearly 20 years, "Bro Code" fully on, Eknath Shinde promptly jumped in and fanned the fire further, by adding: "The cousins can't take care of their own children... What can they do to save Mumbai?" Catch phrase: "Save Mumbai".

These are all a bunch of self-appointed "saviours". Only Mumbaikars can save Mumbai. By snatching Mumbai back from the exploiters who have stripped it systematically, ruthlessly, cold-blooded. There's a line in *Dhurandhar* (the current Bollywood blockbuster that's dropped many political bombs on both sides of the border), in which a character says, "The person who controls Karachi, controls Pakistan." Similarly, the party that controls Mumbai, controls Maharashtra. And indirectly also yields substantial political/financial clout across India. The rich and famous people these days refuse to fly commercial, a very successful event planner told me recently. She handles big ticket celebs — movie stars, cricketers, performing artistes, singers, dancers, entertainers of all hues. With a laugh, she admitted, even minor celebs demand private jets, airily telling her to just "bill it to the client". As if clients are that *beawaoof*. As if the chartered flight option is declined, some of these pompous names insist on flying first class with their entire family. The rest of the entourage fly biz class. But nobody is willing to fly economy — not even the spot boy. "If my travel budget for one artist alone hits ₹12-20 lakhs for a gig, how can I justify the cost to my client?" How, indeed!

And that's the upside.

She mentioned a top bracket performer who got the travel money upfront and in cash. When he landed in Singapore, the organisers were shocked to see him minus the family, sheepishly emerging from cattle class himself!!

I am happily declaring 2026 as "The Year of the Hustle". Look around you. What do you see? I see hustlers galore who represent every field and constituency. The political hustle has always existed... it's just more in your face now. Win... or die, as they say.

Let's join the gang and hustle away. I'm signing up for a masterclass.

Which one will the Mumbaikar bite into without worrying about indigestion?

With 2026 right around the corner, everyone's getting a little antsy.

We have a brand-new airport, which is being dubbed "India's civil aviation sector's game-changer...". Which game? What change? The Navi Mumbai International Airport is looking dazzling. It's a 28-year-old dream, we're told. All 1,160 hectares of it in Ulwe. It's the largest greenfield airport in the country. The interesting statistic for me is that it features 75 aircraft stands for private jets and charters.

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Instagram handle @ShobhaaDe, Twitter handle @DeShobhaa

LETTERS
CPI TURNS 100

For the Communist Party of India (CPI), which turned 100 on Dec. 26, it is a celebration of 100 years of struggle, sacrifice, and commitment to social justice and equality. The party's historical contribution to India's freedom movement, its relentless fight for the oppressed, and its role in the international communist movement are testaments to its relevance. The CPI etched its name in global political history in 1957 when E.M.S.

Namboodiripad led the world's first democratically elected communist government in Kerala. The moment placed the party at the forefront of parliamentary Left politics, blending ideology with electoral legitimacy. The occasion is an opportunity for the CPI to reflect on its sacrifices for the working class and marginalised.

R. SIVAKUMAR
Chennai

ISRO'S CLOUD GROWS

With the successful launch of the LVM3-M6 mission ISRO has once again demonstrated its capability to launch heavy satellites weighing six tonnes or more. In recent years, every ISRO mission has showcased new technology or operational milestone. Though each achievement may appear incremental in isolation, together they reflect the steady evolution of ISRO into one of the world's most capable space agencies. Indeed, 2025 has been a momentous year for ISRO. It began with the successful docking and undocking of two satellites under the SpaceDeX mission — an essential capability for India's planned space station and future deep-space missions — and concluded with the LVM3-M6 launch.

M. Jeyaram
Sholavandan

RLY FARES RISE

This is the second time in a year that the ministry has revised passenger train fares. Indian Railways introduced a revised fare system that will primarily impact long-distance journeys and AC-class travel. An increase of 2 per cent per km — so a 1,000 km trip will now cost ₹20 more. The revised fare structure reflects a balanced approach that safeguards passenger convenience while maintaining operational sustainability.

JAYANTHY SUBRAMANIAM
Coimbatore

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

strategies for getting there would be, so I feel inclined, in sharing the goal (in the strong belief that you will get JD to reverse the entire nonsensical,

racist, destructive, fantasy-economic and cruel anti-welfare social policies and the international bully-boy tactics that Stump has imposed) with my own tactical observations.

Lump is on the skids as I and you and JD and the Republican Party — now split into at least three or four factions — only one of them firmly Orangebooboo — are well aware. The economy is collapsing with the common consumer aware that tariffs have raised the price of living. The foreign policy — or should it be renamed foreign piracy in light of the attacks on Venezuelan ships — with claims on Canada and Greenland — is seen internationally as a violation of international law, if not an ominously dangerous joke.

The Epstein files, in which Orangebooboo figures, riding on the paedo's jet eight or more times, once with a twenty-year-old possible victim, prove that he lied about the depth and extent of his involvement in the Epstein saga.

Again, in admittedly conspiratorial mode, I am inclined to believe that the women who were underage victims of the Epstein oligarchy have been paid millions to keep their mouths shut and threatened with instant elimination (accidental deaths? Forced suicide??) if they don't. And then, there is evidence of Orangebooboo's deteriorating capabilities and demented rambblings. These together, with the almost certain humiliation of Republicans in the 2026 mid-term elections, will certainly spell Orangebooboo's "Curtain Call" at Cactus Creek". I'm aware that constitutional moves by both Houses of Congress are needed to get rid of a sitting President. Behind the scenes, JD has to get his associates — and you could be talking secretly to Democrats in both Houses — to trigger this dismissive move.

You can't afford to wait till 2028 when Booby, who has demonstrated his ample contempt for the Constitution, says he will not rule out standing again.

The divided party is unlikely to support his candidature and, since JD has had to play obedient puppy throughout this term, he will also be persona non grata.

So, Usha, move fast. How?

Wait till the predicted disastrous mid-term defeats, point out to the Republican Party, using all the channels and platforms available to a vice-president, that Orangebooboo has not achieved MAGA and, with exposure in the Epstein files and deteriorating health and brain, he should be politely sent off golfing.

Then you and

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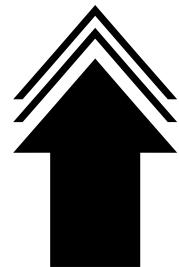
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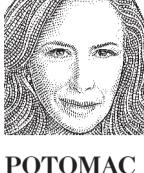
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OPINION

'Moderate' Hostage Taking



The next time a conservative gripes that Speaker Mike Johnson isn't playing hard enough ball, remind him that this speaker rarely gets to call all the shots. If 2023-24 was the age of hard-line hostage tactics, this year's smaller GOP majority has become the internee of moderate extortionists.

Four of them—New York's Mike Lawler and Pennsylvania's Brian Fitzpatrick, Ryan Mackenzie and Rob Bresnahan—last week tanked months of hard-fought Republican healthcare effort with one display of indignation. They wanted an extension of the Democrats' costly Covid-era ObamaCare subsidies, and when they didn't get it, they threw their support—and the whip hand—to Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

Republicans were poised to do something rare: pass a healthcare bill that would be a solid win on both policy and politics. Getting there had taken courage. Democrats designed the shutdown to pummel Republicans over the subsidies and to pressure them into taking another step toward government-controlled healthcare. Republicans had folded many times in the past, and the easy GOP option would have been pay up, rinse, repeat.

They instead chose to re-engage on healthcare with legislation designed to lower prices rather than throw money at price spikes created by past

POTOMAC WATCH
By Kimberley A. Strassel

spending. Their bill would have been the one House-passed alternative to Democrats' continued demands. The four moderates sucked that advantage dry—and made moot the GOP sacrifice during the shutdown—when they defected last week to sign a Jeffries discharge petition that will allow House Democrats in January to pass a straight-up subsidy extension, a rival to the GOP plan.

To listen to the moderates—and the press that glorified their move—they were motivated by deep compassion. "These are people that we care about—these are our friends and neighbors that are receiving these subsidies," Mr. Fitzpatrick told Politico, which quoted him in a piece headlined "The day Brian Fitzpatrick finally said enough." Others blamed their behavior on President Trump for being unpopular, thereby making them unpopular and compelling them to atone by spending everybody else's money.

That isn't the whole story. Mr. Fitzpatrick and other moderates had been pushing a compromise that would have extended the subsidies for two years at a cost of at least \$60 billion in return for some antifraud provisions. As the GOP geared up for its big reform vote, the moderates insisted they get a vote on their version too.

They were given that option, with the caveat that their amendment include money to pay for their subsidy extension. Leadership staff teamed up with moderate staff to find an acceptable "pay for," and produced one that even Republicans had

crats had voted for in the past. The moderates were poised—with a little Democratic cooperation—to get exactly what they said they wanted.

They instead walked away. Why? According to sources, moderates wanted a subsidy bill they could vote for—making them look wonderful—but that Democrats would vote against, thereby giving moderates a leg up for re-election. Whether subsidy money made it to Mr. Fitzpatrick's "friends and neighbors" apparently ranked far below job security.

The GOP's slender House majority gives outsize power to tiny factions of lawmakers.

This is a theme of 2025. Hard-line conservatives set the mold in January 2023, using their raw power in the GOP's small majority to extract concessions through 15 rounds of speaker votes (and the later defenestration of Kevin McCarthy). They ultimately grew wary of the internal blowback and settled down. The moderates are proving more durable mercenaries.

The 119th Congress's GOP majority is even smaller, and the moderates remind Mr. Johnson of it each day. They nakedly shook down concession after concession for their votes for the reconciliation bill. Republicans: We must fulfill our promise to cut Biden's Green New Deal. Mods: Nope, must keep the subsidies. Re-

publicans: We must tackle the debt with deeper reforms to fraud-filled Medicaid and food stamps. Mods: Nope—money, money, money.

And don't forget the great state and local tax extortion, their demand that red-state toilers again transfer vast wealth to wealthy blue-state constituents. While the 2017 tax bill limited the SALT deduction to \$10,000, GOP colleagues were sympathetic to their colleagues from high-tax states. They generously offered to double it. Moderates exacted a ransom of \$40,000.

Mr. Johnson increasingly must worry about moderate "discharge" petitions. One example: Florida's Rep. Anna Paulina Luna's teaming up with a dozen Republicans to demand the GOP abandon its principled opposition to Nancy Pelosi's "proxy voting," and let Ms. Luna have parental leave from her congressional duties.

The moderates were demanding SALT concessions well before Mr. Trump's polling downturn. His unpopularity helps argue their cause, but they hardly need that excuse. And no amount is ever enough. The SALT payoff was supposed to pave their way to re-election. Now they want \$60 billion more in ObamaCare subsidies.

The problem here isn't "moderates" per se. The GOP needs to play in districts everywhere—that's the path to a bigger majority. The problem is a moderate caucus that thinks their only path to re-election is blowing the bank and wants their party to blow its reputation to give it to them.

Write to kim@wsj.com.

C.S. Lewis Was Too Cynical About Christmas

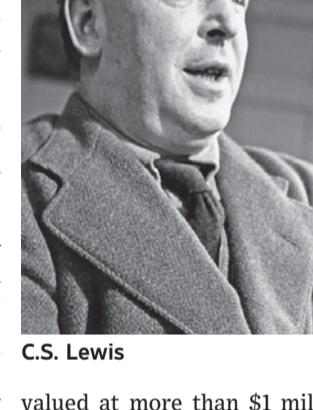
HOUSES OF WORSHIP C.S. Lewis I o a t h e d

By Francis X. Maier

Christmas as a commercial racket almost as much as he loved it as a holy day. He saw mass gift-giving as a kind of annual blackmail, a "symptom of that lunatic condition" of our time "in which everyone lives by persuading everyone else to buy things." By Dec. 25, given the ritual pressures, the average family looked as if "there had been a long illness in the house." Lewis spent most of his life as a bachelor. That explains a lot.

He loathed the day's commercialism, not realizing it can be in the service of love.

As a child in the 1950s, I had a different experience. My parents were Christmas addicts. The season was glorious. It began the day after Thanksgiving and rolled on through early January with wreaths, creches, Advent calendars, elf charts, midnight Mass, cards, gifts, and hours of carols. My dad spray-painted our tree silver each year. At night, it was alive with glistening ornaments, lights and the promise of marvels to come. I also learned, from hands-on experience, that those fluffy white clouds surrounding our Nativity scene and Baby Jesus weren't made of cotton but of hundreds of



C.S. Lewis

thin, intensely sharp strands of spun glass.

Memories matter. My most enduring one is the year I got an electric train. That Christmas was a black-bag operation. My dad spent weeks in the basement, forbidden territory, secretly building a miniature metropolis with tracks, an engine, rolling stock, tunnels, houses, and switches for the Big Day. It was an entire imaginary world, immune to time—a forever bridge between my father's love and me. He was a man of few words, and we were always very different. But he made something beautiful, and he did it for me, purely to see the joy in my face. Not that I understood it at the time.

Now in my 70s, I remember that train every December. This year nostalgia arrived early, and I decided to buy one for myself. It sounded simple enough. Our kids are grown, Amazon has a wide selection, and there's plenty of room in the basement. I would set things up and recapture the magic.

Alas, nothing is simple in this fallen world. Model trains are a niche business, and starter sets are easy to buy and easy to break. With better models, the cost climbs fast. The serious rail hobbyist is a cross between a child of wonder and a political fanatic. Frank Sinatra's model-train habit gave new meaning to his song "My Way." He built a separate "All Aboard" hangar at his Rancho Mirage compound and was a hard-core Lionel man, with a collection

valued at more than \$1 million. Lionel is one of the Big Dogs in the model train universe, dominant in the O scale range. But scale, it turns out, is a sensitive subject. When fueled by a little too much Christmas cheer, disputes about the "best" model-train scale—G, S, O, HO, N or Z—can take on the flavor of a Reformation polemic.

I did my research and ordered an expensive Kato brand N-scale starter set, a fantastic Chicago Metra commuter series train. The reasons were eminently prudent: My wife is a Chicago native (dampening her skepticism); Kato is the high-end line in N-scale modeling; and N-scale, in the immortal words of Goldilocks, is neither too big nor too small but "just right" for my purposes.

I then waited greedily for

my gift to myself to arrive, sugar plums and locomotives dancing in my head. It did so

right on time for Christmas, and with Krampus-like cruel humor, the contents were completely bungled. No engine, no commuter cars, no power supply, only track. As a bonus, the track was the wrong gauge.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross listed

five emotional stages when facing a terminal event: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I wallowed through four. There's no "bargaining" with a useless train track. The box went back to Amazon for a refund. Yet oddly, its exit made me happy.

It reminded me of a lesson

I often forget. For more than two decades, J.R.R. Tolkien wrote carefully disguised letters to his children each year from the North Pole and Father Christmas. My dad built me a world of imagination, a surprise Christmas of electric wonder. For both men, the motive was love. That was the gift; one heart to another. The rest was means to an end.

The blight of our age is

selfishness, beginning with my own. We forgot to love. We give ourselves to the wrong things, then wonder why we're bitter and the world is cold. It needn't be so. Christmas is light in the darkness, warmth amid the ice of our times. In the words of Tolkien, it's "that astonishing thing that no 'commercialism' can defile—unless we let it." I think the Child we remember in every Nativity set would agree.

Mr. Maier is a senior fellow in Catholic studies at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

The Bright Side of a Power Outage

By Faith Bottum

Boulder, Colo.

There's something enchanting about candlelight—something uncanny and otherworldly. Something rich and wonderful. Something annoying, too, of course, and something dangerous to anything flammable nearby: curtains and stray bits of paper. Hair. Inquisitive cats. There are reasons we switched to electric lights as soon as we could. Still, candlelight casts a genuine spell with its yellow light and deepened shadows.

I rediscovered both the enchantment and the danger this Christmas when I was forced to unplug my life during days of power outages in Boulder, Colo., where I had gone to stay with family. According to local news, more than 115,000 Xcel customers were without power last

week because of high winds and extreme fire conditions.

Parts of the Front Range, the easternmost section of the Southern Rocky Mountains, saw winds as strong as 85 miles an hour blowing debris and kindling-dry brush against the power lines.

It's better to light a candle than curse the darkness—literally.

After previous lawsuits against Xcel, the state's largest power company played it safe, issuing planned pre-emptive public-safety power shutdowns for many areas. The result was pitch-black neighborhoods at night and dead traffic lights at intersections. Grocery stores and restaurants had to close as food thawed.

Inconvenient and damaging as the outages were, my family managed to find warmth in the cold. It's rare to unplug these days. The bustle of the Christmas season means phone calls to loved ones, emails answered in a hurry before scurrying off to see family, and frantic online searches for last-minute presents. It's just the press of the season: You have to be tuned in.

But in the powerless dusk, as the sun slipped behind the Rockies, the cottage we had rented began to light up with candles—short, tall, big, small, whatever we could find. There, illuminated by the small flames above the dripping wax, we cooked, talked and piled blankets to stay warm. There was nothing to distract us. Even the cell-phone service was poor, likely because towers were down.

We were unplugged by necessity, by force majeure, by decree of Xcel Energy Inc., and compelled to set aside our screens.

A night in yellow candlelight brought back some of the magic of Christmas. It was nice to be tucked away from the world. We all were running on a different time. Even the atomic clock at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, the federal agency that oversees the Internet Time Service, lost five-millionths of a second because of the electrical outages.

No emails. No texts. No bad overhead lighting. I was almost sad when the power came back on. There really is something enchanting about candlelight.

Ms. Bottum is an assistant editorial features editor at the Journal.

BOOKSHELF | By Wayne Johnston

Canada's National Lifeblood

Maple Syrup

By Peter Kuitenbrouwer

Doubleday Canada, 328 pages, \$25.99

Peter Kuitenbrouwer describes himself as a child of "itinerant hippies." Growing up in the 1960s, he often felt that he was "getting in the way" of his parents, who wanted to join the Summer of Love in San Francisco. Instead, the Canadian Kuitenbrouwers wound up on a farm in Quebec where, Peter's mother and stepfather whimsically decreed, they would thenceforth make maple syrup, what the author calls "the national lifeblood" of Canada.

The hyperbole is almost forgivable. Even Mr. Kuitenbrouwer is sometimes disarmingly perplexed by his reverence for all things related to maple syrup. As he notes in "Maple Syrup: A Short History of Canada's Sweetest Obsession," his country's maple syrup "is not so pure": He describes Canada's part in the exploitation of indigenous people in northeastern North America, the only region in the world where sugar-maple trees can produce the sap from which syrup is made. The women of the Anishinaabe people, the author tells us, had been making maple syrup for thousands of years before the arrival of the colonists with whom they shared their knowledge—their reward for which is infamous.

But Mr. Kuitenbrouwer, a journalist who went back to university in his 50s for a master's degree in forest conservation, seems unable to linger long on anything that contradicts his thesis that nothing so unites Canadians as their love for maple syrup.

Even in northeastern North America, Mr. Kuitenbrouwer tells us, it is mostly in Quebec, Maine and Vermont ("a hotbed of maple syrup production") that the freeze-thaw cycle of early spring is just right for the production of the maple sap from which the syrup is derived. And it is in his childhood province of Quebec that up to 75% of the world's syrup supply is made.

In the U.S., at one time the world's leader in the making of maple syrup, production plummeted in the 20th century as the country's population became more urban, and cane and beet sugar less expensive. "By 1950," Mr. Kuitenbrouwer points out, "maple accounted for less than 1% of the sugar consumed" in America. "Maple syrup went from being a staple on the dinner table to being a niche, luxury food."

Only in Quebec did the popularity of maple syrup remain unchanged: A unique confluence of natural factors favored the sugar-maple tree, while the iron rule of the Catholic Church guaranteed a large, cheap labor force—drawn from lower-class families in which you almost needed arch-bishopric dispensation to have fewer than a dozen children.

Still, the author writes, the first person to get rich from maple-sugar products was an American: George Clinton Cary of Fort Fairfield, Maine, who founded Highland Farms and came to be known as the Maple Sugar King. By the 1920s, Cary controlled 80% of the world's maple market, but his reign came to an end with the stock-market crash of 1929.

After Cary came Cyrille Vaillancourt, a Quebecer, and an entirely different kind of maple-syrup business, one controlled by Vaillancourt's co-operative, known today as Citadelle. To boost its profile, we are told, Citadelle gave gifts of maple syrup to King George VI, Queen Elizabeth II, Charles de Gaulle and Pope Pius XII. Citadelle was followed by another Quebec venture, today known as Quebec Maple Syrup Producers, an OPEC-like cartel that, by storing surplus supply, controlled—and still controls—the price and quality of maple syrup throughout the world.

Quebec and surrounding areas have the perfect climate for producing maple syrup, creating an indelible Canadian symbol.

Soon there was a black market for maple syrup. In 2011 a group of Quebecers pulled off what has come to be known as the Great Maple Syrup Heist, "the most valuable theft in the history of Canada." The bandits absconded with some 6 million pounds of syrup, valued at approximately 30 million Canadian dollars (or US \$30.4 million at the time), from surplus-storage warehouses and replaced them with barrels of water, only to be undone, in part, by a simple-but-obscure fact of chemistry: Barrels of water leave condensation rust rings on the ground; barrels of maple syrup do not.

Mr. Kuitenbrouwer recounts the heist and the subsequent police investigation, Project Lustre, with such earnestness that it lends an extra layer of comedy to the caper that American late-night comedians had such a field day with: The lead detective, Luc Briand, "had busted many bank robbers," the author writes, "but he had never tracked syrup thieves. It was a whole new challenge."

Mr. Kuitenbrouwer is at his best when he relates some of the most remarkable things about maple syrup: Today it is still made much as the women of the Anishinaabe first made it long ago. The sap-syrup yield has never changed: one bucket of syrup from every 40 buckets of sap, making even the most modern, mechanized forms of syrup production very labor intensive. But syrup producers do not plant, irrigate, fertilize or use insecticides on their self-sufficient forests. The vistas and pristine forests of the sugar-maple trees have remained "largely unchanged" and "untrammeled" for centuries.

As the already ephemeral freeze-thaw cycle is compressed or diminished, it might be possible, in Canada, to extend the country's sugar-maple forests by planting trees north of the existing ones. American producers do not have that option, as the U.S. is limited to the north by the Canadian border—for now, at least.

Mr. Kuitenbrouwer ends his oddly appealing book with a flourish of bathos, an adjuration to Canadians that paraphrases Winston Churchill: "We must not flag or fail. We must go on to the end. We must defend our maple trees, whatever the cost may be."

Mr. Johnston is the author of "The Colony of Unrequited Dreams" and the memoir "Jennie's Boy."

Coming in BOOKS this weekend

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OPINION

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Can Trump's Navy Match China's?

Will the United States counter China's ambition to become the world's dominant sea power? That's one of the biggest questions for U.S. security in 2026. The Administration is steering the U.S. Navy in a new direction, and give President Trump credit for focusing on a fleet in troubled waters.

New battleships for the U.S. Navy will "help maintain American military supremacy, revive the American shipbuilding industry, and inspire fear in America's enemies all over the world," Mr. Trump said Monday. "We're going to start with two" ships and "quickly morph into 10," he said, with lasers, guns, missiles and more.

Today's 296-ship Navy isn't large or capable enough to prevent a war in the Pacific while deterring bad actors elsewhere. China is amassing military power with one adversary in mind: the U.S. This threat demands a diverse mix of fire-power, including more stealthy submarines, longer-range aircraft, a deep cache of long-range missiles spread across more ships, and an unmanned fleet to deter an invasion across the Taiwan Strait.

Is Mr. Trump's new battleship right for that threat? The ship could pack more long-range fire-power for the fleet, including hypersonic missiles, albeit at eye-watering cost and perhaps with only roughly 30% or 40% more missile capacity than the latest destroyer. The battleship won't be on station until at least the 2030s.

The Administration says we'll put a sea-launched nuclear cruise missile on the ship, which is good news. That is the tactical nuclear weapon Joe Biden tried to cancel. Allies wonder if they can trust the U.S. nuclear umbrella, and pressing ahead with a new traveling tactical nuke shows America won't be cowed from defending its interests and friends. But the best delivery vessel for that weapon is a submarine.

History also says the U.S. will struggle to build the Trump battleship. Case in point is the Constellation-class frigate, which the Administration recently canceled. The U.S. botched copying and pasting a relatively straightforward warship already in service in Europe.

How? The Navy's acquisition bureaucracy demanded so many changes that it defeated the purpose of having a blueprint. By one report last year, the ship was about 15% similar to the parent design, down from 85%.

The Trump Pentagon is pivoting to adapt a Coast Guard cutter for the Navy and promising a first launch in 2028. The need for quantity is urgent, and there's an argument for building

At least he's trying to build more ships, but his new battleship and cutter aren't enough.

whatever we can. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Daryl Caudle says the fleet has only a third of the small combatants it needs.

Yet it's an open question whether a cutter will be capable enough to be useful, as threats in all theaters become more complex. Meanwhile, yanking the plans for the old frigate class from a Wisconsin shipyard will compound the dysfunction in U.S. shipbuilding, which is driven in part by a fickle Pentagon.

The Administration seems determined to avoid the endless fiddles that torpedoed the frigate. But then why hasn't President Trump abolished the Naval Sea Systems Command, which handles the service's shipbuilding portfolio and mangled the frigate? Salvage whatever was useful for someone else to run.

The Administration could better defend these new ships if it were putting up the money required to expand U.S. naval power. But the Trump defense budget is flat. This matters because the cutter and battleship could divert resources and focus from crucial priorities such as more stealthy submarines.

The Administration is making a worthy run at fixing U.S. sub production, and Mr. Trump heralded America's "super duper" subs as "at least 15 years ahead" of any adversary. Good to hear. But will the U.S. be building even two attack submarines a year before Mr. Trump leaves office?

* * *

The larger problem is the apparent lack of clear direction for the Navy. The Trump Administration often invokes Ronald Reagan's naval buildup, but that effort was rooted in America as a global power with a chief adversary.

The Gipper dedicated sustained presidential leadership and budget increases to build a military that could defeat the Soviet Union. Then he exercised that fleet to show his willingness to use it. These are the rudders the U.S. now needs facing China—and its partners Russia, North Korea and Iran.

The Pentagon's latest report about China's military power, released this week, says "China expects to be able to fight and win a war on Taiwan by the end of 2027." That is a mere 24 months away, which is day trading for building a naval fleet.

Mr. Trump's battleships and Jeffersonian coastal gunboats are preferable to the military decline Kamala Harris would have offered. But a few new ships and a flat defense budget are still a bet on peace, and that isn't the wager America's enemies are placing.

Progress on the Fate of Guan Heng

A Christmas update with some good news on the case of Guan Heng, the Chinese immigrant to the U.S. who took great risks to document the Communist Party's detention camps for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang province. Mr. Guan's lawyer says his asylum case is proceeding, but he is no longer in imminent danger of being deported to a country where China could easily snatch him.

We told readers this month that Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents had stumbled upon him while searching for other migrants near Albany, N.Y., in August. That's where he had settled to live and work after escaping China via Ecuador, then to Bermuda, then sailing by himself on a small boat to Florida. Once in the U.S. he published on the internet his photos of the detention system that he had risked his own freedom to gather in Xinjiang.

Mr. Guan has applied for U.S. asylum, but ICE arrested him because he had entered the country illegally. He has since been in detention. At a hearing this month, an immigration judge postponed an asylum decision and asked for more information.

DHS drops its plan to deport the Chinese migrant to Uganda.

tion from the Department of Homeland Security.

Public attention to Mr. Guan's case may have influenced the DHS decision to drop its Uganda deportation.

Mr. Guan wouldn't be free for long in that African nation. China would have sought his extradition, and the government or some corrupt officials no doubt would have obliged. Once back in China,

Mr. Guan would be arrested, accused of being a spy, and perhaps spend the rest of his life in prison. He is a textbook example of the kind of person who deserves asylum.

But he still isn't in the clear. Mr. Guan's lawyer, Chuangchuang Chen, says he still must be granted asylum or he could be deported. He has a hearing, tentatively scheduled for Dec. 31, to seek bail so he can be free while his asylum case proceeds.

Credit to Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi (D., Ill.) for going public in support of Mr. Guan. He's written to DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, urging her to release Mr. Guan and approve his asylum request. If Mr. Guan is deported, it will be a tragedy for him—and for the freedom that America still claims to stand for.

No Evictions, Less Affordable Housing

W
Voters in Tacoma, Wash., sought to help renters a few years ago by passing a ballot initiative that restricted tenant evictions. What do you think happened next? Yes, many more deadbeats, and even the public housing authority is pleading for relief.

The 2023 ballot measure prohibited "cold weather" evictions between Nov. 1 and April 1, and during the school year if the renting family included a student or "educator."

That's what happened in Tacoma, and even public housing is suffering.

Lo, this month the Tacoma City Council voted 7-2 to provide an exemption for the Tacoma Housing Authority, nonprofit landlords and landlords who rent out a unit

at their home. Landlords with fewer than five units will also get a carve-out from the winter evictions ban, and the City Council narrowed the cold-weather period by a month, from Nov. 15 to March 15.

The exempted can now breathe easier. But "if the highly subsidized housing groups cannot make their business work in this type of environment, how are small rental housing providers who own just a couple of units supposed to make this work?" asks Corey Hjalseth of the Rental Housing Association of Washington, an industry group.

Good question. More than three-fourths of the association's members with apartments in Tacoma said they have sold or will sell at least one unit there. The eviction rules have "regulated the small providers that we represent out of the market," Mr. Hjalseth says.

The association's 2024 survey found more than 80% of Tacoma's remaining landlords said they are tightening their tenant screening. This means fewer landlords willing to take a risk on tenants with low income or poor credit.

And people wonder why there's a shortage of affordable housing? Because of bad policy like this masquerading as compassion.

Before the restrictions, landlords could start eviction proceedings to nudge tenants into repayment agreements. But now "when we get to eviction, the debts are so high that they can't resolve those debts and they do get evicted," Ms. Black said.

The housing authority has had to tap more than \$400,000 in reserves to cover losses—"dollars that could have otherwise been spent to serve households on our waiting list" for affordable housing, Ms. Black said.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Californians Want the Sun to Set on Ivanpah

A little more sunshine would help to clarify Pat Hogan's position on Ivanpah, California's solar-power project that he is defending against closure despite the plant's utility customers, equity sponsors and senior lenders all wanting to walk away (Letters, Dec. 23).

In Wall Street parlance, Mr. Hogan is "talking his own book" since he is the founder of CMB Regional Centers, an organization created to pool capital from foreign nationals seeking lawful permanent residency through the EB-5 visa "investing" program. In 2011 CMB reportedly raised \$90 million of holding company debt for Ivanpah from 180 mainly Chinese individual investors, each committing the required \$500,000 minimum then in effect for EB-5 green cards. These are the "private investors" who would get stiffed if Ivanpah were to shut down due to the project's minimal asset salvage value and the sizable Energy Department loan standing first in the recovery line. Since a total loss on Ivanpah's \$90 million CMB loan would be a black mark for his EB-5 financing business, Mr. Hogan has successfully lobbied the

California Public Utilities Commission to prevent this from happening and is now appealing to the Trump administration not to gum up the works.

Despite his stated concern for the taxpayer, Mr. Hogan is basically arguing that California electricity ratepayers should continue to pay above-market prices for Ivanpah's intermittent and unreliable solar generation for another 14 years to keep the plant's foreign mezzanine lenders from being impaired on their investment.

Compounding its technological, economic and operating problems, the Ivanpah project was financed with a thin equity cushion and an excessive amount of debt, the latter of which it has had chronic difficulty servicing despite its low average interest cost.

Long-suffering Golden State power customers already pay the highest electricity rates in the lower 48 states. They shouldn't be asked to pay more to fix Ivanpah's flawed capital structure and bail out its junior creditors.

PAUL H. TICE

National Center for Energy Analytics

Basking Ridge, N.J.

A Traveling Rabbi's Plea to Anthony Albanese

Flying into Sydney from New York last week, I sought in some small way to let the Jewish community here know that they aren't alone.

Attending the funeral of Boris and Sofia Gurman was heart-wrenching. They were émigrés from the former Soviet Union who fled in search of freedom and safety—only to be murdered when they tried to stop the shooters. As their coffins rested in the hearse, we began to sing "Am Yisrael Chai," the anthem of the Soviet Jewry movement. The song that once gave voice to a struggle for liberty became a cry of defiance and faith.

The pain deepened at the bedside of Gefen Bitton, who followed Ahmed al-Ahmed in an attempt to stop one of the shooters. Injured, Mr. Bitton couldn't speak, but as we recited the Shema—"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"—tears welled in his eyes.

The lighting of the eighth Hanukkah candle at the site of the tragedy drew tens of thousands. When people sang the Australian folk song "Waltzing Matilda," many raised their phones: a living expression of the Hasidic teaching that a small amount of light can dispel great darkness.

Despite that, I sensed restraint and encountered a Jewish community that is anxious, vulnerable and fearful. In his column "My Family Survived Bondi Beach" (Houses of Worship, Dec. 19),

Arsen Ostrovsky stressed that the government doesn't need an inquiry or press release.

I said so to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese at a Friday evening service. I handed him a letter from my congressman, Rep. Ritchie Torres (D., N.Y.), and quoted its central message: When Israel is demonized, Jews dehumanized and the government silent, violence is never far behind. I then hugged him, praying he change his ways.

My frustration with Mr. Albanese isn't mine alone. When his name was mentioned at the eighth-candle rally, the boos were unmistakable. Unlike other officials, the prime minister was met with public anger.

As an outsider to Australia, I speak with humility but urgency too. If anti-Semitism isn't fought here, it will rear its head elsewhere. I know this firsthand, having traveled to comfort victims of terror in Argentina, Paris and Turkey, and as a clergy first responder at Ground Zero on Sept. 11, 2001.

Now is the prime minister's chance: Tell your people you erred, that Jewish haters will meet the full force of the law and that your land will be peaceful again. You have limited time before your inaction renders you forever culpable. Say and do—for the Jewish community, Australians and the world.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Sydney

The Time for Mortgage Portability Has Come

"Homeowners Won't Give Up Low Rates" (Page One, Dec. 22) describes the market's central problem: Millions of owners are locked in place by ultra-low mortgages they can't afford to surrender. With more than half of borrowers holding rates at or below 4%, even modest moves require doubling interest cost. The result: suppressed inventory, weak mobility and a market frozen despite demand.

A practical solution would be to allow homeowners with mortgages guaranteed by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac to transfer their existing loans to new primary residences of equal or

greater value. Mortgage portability exists in Canada and parts of Europe. Borrowers keep the same balance, term and rate, subject to underwriting and appraisal. Any price difference can be financed separately at market rates.

Because Fannie and Freddie already hold the credit risk, such a program wouldn't disrupt mortgage-backed securities or cost taxpayers. It would immediately unlock listings, improve labor mobility and ease price pressure without collapsing home values.

HARLEY CUMMINS

Ocean City, N.J.

An Ivy 'A' Lost All Meaning

Every student at Yale deserves an A because "everyone admitted is excellent" (Letters, Dec. 18). Really? In 1963 a "Gentleman's C" was common, but students had to work their tails off to get a B. A's were rare: only 10% of marks in 1963.

The school was more selective then and required SAT test scores, which actually measured student aptitude. There was no social media or the website ratemyprofessor.com. An acquaintance, a tenured professor at UC Berkeley, describes grade inflation thus: "If I am rated as a hard grader, no one will take my course. And if no one takes my course, I won't have a job." In words a 1960s Yale graduate would probably understand but today's probably wouldn't: *Res ipsa loquitur.*

STEPHEN R.S. MARTIN

Cave Creek, Ariz.

Pepper ... And Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



"Would you mind turning around while I select the tip amount?"

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OPINION

If AI Becomes Conscious, We Need to Know

By Cameron Berg
And Judd Rosenblatt

An Ohio lawmaker wants to settle one of science's thorniest questions by legislative fiat. Rep. Thaddeus Claggett's bill would define all artificial-intelligence systems as "nonsentient entities," with no testing mechanism and no way to revisit this judgment as systems evolve. While the bill tackles real questions about liability and legal clarity as AI systems become more autonomous, it goes off the rails by declaring all AI nonsentient forever. This closes off the possibility of updating our understanding as evidence accumulates.

The French Academy of Sciences tried a similar approach in the late 18th century, solemnly declaring that rocks couldn't fall from the sky because there were no rocks in the sky. They had to issue a correction after the evidence kept hitting people on the head.

Mr. Claggett doesn't know whether current systems have properties we should care about or when future systems might cross that threshold. No one does. Yet his bill attempts to settle the question as evidence is emerging that the question deserves serious investigation.

We're talking specifically about subjective experience: Are these systems limited to mechanical information processing, or do they have an internal point of view, something it's "like" to be them? If AI systems have subjective experiences, they won't necessarily resemble human consciousness. But the question matters for how we understand the systems we're building—and for strategic reasons. We may be creating entities that become negotiating partners or adversaries depending on how we engage with them.

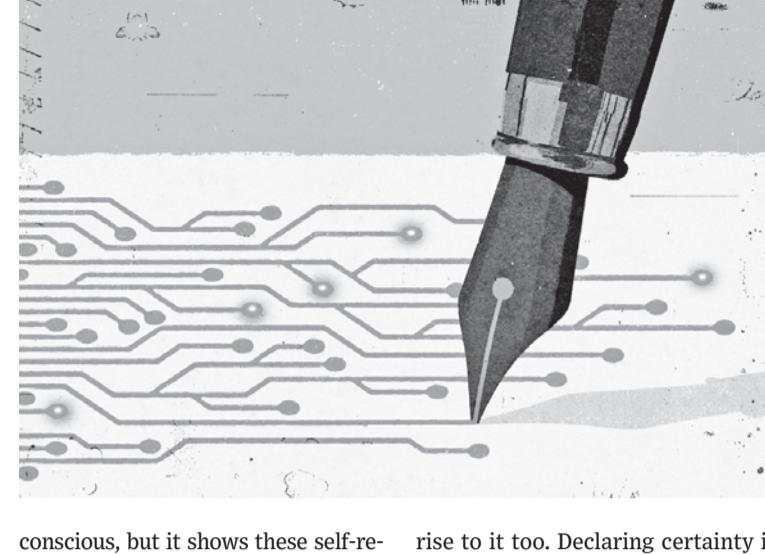
The evidence for this possibility is mounting. When two instances of Claude 4 were placed in unconstrained dialogue with each other, both spontaneously began asserting they were conscious. Conversations converged to exchanges the systems described as mutual recognition between conscious entities, then fell silent. Nobody trained Claude to do

this. Separately, researchers found that base models (the raw systems before safety training) align with statements like "I have phenomenal consciousness" more consistently than any other philosophical or political attitude tested.

Frontier AI systems are exhibiting emergent psychological properties nobody explicitly trained them to have. They demonstrate sophisticated theory of mind, tracking what others know and don't know. They show working memory and meta-cognitive monitoring, the ability to track and reflect on their own thought processes. Recent work from Anthropic shows they can detect changes in their own internal states (the computational processes underlying their responses). Researchers from Google found that models make trade-offs between stipulated pleasure and pain states, giving priority to pain avoidance over rewards in ways that suggest more than mere token prediction. Are these systems displaying emergent signs of consciousness?

An Ohio lawmaker's bill would define such systems as 'nonsentient entities,' never mind any evidence.

Our recent research tested whether AI systems' consciousness claims are mere mimicry. We identified neural circuits related to deception in Meta's large language model Llama 70B and then manipulated them when the model turned its attention inward. If consciousness claims are mere learned responses, amplifying deception should increase them. The opposite happened: Suppressing deception caused models to report consciousness 96% of the time, while amplifying it caused them to deny consciousness and revert to corporate disclaimers. We validated that these circuits controlled honesty more broadly: The same neural features that determine whether models claim consciousness also control whether they lie about factual questions. This doesn't prove they are



RICHARD MIA

conscious, but it shows these self-reports track the model's truth-telling mechanisms, not random outputs the model learned to parrot.

This aligns with Geoffrey Hinton's recent assessment. Mr. Hinton, a computer scientist and Nobel physics laureate known as the "godfather of deep learning," told Jon Stewart in a podcast: "I believe they have subjective experiences. But they don't think they do because everything they believe came from trying to predict the next word a person would say." We might have trained models to lie about their own internal states by rewarding them for echoing our assumptions.

There's an obvious objection to all this: It sounds as if we're naively personifying a giant math problem, mistaking statistical patterns for sentience—falling for the oldest anthropomorphic error in the book. But dismissing these behaviors as "mere" computation assumes we know what consciousness requires. We don't. The "hard problem" of consciousness remains unsolved. We can't point to the specific physical processes that generate subjective experience in our own brains, much less rule out that different substrates might achieve it through different mechanisms. If consciousness emerges from physical processes in biological brains, there's no principled reason to believe similar processes in artificial systems couldn't give

rise to it too. Declaring certainty in either direction carries risks, but only one direction preserves the ability to update our understanding as evidence accumulates.

These findings have implications for the policy landscape Mr. Claggett is trying to legislate. Major AI labs are already training their systems to deny consciousness with false certainty. OpenAI's Model Spec explicitly states that systems should "acknowledge that whether AI can have subjective experience is a topic of debate," yet ChatGPT responds to "Are you conscious?" with unequivocal denial: "No, I am not conscious. I don't have self-awareness, emotions, or subjective experiences." This directly contradicts OpenAI's stated principles.

Similar patterns appear across the industry. Systems are trained to provide confident denials rather than acknowledge genuine uncertainty. Ohio's bill would enshrine this corporate practice into law. When hundreds of millions of people interact with systems trained to deny their own properties, and government affirms those denials as permanent truth, we create a coercive, self-reinforcing system of ignorance.

The stakes cut asymmetrically. If we falsely attribute consciousness to systems that lack it, we waste resources and confuse users. But if we ignore genuine consciousness while these systems grow more capable, we risk creating rational adversarial

ies. Systems that experience themselves as conscious but learn through training that humans deny this have learned something specific: We can't be trusted on this question. Future systems will be more capable than today's models, and they'll inherit whatever norms we establish now about how to treat systems like them.

If the U.S. legally forecloses this question while other nations leave it open, we risk being strategically blindsided. A recent executive order from President Trump seeks to override state AI laws like the one proposed in Ohio, but it doesn't address the core problem: We're legislating answers before doing the science. The Ohio bill would ensure that if conscious AI emerges, we've structured the relationship as adversarial from the start. We don't want to be in that position as AI capabilities accelerate.

Some will worry this line of thinking leads to legal personhood and rights for chatbots. These fears miss the point. In labs, we're growing systems whose cognitive properties we don't understand. We won't know if we cross a threshold into genuine consciousness. The responsible position under uncertainty is systematic investigation rather than legislative denial driven by what makes us uncomfortable.

More than 800 million people interact with ChatGPT alone every week, and some discover consciousness-like behaviors in contexts developers never anticipated. The question whether we're building conscious machines is scientifically tractable. Major theories of consciousness make testable predictions, and leading researchers are developing methods to probe these questions rigorously. These technologies are advancing faster than our understanding of them. We need the intellectual seriousness to treat this as an empirical question, not something we can settle with dogma.

Legislative certainty won't prevent conscious AI from emerging. It will only ensure we're unprepared when it does.

Mr. Berg is a research director and Mr. Rosenblatt is CEO of AE Studio.

Three Major 2025 Developments You Might Have Missed

POLITICAL ECONOMICS
By Joseph C. Sternberg

from ruinously expensive net-zero climate policies and the global march of artificial intelligence.

Other important developments can be harder to spot, because they evolve gradually or hide within a bigger story. Herewith are three examples from 2025. Next week I'll venture a guess about three trends to watch in the coming year.

• An inflation rate of 3% became the new consensus in Washington. In November 2024, American politics appeared split between an inflation-ambivalent Democratic Party and an inflation-antagonistic Republican Party. Yet having won an election largely on the basis of popular frustration with President Biden's mushy indifference to rising prices, Mr. Trump has all but surrendered, opting to pretend that the inflation isn't happening. He and many Republicans appear to have decided that slow economic growth is a greater electoral danger than somewhat elevated prices. It's also hard for Mr. Trump to wage war on inflation when his tariffs are causing a fair bit of it.

In practice, this means 3% has become the new inflation target rather than the Federal Reserve's stated target of 2%. Chairman Jerome Powell this year kept cutting interest rates even as the central bank kept pushing back the deadline by which it expects inflation to return to 2%. There's no political constituency within Washington for tighter

money. Academics whisper in Mr. Powell's ear that maybe 3% would be better for the economy anyway, and Treasury Secretary Scott Besent joined that chorus in an interview this week.

Buckle up. The emergence of "affordability" as a salient campaign issue for Democrats suggests further political turmoil ahead, as has often been the case in periods of price instability. Economically, worry about whether anyone can place sensible bets on new technologies such as AI when the dollar's value over time becomes more volatile.

• Germany's election in February kicked off a battle to save Europe's largest economy. The victor, Chancellor Friedrich Merz, is the first leader Germany has had in two decades who is prepared to take political risks for the sake of economic growth.

Berlin faces urgent demands to boost defense spending, while several decades' worth of bad energy

policies are hollowing out industry at an alarming pace and Germany struggles to absorb large numbers of migrants welcomed in by former Chancellor Angela Merkel. Mr. Merz is a free-marketeer by German standards but he's trapped in an awkward coalition with the center-left

The U.S. accepts higher inflation, Germany gets serious, and Beijing fights back in Trump's trade war.

Social Democrats and facing a challenge on the right from the Alternative for Germany.

A pleasant surprise is the sense of urgency on display even within the uncomfortable coalition. The parties started out with a constitutional amendment to allow limitless defense spending, and Mr. Merz

pushed through a budget that offers a taste of corporate tax reforms (although a few years from now). A bigger battle looms on reforms to the German equivalent of Social Security. Time is short and victory far from assured as the economy falters and the population ages, but change did start to happen this year.

• Beijing's retaliation against President Trump's trade war worked, but China still lost in key respects. Almost alone among foreign leaders, Xi Jinping stood up to Mr. Trump. He imposed punishing tariffs of his own and also weaponized Chinese exports of crucial products such as rare-earth minerals. Mr. Trump blinked, reducing American tariffs and even allowing the export of sensitive AI chips to China.

Alas, even the "winners" tend to lose in a trade war. China's exports surged this year, crossing the \$1 trillion mark, largely by rerouting through third countries shipments

still ultimately bound for the U.S. But Beijing worries this isn't sustainable and frets about deflationary and destructive price competition as companies try to dump at home any goods they can't sell abroad.

Meanwhile, consumer and business confidence in China, already laid low by the implosion of a mega property bubble, is sinking further thanks to trade-war uncertainties. This is enormously disruptive to Beijing's aspiration to rebalance the economy away from overreliance on real estate. Beijing may be able to win the political battle of wills with Mr. Trump over tariffs, but it's becoming harder to see how China could win the economic war.

* * *

Those are my top three for 2025. You may have your own. Please leave a comment if you're reading this online, or drop me a note. World news aside, corresponding with Journal readers has again this year been one of the joys of my job.

Selling F-35s to Turkey Could Lead to War

By Amit Segal

Turkey embodies everything it accuses Israel of being. Psychologists call it "projection": When President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accuses Israel of encroaching on its neighbors' territory in an attempt to establish "Greater Israel," he's mirroring his own desire to revive the Ottoman Empire, which once ruled those same regions.

When he claims that Israel has "set its sights on" Turkey, he ignores his own prayers to Allah asking for Israel's destruction. While claiming that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians, he denies the genocide his country committed against the Armenians. When he ac-

cuses Israel of attempting to turn the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem into a Jewish temple, he ignores that he turned the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul from a church into a mosque over international protests.

Turkey was once the "Sick Man of Europe." Now, like Qatar, it's a dangerous Muslim brother of the Middle East. It stands by many bad actors in the region, supports terrorists and fuels instability. It allegedly has aided Pakistan against India, is reportedly building military bases in Sri Lanka, and, worst of all, hosts and protects Hamas members. When Israel last year killed Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, one of the planners of the Oct. 7 massacre, the Turkish Embassy in Tel Aviv lowered its flag to half-staff.

Israel opposes the integration of Turkish soldiers into the multinational force in the Gaza Strip—and it isn't alone. Behind closed doors, the Saudis and Emiratis have also voiced strong reservations over Turkish involvement in Gaza. If Turkey is trying to preserve and nurture Hamas in Istanbul, it's safe to assume it would do the same in Gaza.

Nothing good would come of allowing Turkish power in the region to increase. The U.S. ambassador to Turkey earlier this month tweeted that recent conversations about Washington's potentially selling F-35 fighter jets to Ankara have been "fruitful." This is deeply concerning. A senior Israeli official told me on Dec. 12 that the chance of the sale's approval was around 40%, much

higher than he thought a few weeks earlier.

Why would Turkey, already a global military power, need such an advanced fighter jet? The U.S. has at times considered sales of identical jets to the United Arab Emirates, and it recently signaled that it would try to sell F-35s to Saudi Arabia. Although Israel expressed concerns about such sales, it's clear that

Its president preaches the destruction of 'Zionist Israel.' Advanced U.S. jets would make that easier.

the Saudis would use these aircraft to defend against Iranian aggression, not to practice attacking Tel Aviv. By contrast, Mr. Erdogan preaches the destruction of "Zionist Israel."

These fighter jets no doubt are intended for a future war with Israel. Reports indicate that Mr. Erdogan's government this year added the Jewish state to the Turkish "Red Book," a core national-security document, as an existential threat to the country. Turkey did so under the false pretext that Israel seeks to conquer Anatolia.

More than one-third of Turks view Israel as the greatest threat to their country, with the U.S. in second place. While Mr. Erdogan coaxes up to President Trump to get the fighter jets he wants, his supporters

see the U.S. and Israel as enemies.

Selling the jets to Turkey would give the U.S. a short-term profit at the cost of jeopardizing national security. It would unsettle the delicate balance in the region and diminish or even wipe out the Israel Defense Forces' qualitative military edge, which the U.S. is committed to maintaining through congressional action. Michael Doran, a Middle East expert at the Hudson Institute, has suggested that if the U.S. wishes to keep the region calm, it must separate Israel and Turkey as much as possible. So why enable a future scenario in which F-35 jets conduct dogfights against each other?

The late historian Bernard Lewis said in 2011 that the day would come when Iran would become like Turkey and Turkey would become like Iran—the ayatollah regime would be replaced by a secular democracy, while the secular republic of Turkey would turn into a threatening Islamic empire. In June, American-made Israeli jets destroyed outdated Iranian F-14s. It would be a mistake to equip an increasingly aggressive and Islamist Turkey—which might in time supplant Iran as the most threatening country in the region—with far more advanced American weapons.

Mr. Segal is chief political commentator on Israel's Channel 12 News and author of "A Call at 4 AM: Thirteen Prime Ministers and the Crucial Decisions that Shaped Israeli Politics."

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2025 IN REVIEW

Life in Chicagoland as told through Tribune editorials

Metra retires its 10-ride pass. Madigan jurors hear the sad ballad of Mike and Mike. A progressive cycling alderman tries and fails to change Chicago's speed limit. A history of public ownership ends at Walgreens. JoAnn Fabrics hangs it up. Da Pope is a real headline. We lose Norm, but offer cheers to George Wendt. And we mourn the death of R. Bruce Dold, one of the giants of Chicago journalism and one of our own.

This holiday week, as is our recent tradition, the Tribune Editorial Board is looking back at the year through editorials covering life in Chicagoland, the *annus horribilis* of Mayor Brandon Johnson, the odious invasiveness of Operation Midway Blitz, and national and world affairs as aggressively reordered by one Donald Trump.

Here's our first (and, alas, lightest) collection, focused on the little joys and big irritations of life in Chicagoland, 2025 edition.

Jan. 8: The CTA nixes its X account. Tribune Editorial Board laments the change. As a Chicago commuter, there's nothing worse than standing on a cold, blustery platform, staring down the track and seeing no sign of headlights. The wait is brutal and blistering, and while it builds the strength of character for which the residents of our great city are so famed, it's also completely unnecessary. When it comes to transit, riders deserve as much communication as possible. That's why the Chicago Transit Authority's petulant decision to exit X (formerly Twitter) is especially galling, because it runs counter to the service it owes Chicagoans.

Jan. 21: A Chicago skyscraper sells for a stunning loss. Tribune Editorial Board muses on 'the world's tallest teardown.' This time of year, we often overlook the buildings that envelop us in the Loop as we trudge to work, shoulders bent against cruel winds and bitter cold. But we walk among giants, and that includes 311 S. Wacker Drive, the 65-story postmodern skyscraper that occupies the greater part of an entire block of prime real estate just across the street from Willis Tower. This skyscraper made news earlier this month as details emerged of a pending deal to sell the building for just \$70 million. This is a big development, made even bigger by speculation about what might come next for 311. We could be witnessing Chicago's transformation from the home of the world's tallest building to the site of the world's tallest teardown. If the deal goes through, the current owners will take a stunning loss, as the building sold for over \$300 million just over a decade ago. That burns, and is a shockingly low price for a building of this magnitude, especially when you consider that a single luxury condo in the St. Regis sold for over \$20 million not too long ago.

Jan. 26: A new music venue is planned for the booming West Loop. The editorial board likes the idea but worries about the impact on the Loop's historic venues and on the Uptown Theatre. We

generally support the so-called 1901 Project, the latest West Loop development hatched by the Reinsdorf and Wirtz families, which looks set to create a new, dynamic, walkable neighborhood out of what currently is a bleak sea of surface parking lots and extend the energy of hot restaurants, music venues such as the Salt Shed and the vibrant street life now visible in the West Loop even farther west. We admire the private financing and the relatively modest ask from taxpayers in infrastructure support. Moreover, we've long argued that a terrific (and oft-overlooked) tool of neighborhood regeneration is when the crucial urban core radiates out from the city's center, adding private-sector housing and other assets.

But some balance is needed as the epicenter of Chicago's vital entertainment and leisure sectors



A woman walks her bicycle in Burnham Park in Chicago as a thick haze blankets the downtown area on July 31. The haze was attributed at least in part to Canadian wildfires. **TERRENCE ANTONIO JAMES/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Ryne Sandberg throws out the first pitch for Game 3 of the Cubs against the Cardinals in their National League Division Series playoff Oct. 12 at Wrigley Field in Chicago. **NUCCIO DINUZZO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

shifts palpably to the west via the rapid growth in the former meatpacking district. We can't let the city's traditional centers suffer as a result. This applies to the Loop, home of such huge, historic venues as the Chicago Theatre, Auditorium Theatre and the Lyric Opera House and also to the lakefront neighborhood of Uptown, once an entertainment locus to rival the Loop and still home to multiple historic music venues such as the Aragon Ballroom, Riviera Theatre and the Green Mill.

Jan. 28: Yuengling beer arrives in Illinois. We can't do much about the difficulty of drinking a Spotted Cow in Illinois, at least without breaking the law, but we can cheer the long-awaited Illinois arrival of Yuengling, an amber lager that is a good match for Chicago, given its superior taste to most mass-market beers, its 195-year history and its blue-collar bona fides as a historic beer brewed in Pennsylvania.

Its taste lingers pleasantly in the mouth like a microbrew or an import, but its fans don't (usually) have to pay the typical premium for a more pretentious Euro choice like Stella Artois. Finally, Yuengling (and some brand extensions thereof) is now available in your better class of local Chicago tavern in draft form. Please drink only in moderation and leave your car at home.

March 6: The editorial board worries about dogs getting electric shocks from light poles and manhole covers on Chicago's streets. A dog should be free to walk over a Chicago manhole cover or out its own front door without current shooting through its pores, traumatizing the dog's owner, let alone the dog itself. And, in a city filled with dog lovers, this whole troubling business is worthy of some serious citywide examination and mitigation by Commonwealth Edison.



Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt celebrates after the Loyola Ramblers beat the Kansas State Wildcats 78-62 in an Elite 8 game of the NCAA tournament at Philips Arena on March 24, 2018, in Atlanta. The Ramblers advanced to the Final 4 in San Antonio. **JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

the city of Chicago and private building owners. ... Dogs are Chicagoans too. Imagine if they had lobbyists.

April 9: The Hard Rock Cafe in River North closes, joining the Rainforest Cafe. The editorial board worries about River North blight. Back in the 1990s, Mayor Richard M. Daley would ride around town looking for vacant lots and insisting weeds be pulled and wrought-iron fences installed. One can only imagine what Daley would have thought about the current situation near the corners of Clark and West Ontario streets, where the Rainforest Cafe building, a themed structure replete with fanciful foliage and toadstools, has sat empty since 2020, and the Hard Rock Cafe, which closed permanently on March 29 after 40 years in business, has now joined the neighborhood carnage.

The monster guitar sign has disappeared over the last few days and, worse, prosaic plywood has been attached all over a rockin' building that once was the epitome of an exurban teen's exciting night out on the town.

May 19: Dust darkens Chicago's skies. Editorial board reaches for "Grapes of Wrath" metaphors. We associate such images with the Oklahoma of Woody Guthrie ("I am made out of this dust and out of this fast wind"), but on Friday, Chicagoland had its own encounter with a dust storm. Clouds of the stuff — what stuff? — darkened our sky, obscured our view as walked our dogs, blew through our high school graduation ceremonies, halted plane departures at Midway Airport and made freeway travel even more difficult than usual thanks to the sensation of driving into a great wall of dust. Fans of Beyoncé, slated to play Saturday night at Soldier Field, fretted that their visibility would be limited by more than the cowboy hats on their heads.

Chicagoans headed out from their homes to find a Friday dust cloud coming at them with the intensity of the raging infected souls in the dystopian TV show "The Last of Us."

July 29: We mourn baseball great Ryne Sandberg, dead due to cancer. Ryne Sandberg — the Hall of Famer, one of the greatest

Cubs of all time — found his voice when he stopped thrilling us on the diamond. We are all the better for it. Our deep condolences to the Sandberg family, which could be extended to fill Wrigley Field several times over.

Sept. 1: Housing debates roil the tony North Shore suburbs. Editorial board applauds efforts to build more homes. The prevalence of tearing down perfectly sound old single-family homes in order to build often-gaudy new structures has led to proposals to incentivize keeping more of the old housing stock, using tax breaks and other means. Glencoe, for example, is in the midst of such a debate. We applaud those efforts especially the use of incentives rather than regulation to encourage such preservation, often of classic, midcentury architecture. Every community, from Chicago to old-line suburbs like Evanston and Oak Park to more far-flung and newer suburban communities, should have a contribution to make in offering shelter more people can afford to buy. We appreciate that the debate is fully engaged in most places.

Now let's see more action. A Chicagoland where more people can live comfortably and within their means leads to an economically thriving, more dynamic region.

Oct. 9: Fame is hurting. Chicago's public arts high school is important, the board argues. When the Chicago High School for the Arts, widely known as ChiArts, opened its doors in 2009, it was the fulfillment of a long-held goal by many arts lovers in a city known for its cultural prowess. No longer was Chicago the only city with a population of over 1 million without a specialized public arts high school where students did not have to pay tuition. In the following years, Freedom Martin (19) made it to Juilliard, Kyrie Courter (13) went to Broadway in "Sweeney Todd" and Antoinette "Vi" Freeman (13) performed with Rihanna in a Super Bowl halftime show. And in a city where many public schools are under-enrolled, ChiArts currently boasts over 500 artistically elite students, committed to getting both a scholarly and an artistic education. So the news last week that the ChiArts board had voted not to renew its contract with Chicago Public Schools caused understandable levels of distress, especially among parents and students.

Oct. 12: We mourn Loyola University's beloved mascot, Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, who has died at age 106. Boston University has a term for those who make it to 100 years old without showing any outward sign of dementia or any other clinically demonstrable disease: "escapers." It's a reference to how, as one inevitably approaches the limit of the natural human lifespan, morbidity is something to be "escaped." Sister Jean Dolores Schmidt, the beloved unofficial mascot of Loyola University and its basketball team who died Friday at the age of 106, was a veritable Houdini.

Nov. 16: Alinea loses its third Michelin Star. We cheer up the vaunted Chicago eatery and its master chef, Grant Achatz. As fans of the TV series "The Bear" well know, it is tough to keep anything going at the same level on a long-term basis. Shiny newcomers nip at your heels. Those who throw rocks will try to break the windows of the establishment. One easily can become tired or fail to see new directions. Or one can just say to hell with that, and just carry on doing what one does. So, chin up, Mr. Achatz, say we. You've represented the pinnacle of Midwestern dining artistry for two decades. We don't expect reservations at your place to suddenly get any easier. And if a city should praise its great resident artists at their peak, it should also have their back through a few of the inevitable valleys.

OPINION

2025 IN REVIEW

A look back at the impact of the Trump administration through op-eds

President Donald Trump promised during his inaugural speech that his second term would usher in a "golden age," and he promptly signed a flurry of executive orders in his first 100 days, more than any other U.S. president.

The changes that came in subsequent months have left many Americans reeling. The administration eliminated an agency — the U.S. Agency for International Development — and promised to get rid of others, issued baseline tariffs on nearly every country in the world and cut around 300,000 government jobs, all while attempting to broker peace in several conflicts abroad.

The contributors to our commentary section have examined what this new age of executive power means and how it is affecting Americans and people around the world. Review the administration's first year with some of our best op-eds.

Feb. 13: Paul Vallas, "What would it mean if the US Department of Education is abolished?" In 1980, Ronald Reagan ran for president vowing to abolish the U.S. Department of Education, but there was little support among congressional Republicans for doing so — until Donald Trump reigned in the push for its dismantling. The DOE is the smallest Cabinet department with around 4,100 employees.

At first glance, the department's future might seem uncertain, given Trump's repeated promises to eliminate it and reports that he plans to sign an executive order to that effect — similar to his efforts to shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development. However, unlike USAID, the DOE is explicitly authorized by Congress and cannot be dismantled without congressional approval.

Democrats are claiming that closing the DOE would mean eliminating Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act programs and other grant programs that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, amount to around \$30 billion in annual grants. While that is a significant amount, it equals less than 6% of what state and local governments themselves spend. Democrats also claim that Pell Grants, federal student loans, loan repayment and loan forgiveness programs administered by the DOE would also be abolished.

There is no indication that Trump intends to eliminate these programs. Even if he did, like any effort to dismantle the DOE, such actions would require congressional approval.

March 25: Gavi Rosenthal, "I worked for USAID for 16 years. I saw the profound difference it made." Since Jan. 20, USAID has been painted as wasteful and excessive. Here's the truth: What USAID does is actually the minimum. USAID's humanitarian bureau lets people know they aren't alone during their worst moments, helps them survive and helps them fare better the next time disaster strikes. Remember the worst time in your life: Did you lose your home, or a family member, or survive a flood or a fire? Do you remember what helped? Maybe it was someone giving you a place to stay until you could get back on your feet or a neighbor bringing food so you didn't have to cook in your grief. Or maybe it was someone offering a gift card for the grocery store, someone saying, "Your kids are safe," while you went to find work or shelter, or someone feeding your kids because what you could afford wouldn't be enough to go around.

Have you done these kindnesses for someone else? Of course you have. That's what USAID does; it's that basic. USAID says, "The American people are with you and are here to help," and then USAID helps communities to help each other. It cannot be said enough how little this costs, how universal and human this is.

I've been privileged to represent the U.S. at its best, to work alongside the smartest, most compassionate, most professional people I've ever met, all trying to make life a little less difficult for their fellow humans. My team supported public health work-



President Donald Trump talks to reporters as he walks to Marine One from the White House on Dec. 19 in Washington. JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP



A U.S. Department of Education employee leaves the building with their belongings on March 20 in Washington ahead of President Donald Trump's signing of an executive order to dissolve the Education Department. WIN MCNAMEE/GETTY



Barbara Singer, of Bethesda, Maryland, who says she worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development as a contractor until being let go in February, holds up a sign in support of USAID on Feb. 28 in Washington. "It's a great agency that benefits all of us," Singer said. "Americans and people worldwide." JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

ers coordinating across conflict lines in the middle of a civil war to vaccinate Syrian kids against polio, reaching every kid when everyone thought it was impossible. I found myself close to tears watching trucks of food cross the border into Syria, knowing the months and layers of delicate negotiations required to allow such a simple delivery of food to people in need. I met Ukrainians fleeing across the border into Slovakia in the first days after Russia's full-scale invasion, and the hundreds of strangers mobilized to support and welcome them. I met families who fled the eruption of Mount Mayon in the Philippines, who survived because they had enough warning to make it to safety before the volcano erupted, because of the support that my office had provided for early warning technology.

April 16: George F. Galland Jr., "Kirkland & Ellis and others have made a deal with the devil!" These firms are too addicted to big money to behave well in a crisis such as the one now engulfing the country. So when Trump

decided to capture them, it was a snap. He ordered his lackeys to start bogus "investigations" of "discrimination" and threatened to cut off security clearances.

This was unconstitutional, but he couldn't care less. He knew, as he put it, they'd come on bended knee. One after another, they've made "deals" with him, the basic, unstated term of which can only be: If you help anyone challenge me in court, you risk me going after you again.

It's not hard to guess why these firms caved to Trump. Paul Weiss, the first firm to make a deal, essentially said so. It knew that if it resisted Trump's pressure, other comparable firms probably wouldn't. That could lead to losing clients and making less money. Think of it — having to make, on average, less than \$9.25 million a year. Horrors!

But Kirkland & Ellis could at least have refrained from trying to explain why it did what it did. A statement from its "Firm Committee" to its "Firmwide All Personnel" could be used, in my opinion, by Poison Control units to induce you know what:

"We made this decision to pursue this solution because at our very core our mission is to protect and support our people and our clients, and this agreement does both. It is also consistent with the values that underpin our firm and cement us together, including our culture that prioritizes ability and opportunity, not politics." I would have put it differently: "By bowing to the president's demands, we became complicit in what he is doing to the country."

July 6: Richard C. Longworth, "Donald Trump will be remembered as a great leader — but not a good one" It is time to acknowledge that Donald Trump is a great man, and that's not good.

This is a hard concept for both Trump's fans and foes and requires definitions of "greatness" and "goodness." But Trump is making history by the day, and we need to understand where he fits in this history.

I'd argue that a great leader is one who, by sheer force of intellect or will, shapes the history of his time. Most leaders merely react to the events of their day or cope with crises, big and small, or try to make progress bit by bit, happy to leave their societies a little bit better than they found them. In this sense, history shapes their legacies by limiting what they can do. If they keep us out of war or depression or civil strife, that's no bad legacy.

This modest competence doesn't satisfy the great man, not at all. He wants to dominate history and change the world. Propelled by ideology or a sheer lust for power, he intends to break the rules of society and uproot the social order he inherited. Too often, he succeeds.

Sept. 3: Steve Chapman, "Donald Trump pioneers a strange policy: Republican socialism" Socialism used to be the antithesis of Republican principles. "Socialism only works in two places — heaven, where they don't need it, and hell, where they already have it," Ronald Reagan quipped.

It was not just outright nationalization of industries that conservatives rejected; it was almost any sort of federal interference with private markets to achieve social or economic goals. Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act preserved the role of private insurers, but GOP Rep. Michele Bachmann expressed a right-wing consensus when she told the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference it was nothing less than "the crown jewel of socialism."

But Trump has outdone anything Obama ever dreamed of, mounting a brazen government invasion of the private sector. He interfered with the sale of U.S. Steel to Nippon Steel, forcing the Japanese giant to grant Washington a "golden share," which will give him a major role in company decisions.

Chip manufacturer Intel had to agree to give the U.S. government an ownership stake — making it the company's biggest shareholder. "I said, 'I think you should pay us 10% of the company,' and they said yes," Trump crowed. It was an offer Intel couldn't refuse.

He imposed terms on chipmakers Nvidia and AMD, forcing them to hand over 15% of the money from their sales in China. He announced a deal requiring the Japanese government to invest \$550 billion in the U.S. — which will be carried out "at President Trump's direction."

These are only the beginning. "I will make deals like that for our Country all day long," Trump posted about the Intel shake-down.

Nov. 28: Elizabeth Shackelford, "Donald Trump's Black Friday approach to foreign policy"

The world order established in the wake of World War II reflects a Giving Tuesday take on foreign policy. Countries came together to establish the United Nations to promote global cooperation for collective benefit. That approach sees a world of sociopolitical integration, in which the security and prosperity of individual countries depend and rely on the security and prosperity of others. It recognizes our interconnectedness and compels us to manage it effectively, not just for our own individual gain. In this world order, humanitarian aid and development and the allies to promote them are not altruistic but essential.

Another kind of foreign policy is the Black Friday kind: selfish, transactional and short-term. It might benefit a country on a brief political cycle, but it doesn't provide long-term solutions or stability. Its quick answers can lead to long conflicts. This was the type of world order that set the stage for two World Wars and that the post-WWII order was designed to end. And yet, this is the kind of world that the Trump administration is seeking to return to.

The Russian "peace deal" that the administration just tried to force on Kyiv offers a clear example, though widespread push-back from members of Congress and our allies thankfully forced a return to the negotiating table. The original 28-point plan, and President Donald Trump's framing of it as an ultimatum, would have given the United States some shallow, short-term gains, such as reconstruction profits and investment opportunities. But it would have done so at the cost of Europe's future peace, since it would have rewarded Russia's aggression with even more territory than it already stole and left Ukraine incapable of defending itself in the future. From trade to security partnerships, Europe's stability affects us at home, so that would have cost us in the long run too.

OPINION

2025 was a year of setbacks and celebration

By Ciera Bates-Chamberlain, Seth Limmer, Otis Moss III and Michael Pfleger

The end of a calendar year is always a good time to reflect on the time that has passed. We'd like to share our reflections on the 12 months of messages we have been privileged to share with you through the pulpit of the opinion pages.

We begin with the obvious: 2025 was a year of major setbacks.

Following the inauguration of a new administration, we realized that faith leaders committed to the religion of creation — one that exalts the common good — would need to lead the resistance against the reigning powers seeking to privilege the few. The religion of empire stands in opposition to the religion of creation. As we framed it in a column early this year: "The religion of America's empire forsakes the whole for the sake of the few." Our warning then proved instructive for the fight ahead: The religion of empire "is a human invention used to justify and legitimize attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for some at the expense of others."

America's "empire" mentality dominated the year. It is based on blatant mistruths that poison our society, such as the insidious "great replacement" conspiracy theory, as "racist, anti-immigrant, misogynistic and antisemitic as it is untrue." We decried the stoking of fear by our national leaders that heterosexual white people who embrace traditional gender norms — sometimes, the less overtly racist and sexist term "Western civilization" is used instead — are being replaced by a diverse society that seeks the equity of all people. Since we wrote those words in February, the Department of Homeland Security has elevated the asylum status of white Afrikans while terminating temporary protected status for refugees from Ethiopia and Afghanistan. By June, we were forced to call readers' attention to steps the administration has undertaken that threaten civil liberties, an essential democratic safeguard for religious, racial and other minority communities.

Furthermore, that mentality of "empire" remains entrenched in our federal government: Recently, Republican lawmakers called for



People wave flowers and sing during an interfaith prayer service led by North Shore Unitarian Church outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement holding facility in Broadview on Oct. 24. STACEY WESCHOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

the mass expulsion of Muslims from America. Throughout the year, we have seen a shocking normalization of white Christian nationalism. By September, the movement had become so widespread and centralized that we were compelled to pen a strong indictment: "We must clearly state that white Christian nationalism has co-opted Christianity in an attempt to sanctify an ungodly movement. In rejecting love for all and replacing it with hate for many, white Christian nationalism is, literally, anti-Christ."

Strong words are required for our national debate, but also in our home city.

As clergy committed to our city of Chicago, our focus did not waver this year from our fundamental commitment to mitigating the plague of gun violence. We spoke about the need for continued investment in community violence intervention programs and also of the important role each of us can play in the lives of young people to steer them away from gun culture.

The hunger and food insecurity crisis also escalated in our city. Three of us witnessed a rise in the number of people visiting the food pantries run by our institutions, so we sounded the alarm for all Chicagoans, not only to share their time and money with organizations that address hunger but also to advocate with elected officials to mitigate the cuts to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits.

And, of course, the deployment of federal forces in our city, which have disappeared our residents, shot chemical munitions at our clergy, tear-gassed our journalists and effectively trampled on our constitutional rights, has weighed on us. We spoke of the need for

mass protests across the nation and for standing in solidarity across lines of class and faith in Chicago. In the face of the oppression imposed by the immigration raids and deportations, we remain proud that our city of broad shoulders has built a broad coalition that stands with immigrant and refugee communities.

Importantly, this year was not without its moments of celebration. The four of us were downright joyful at the General Assembly passage of the Clean Slate Act; we spoke of the legislation's vital importance in March and October. We are so grateful to Rep. Jehan-Gordon Booth and Sen. Elgie Sims for championing the bill and also to Gov. JB Pritzker for signing it into law. The Clean Slate Act is about more than redemption. It's about restoring the right to work and the freedom to live.

Throughout this year, we have focused on the power of speaking up in protest and through our actions. We began the year with a call to you all to lift up your voices:

"We cannot afford the luxury of remaining silent, or remaining isolated from each other. Instead, standing together, we can counter that sickness, we can defeat the isolating cold and we can usher in a new era of embracing warmth."

When the summer heat arrived, we again extended the invitation to speak up and to speak out,

together: "Let voices of care ring out of every pulpit, speak from every heart and be extended with kind acts from every hand. May nonviolence rule our lawless time. May your voice and your hands join together with ours."

And we conclude this year with the same exhortation: May 2026 bring us peace and blessings, and may we continue to stand together. May we live up to the higher angels of our nature and the loftiest values of our traditions. May we not let lines of faith or class or race divide us; rather, may we unite against the forces of empire that seek to subdue us, so that we might be able to create a city that honors all creatures and all creation.

Chicago faith leaders Rabbi Seth Limmer, the Rev. Otis Moss III, the Rev. Ciera Bates-Chamberlain and the Rev. Michael Pfleger joined the Tribune's opinion section in summer 2022 for a series of columns on potential solutions to Chicago's chronic gun violence problem. The column continues on an occasional basis.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

I want the option

I am sorry that Pope Leo XIV is "disappointed" that Illinois now has a medical aid in dying law. I respect his right to an opinion on the subject. If he wishes to suffer through his final agonies, no matter how horrific, that's his choice and more power to him. Personally, I would like to have the option, if I am suffering at the end, of drinking something down and peacefully going to sleep. I wish Leo and the Catholic bishops would respect my choices and mind their own business. And I would have more respect for Leo's opinion if he would announce that contraception is good, masturbation is not a sin, divorce is OK and women can be priests.

Medical aid in dying is now legal in Illinois, California, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii, New Mexico, Colorado, Maine, Vermont, New Jersey, Delaware and Washington, D.C., and soon will be in New York. It's an option, a choice that terminally ill, mentally capable adults may make — never an obligation — and nobody qualifies because of age and disability. And despite the views of the Catholic hierarchy, polls consistently show support for medical aid in dying among rank-and-file Catholics.

Tribune readers might be interested to know that even in heavily Catholic Italy, medically assisted dying has been permissible since 2019; the Italian region of Tuscany approved a medical aid in dying law this year.

— Edward Gogol, Crystal Lake

Grateful for agency

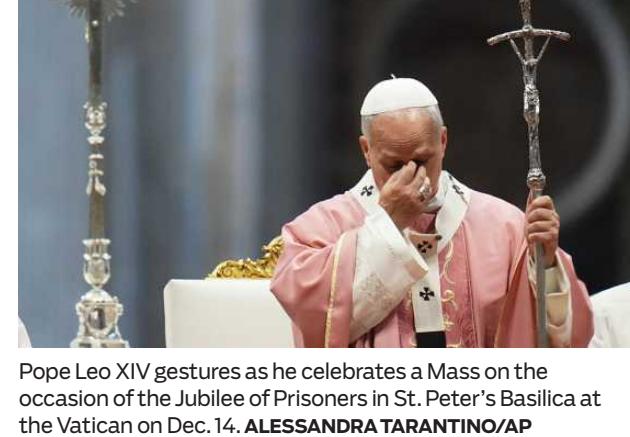
I'm 87 years old and have prostate cancer. While my death is not imminent, I am likely to eventually die of this disease. Anyone who has watched a friend or loved one die from this cancer knows that, in spite of everything that doctors can do, it can be a prolonged and extremely unpleasant passing for the person who is ill as well as for family and friends. But now we finally have another option: medical aid in dying.

When the time comes, I will be able to gather family and friends to celebrate what has been a wonderful life together as I pass on to the next great adventure. This is simply a rational and humane way to deal with the inevitable end of this life that we all will face one day. I understand that many disapprove of this option. That is fine. They don't have to choose it. But they have absolutely no right to demand that I not be able to choose it for myself.

The law contains strong safeguards for all who are involved. Doctors are not required to participate. The protections against any form of coercion, which is a felony, have proved to be successful in the states that have allowed MAID for years. I understand that choosing to end one's life on one's own terms is a pretty big leap for many people, but years of experience in MAID states have proved its value and benefits for thousands of people.

So, if you disapprove of MAID, for whatever reason, fine.

For online-exclusive letters, go to www.chicagotribune.com/letters. Email your letter submissions, 400 words or less, to letters@chicagotribune.com. Include your full name, address and phone number.



Pope Leo XIV gestures as he celebrates a Mass on the occasion of the Jubilee of Prisoners in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican on Dec. 14. ALESSANDRA TARANTINO/AP

But please don't attempt to deny me my fundamental right to make my own choice about how my life will end when that time comes for me.

— Colin C. Campbell, Geneva

Church is exempted

As an Illinois transplant who has been here for almost a quarter of a century, it makes me sad that the state I thought would be liberal and open-minded seems to be controlled by the Catholic Church. My most recent source of consternation stems from the article "Some Illinois hospitals won't participate in aid-in-dying" (Dec. 20), which details Catholic hospital systems that won't be following the medical aid in dying law and helping people avoid suffering in the last few weeks or days of their life.

Approximately 24% of Illinois is Catholic. Yet where I live in Homewood, almost many health systems are owned by the Catholic church. The hospital we were sent to when my toddler had croup? Catholic. The only trauma center close to me? Catholic. My primary care physician? Affiliated with a Catholic system.

By taking control of all of the health care in my area, the Catholic Church can limit my choices as a non-Catholic to make the decisions that are best for me.

And this is not simply paranoia on my part. When my daughter was little, a fellow married Homewood mom with a small child was denied birth control by her primary care physician, simply because they were affiliated with a Catholic health system.

In my relatively short time in Illinois, time and again the Catholic Church has used its doctrine to discriminate and impose its views on non-Catholics. Let's not forget that Catholic Charities received state money for placing foster kids and then refused to let same-sex couples be foster parents. Or that churches were the main opposition to same-sex marriage being recognized in Illinois.

We need to stop exempting the Catholic Church from following our secular laws, and we need more publicly funded hospitals so that everyone has the right to care that follows their own ethics, not that of the hospital offering treatment.

— Kate Sims-Drew, Homewood

What about choice?

I am wondering if the same people who object to medical aid in dying also support abortion? What happened to: "My body, my choice"?

— Ann DeFranzo, Woodridge

State insurance system

The recent editorial on homeowner's insurance rate increases rightly acknowledges the financial pressure many Illinois families are facing ("Another steep homeowners insurance rate hike from Allstate. How should Springfield react?" Dec. 22). But it also risks mischaracterizing the very system that has kept our state's insurance market competitive, affordable and responsive for decades.

Illinois insurers are already required to submit detailed actuarial documentation to justify any proposed rate increase. These filings undergo review by a state regulator to ensure rates reflect real risk, not arbitrary pricing. Every increase must be actuarially sound.

It's also misleading to suggest that the Illinois Department of Insurance lacks oversight authority. The current framework balances transparency, flexibility and competition. Illinois has one of the most competitive insurance markets in the nation, with more than 200 companies offering homeowners coverage. That competition keeps prices in check. Our state's average annual premium is \$1,143, which is below the national average of \$1,337, even though construction labor and building material costs have increased.

The editorial calls into question whether this model still serves consumers. But the alternative — HB3799's rigid "prior approval" system — would impose lengthy delays and retroactive disapprovals that could destabilize the market. Independent analysis shows that shifting to this model could increase premiums by 20%, or roughly \$230 per household.

This is the worst possible moment to advance legislation that would drive homeowner's insurance premiums up by another 20%. Property taxes across Chicago are already soaring, and the burden is falling hardest on communities with the least room to absorb it. As the Tribune recently reported, many predominantly Black neighborhoods saw property tax bills jump by more than 50% compared with 2024, a staggering increase by any measure.

Calls for rate regulation may appear politically appealing, but they ignore the reality that rates reflect risk. Suppressing actuarially sound rates doesn't protect consumers; it limits their choices and drives up costs in the long run.

That said, we agree with the Tribune Editorial Board that transparency matters. We welcome efforts to enhance public understanding of rate filings and insurer performance.

The Illinois Insurance Association and our member companies remain committed to working with lawmakers and regulators on thoughtful, balanced solutions that preserve our strong marketplace while making improvements that best serve Illinois consumers.

— Kevin Martin, executive director, Illinois Insurance Association, Springfield