

Editor's TAKE

Biofuels and India's Green Energy Future

For India, the transition to biofuels aligns with its twin goals of energy security and environmental responsibility

Earth's climate is changing at a faster pace than ever before. Rising temperatures, shifts in precipitation patterns, melting glaciers, rising sea levels and higher frequency of extreme weather events are a few indicators of the gloom that stairs us in the face. A lot of this has been due to human activity, especially burning of fossil fuel which has led to release of greenhouse gases which trap the heat. This is heating up the planet and ruining our own chances of survival in the long term.

In this scenario the push for clean, renewable and locally sourced energy has become more urgent than ever. Biofuels have emerged as a vital alternative to fossil fuels — offering a sustainable, lower-emission pathway to power our industries and vehicles. For a growing and energy-hungry nation like India, the relevance of biofuels goes far beyond environmental benefits. They promise energy independence, economic opportunities in rural areas and a more resilient future.

Biofuels, which are derived from organic material such as agricultural waste, non-edible oilseeds and even algae, emit far fewer greenhouse gases than traditional petroleum-based fuels. Transitioning to them not only supports India's climate goals under the Paris Agreement but also reduces its overwhelming dependence on imported crude oil, which currently covers more than 80 per cent of its oil needs. The advantages also extend to the agricultural sector, where farmers can find new income streams by selling crop residues and organic waste, which are often burned or discarded.

India has taken notable steps to tap into this potential. The National Policy on Biofuels, first launched in 2018 and updated in 2022, has set ambitious targets. India has reached a milestone in its journey toward energy independence and environmental sustainability. The nation has achieved 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol by March 2025. In less than a decade, ethanol blending has jumped from 1.5 per cent in 2014 to over 12 per cent in 2024 — a dramatic improvement.

In 2023, India further cemented its leadership role by launching the Global Biofuels Alliance during the G20 Summit, aiming to foster international collaboration on research, production and standards for biofuels. Alongside these national and international efforts, schemes like SATAT (Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation) have encouraged the establishment of thousands of compressed biogas plants, turning organic waste into clean energy.

However, challenges remain. Feedstock availability is inconsistent and often seasonal, making logistics and supply chain management difficult. Second-generation biofuels, which use crop residues and waste rather than sugarcane or corn, are still more expensive to produce. There are also technological hurdles in processing certain kinds of biomass efficiently. Without sufficient investment in research and infrastructure, scaling up production remains a complex task. Despite these obstacles, the direction is clear. India's growing emphasis on biofuels is more than a green initiative — it is a strategic move to secure its energy future, strengthen rural economies and assert global leadership in sustainable development.

Indian Muslim: A Call for Reform and Renewal

The way forward lies in embracing constitutional values not just legally, but culturally — by advancing women's rights, and prioritising education rooted in both Islamic principles and democratic ethos

The Constitution is the elixir of democracy. It is a covenant that all citizens of a country have agreed to adhere to. It is a guarantee of equality in the eyes of the law. It is armour that protects the weak and holds the mighty accountable. Even though riddled with umpteen road-blocks and deliberate attempts to muzzle its spirit, it has kept its flame afire. Muslims of India have dutifully followed the Constitution, yet their reverence or preference, to be honest, has been for religious texts that remain popular as per the sectarian orientation of a Muslim section. Seemingly, Muslims publicly embraced the Constitution only during the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) agitation some years ago when they feared probable loss of citizenship of millions among them. It is a sad commentary on a community whose top leadership was at the vanguard of shaping the Constitution that was so painstakingly promulgated by sieving through the best of canons from across the globe.

Maulana Azad, Sir Syed Muhammad Saadullah, and Tajamul Hussain — all members of the Constituent Assembly — significantly contributed to India's Constitution. These dignitaries were well-versed in details of religious injunctions and saw in the Indian Constitution nothing that would forbid compliance with Islam concurrently with the law of the land. Muslims are oblivious to the fact that it was due to the participation of these stalwarts in the Constituent Assembly that some milestone provisions became part of the Constitution. Examples include:

- Ensuring equality before the law (Article 14)
- Prohibiting discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (Article 15)
- Guaranteeing freedom of religion (Articles 25–28)

These are guarantees for the protection of cultural, educational, and linguistic rights of Muslims and others. However, the following 75 years saw Muslims clinging to regressive clerics, as they had been doing during the Colonial and Mughal periods. Such clerics almost had hegemonic control over the general Muslim masses. As a result, societal reforms have been either sparse or obstinately decremental. Calls for modernisation and reform have been repeatedly resisted. A mere meandering through a Muslim locality would uncloak the reality that a larger section of the population is in the grip of traditional and



SHUJAAT ALI QUADRI



hackneyed texts, which are propagated by demagogic religious figures. These figures — self-acclaimed authorities on Islam within both *Sunni* and *Shia* streams — can be seen on community fora, television studios, and most prominently on social media.

Sometimes, even such figures from Pakistan are followed as much in India as indigenous *maulvis*. One of the most problematic outcomes of such traditional following is that Muslims begin to adopt certain theocratic ideologies that are often propounded by the aforementioned theologians. For years, a portion of Muslims followed the headline doctrine of *Jamaat-e-Islami*, which had declared modern democracy as “anathema” to Islamic principles of governance.

Some of its organisational contours still resonate with separatist tendencies. Similarly, a section of Indian Muslims have followed clerics groomed in Wahhabi moorings. Such clerics have openly called for the establishment of a Khilafat (Caliphate) in India and the world at large. Some have even persuaded their followers to embark on “conversion” of their non-Muslim compatriots.

These two theological thoughts have been prevalent despite their trouble potential in the Indian milieu. In recent years, such clerics have slowly disappeared and their views too have been thrown into obscurity — but their residue may sprout here and there. This is the danger.

In such a backdrop, embracing the Constitution tightly, promoting secularism, and initiating intra-community reforms will be the best possible remedy to correct the ills of the past and enter the 21st-century future. Strengthening secularism would not only enhance Muslims' own social standing but also contribute to India's unity and progress. In order to align themselves with the

Constitution, Muslims must begin reforming their personal or traditional laws in light of — and in the spirit of — laid-down canons. The community must champion reforms ensuring equal status for women. There must be much greater emphasis on women's education, including higher education, and it must be ensured that they find a voice in society. Such measures are not alien to Islamic principles but resonate strongly with the Quranic emphasis on justice, equality, and human dignity.

These principles, in fact, converge with the values enshrined in India's Constitution, especially the Directive Principles that stress fraternity and equality. Reform should not be seen as a betrayal of Islam but as its true fulfilment. The Quran repeatedly emphasises welfare, progress, and societal well-being. Therefore, there must be greater debate among all sections of Muslims in an effort to think in the context of the times we live in and accept the need to adapt to modern society.

However, these reforms must be community-driven, not forced by governmental fiat, as has been the present effort. Any effort to force reform and changes in laws will be met with resistance and is likely to fail.

Muslims are very personal about their personal laws, and hence their sensitivity must be kept in mind while updating their software in the Constitutional mould. Once Muslims are able to successfully ingrain constitutionalism in their outlook and reshape their Shariah-oriented religiosity in its light, they can claim various safeguards that the Constitution offers citizens of India — especially those groups that are minorities and are thus marginalised in myriad ways.

Muslims must demand constitutional guarantees for the security of life, protection of property, and a fair, level playing field.

Strength through merit, not political crutches, should be the guiding philosophy. Muslims may take a cue from the national life of Parsis in India. They are also a minority, albeit a minuscule one. They have amalgamated into India as sugar dissolves in milk — making it sweet and healthy. Parsis figure among the top-notch constitutionalists in India.

The Indian judicial landscape is dominated by them. Their legal acumen and scholarship have made them almost saintly figures in their domain. It is seldom heard that Parsis nurture any phobia while living in India. It is not recommended that Muslims should turn into experts on the Constitution overnight, but they must make it a vision for their collective life that the Constitution becomes their leading light. The discussions in their societies must revolve around issues that directly involve some constitutional angle.

It will foment in them a knowledge-oriented attitude. They will slowly turn wary of religious clichés that are chasing them in the form of ideologies or merely in the form of wily clerics. Their leaders and opinion-makers must understand that they are an indivisible part of the Indian nation. In keeping with the inclusive spirit of the Constitution, Muslim leaders must now integrate — and even assimilate — into the Indian mainstream. Muslims in general must accept pluralism, fairness, and justice as the basis for living together in dignity and security.

The Indian Constitution naturally inculcates such values among its followers. If Muslim folks follow this lead more forcefully, and almost with a missionary zeal, it will be the right direction for the community at the right time in history.

The author is the National Chairman of the Muslim Students Organisation of India (MSO).

PICTALK



A man feeds a flock of pigeons on a rainy day, at Musallam Jung Pul, in Hyderabad. PTI

Living the Gita's Wisdom to Please God

Opinion

Lord Krishna has spoken about giving up the fruits of labour in multiple verses of the Bhagavad Gita. I present a few of them here: “When prescribed work is done considering that as duty only, and by renouncing attachment and the fruit of action also, that relinquishment is considered to be in goodness.” (Gita 18.9)

In an earlier verse, Lord Krishna declares the relinquishment of the fruits of all acts as tyaga (renunciation). (Gita 18.2) And perhaps the most profound is this: “Knowledge is superior to practice; meditation is superior to knowledge; giving up the fruit of action is superior to meditation.” (Gita 12.12)

This is because using the fruits of action for the benefit of others pleases God the most. God is complete in every respect; He does not need anything material from us. But when we use our material possessions as a medium to serve others in His name, He is deeply pleased. There are two kinds of fruits of action: material and spiritual. Let me begin with the material kind, which are more common. We have ten senses and their leader — the mind.

Of the ten, five are knowledge-gathering: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. Each sense can experience pleasure in different modes. For example, the eyes: In sattuva (goodness),



AJIT KUMAR BISHNOI

one enjoys natural beauty, serene landscapes, and art. In rajas (passion), the pleasure comes from action — sports, cinema, and thrill. In tamas (ignorance), one may be drawn to vulgar content, violence, or obscenity. Similar modes of pleasure exist for the other senses. As for the working senses — speech, hands, feet, genitals, and anus — sensual pleasures are among the most intense and sought after. However, these pleasures are personal and fleeting. Those who can master their senses often live a more balanced and fulfilling life. Now, at a subtler level, there are the mind, intelligence, ahankara (ego)

and consciousness.

A controlled mind brings peace. Elevated intelligence makes life meaningful. Curbed ego makes us more acceptable in society. Awareness and presence (consciousness) give a sense of significance.

Yet, attachment to the material world keeps the cycle of birth and death intact. Looking at the grosser fruits of action, one can sacrifice time to serve others. Parents, volunteers, and social workers do this nobly. Then there are physical possessions we can give away — old phones, unused clothes, household items.

Money is perhaps the most significant of all. Since people are deeply attached to it, using it for others is a powerful renunciation. However, Lord Krishna cautions: “That charity which is given with the thought that one must give, without expectation of return, and to a worthy recipient

— that charity is in the mode of goodness.” (Gita 17.20) Quality time, too, should be offered to family and loved ones. This includes meeting both material and emotional needs. But to do this well, we must overcome our fault-finding nature, as everyone has shortcomings. To make our seva (service) meaningful, it must be welcomed, and for that, appreciation is key. I have found that sincerely appreciating others — especially those close — opens hearts. Such acts truly please God. Now, I come to the most important form of offering — the fruits of labour to God Himself.

Time must again come first. Personally, my Lord has relieved me of many responsibilities, acting as the karta (doer) in my life. I use the spare time to connect with God through spiritual practices that suit me and are free from pressure. Next is fame, which I have received by His kripa (grace) through my books and articles. God enabled me with opportunities, support, and inspiration.

For instance, we recently distributed spiritual books for children to 1,000 schools in Delhi. My Lord must be pleased. Then comes empowerment. I'm deeply grateful to God that I can now support my loved ones — both materially and spiritually. That brings me to a verse I cherish: “No one among men pleases Me more than he, nor will there ever be one dearer to Me on earth.” (Gita 18.69) Finally, my service to God includes setting an example of renounced living, just as He instructs. In doing so, I offer everything I have — time, fame, energy, and resources — at His feet.

(The writer is a spiritual teacher)

Letters to the Editor

Queenship earned in silence

Apropos the news item, “Divya Deshmukh Wins Chess World Cup”, published on July 29, this is my response. In an all-Indian final, exciting young talent Divya Deshmukh etched her name into chess history by defeating Grandmaster Humpy Koneru in the tiebreaks to win the FIDE Women's World Cup, demonstrating exceptional resilience and strategic precision. The historic win not only crowns Deshmukh as the World Champion, but also confers on her the Grandmaster title, making her India's 88th Grandmaster and only the fourth Indian woman to reach this elite status.

Deshmukh's victory is more than a personal triumph; it reflects India's deep talent pool and growing stature in women's chess. The all-Indian final underscores how sustained focus on nurturing female talent is beginning to pay dividends, with chess clubs, academies, and federations working tirelessly to promote the game among young women. Deshmukh's journey from underdog to India's newest Grandmaster will inspire a generation.

Divya Deshmukh's win is a powerful reminder that India's chess future is in capable hands. Her achievement signals a transformative moment for women's chess in the country. With determination and support, many more young champions are sure to emerge.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI

Debating dagger, dulling defence

The debate in Parliament over Operation Sindoor has unfortunately devolved into a spectacle of poor political discourse. The Opposition, rather than acknowledging the operation's undeniable success in dismantling long-standing terror hubs, chose to raise questions that appear politically motivated and disconnected from national interest.

Shockingly, the Opposition even questioned the timing of Operation Mahadev, which successfully neutralised three Pakistani terrorists responsible for the brutal killing of 26 Indians in Pahalgam. When Prime Minister Modi clarified that no global leader, including the US President, urged India to halt Operation Sindoor, Rahul Gandhi's demand to publicly call President Trump a liar came off as puerile and diplomatically irresponsible.

Instead of constructive dialogue, the Congress's line of questioning allowed the Prime Minister to turn the spotlight back on the party's historical missteps — from its Kashmir policy to the controversial Indus Waters Treaty. No other democracy in the world would conduct such a self-damaging debate, which plays directly into the hands of the enemy. Rather than celebrating the bravery and strategic precision of our armed forces, the Opposition has turned the debate into a farce, embarrassing India on the global stage.

N SADHASIVA REDDY | BENGALURU

A mason builds bridges, not walls

When the BJP has gone all out to polarise Bengali society along religious lines to win the 2026 West Bengal Assembly polls — backed by communal-minded “educated elites” with top degrees and designations — what a powerful response has come from “uneducated” mason Md Soleman. After his childhood friend Mithun Mondal lost his home to Ganga erosion in September 2024, Soleman welcomed Mithun's seven-member family into his modest four-room house — giving them two rooms, without charging a rupee.

Soleman, who lives with his own family of five, simply said: “It is not about rent. It is our bond of love.” While communal flames were fanned in Murshidabad in April 2025, and the saffron brigade across Bengal and India zealously stoked hatred for electoral gains, Soleman and Mithun quietly lived in harmony — near the very epicentre of that unrest.

This is humanity. This is the secular soul of Bangaliana at its purest — reminding us that rioters and hate merchants have no religion. When will the BJP's high command realise that their tried-and-tested communal playbook might work in Gujarat, UP, Assam — even “New India” — but not in the land of Tagore, Nazrul, and Lalone, where Bangaliana and compassion will always outshine the forces of division?

KAJAL CHATTERJEE | KOLKATA

WHY IS OUR POLITICAL CLASS SO UNAPOLOGETIC?

The Supreme Court recently slammed Madhya Pradesh minister Kunwar Vijay Shah for issuing an online apology for his derogatory remarks against highly decorated Army officer Col Sofiya Qureshi. The Court's criticism was not merely about the format, but the lack of sincerity and gravity with which such an apology was tendered.

Following the roof collapse at a Government Primary School in Rajasthan, where seven students lost their lives and several others were injured, no formal apology has been issued by the state government. There have only been expressions of grief and vague promises of action. The opposition Congress party called the incident “murder,” but its own history is marred by similar failures. When in power during past tragedies, Congress leaders often avoided direct apologies, instead resorting to damage control. A parallel can be drawn with the 2023 Kerala boat tragedy in Malappuram.

While in opposition, Congress leaders demanded resignations and accountability. Yet, when in power, similar disasters saw nothing beyond perfunctory condolences. The most glaring example of this unapologetic behaviour comes from none other than the Prime Minister and Home Minister, neither of whom has issued a formal apology for the loss of 26 Indian lives under their watch in Pahalgam.

In stark contrast stands South Korean President Lee Jae-myung, who formally apologised to the families of victims following national tragedies like the Sewol ferry sinking and the Itaewon crowd crush. He bowed his head and publicly admitted the Government's failure to act during critical moments — an act of leadership and accountability. As the anonymous quote goes: “Admitting you're wrong is hard, but it's the first step to being right again.” Are our netas listening?

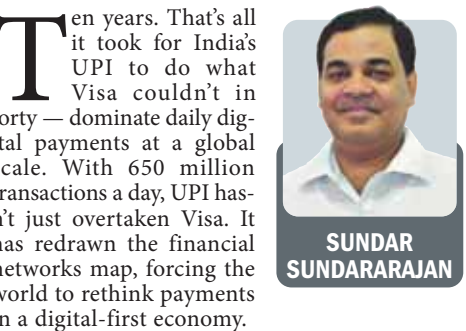
AVINASH GODBOLEY | DEWAS



# How India's UPI Rewired the Global Payment Network

In just a decade, India's UPI has transformed from a bold experiment into the world's leading digital payment network — surpassing Visa, redefining global finance, and proving that openness and inclusion can outpace legacy systems

FIRST  
Column



SUNDAR  
SUNDARAJAN

Ten years. That's all it took for India's UPI to do what Visa couldn't in forty — dominate daily digital payments at a global scale. With 650 million transactions a day, UPI hasn't just overtaken Visa. It has redrawn the financial networks map, forcing the world to rethink payments in a digital-first economy.

## Openness by Design

UPI is not the story of a single app — it is the story of a nation's transition from disconnected financial systems to a cohesive, democratically designed digital infrastructure.

UPI's rise wasn't a startup story. It was a convergence of visionary regulation, public digital infrastructure, and private innovation.

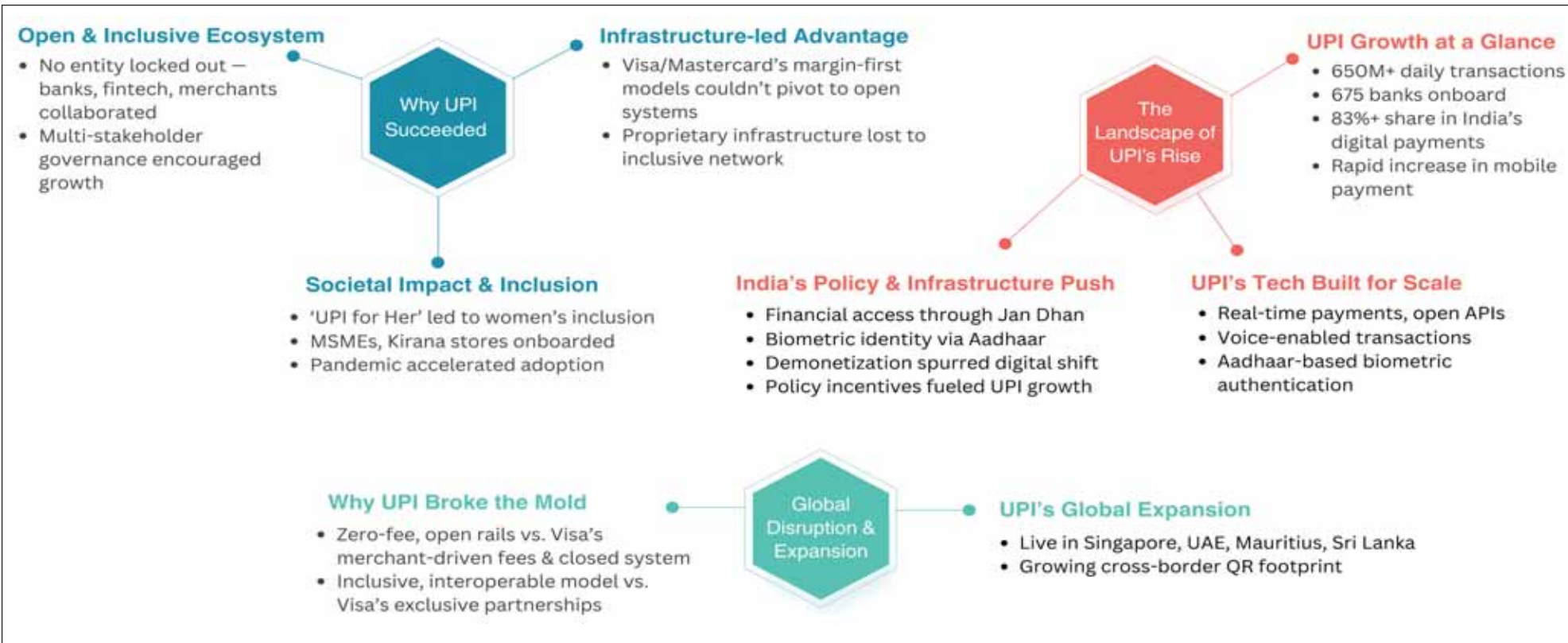
To understand this shift, one must first understand the terrain India started from. Digital payments were fragmented. Card usage was low outside cities. Wallets were closed systems — each with separate logins, fees, and barriers. Transfers were slow, costly, and limited in reach. Meanwhile, the government pushed foundational initiatives: Jan Dhan Yojana for banking, Aadhaar for identity, and Direct Benefit Transfers for welfare. But access alone meant little without affordable, reliable payment rails. A mobile revolution was shaping the user behaviour. A young, digitally fluent population embraced smartphones, fuelling demand for simple mobile payments. Then, demonetisation in 2016 accelerated the need for cashless alternatives. UPI was India's answer — to its own gaps and rigid global payment models. Unlike card networks built on exclusivity and profit, UPI, developed by NPCI with regulatory backing and multi-stakeholder governance, was public infrastructure — open by design.

Its architecture embodied this vision: open APIs, zero-cost transactions, and seamless interoperability. Any bank or fintech could easily integrate. Control wasn't centralised, yet innovation thrived.

## From Kiranas to Digital Economy: The UPI Ecosystem in Motion

UPI removed friction, built trust, and turned collaboration into infrastructure

By removing entry barriers, UPI encouraged both collaboration and competition. Banks



expanded reach. Fintechs improved user journeys. Merchants, from malls to corner shops, adopted QR codes. Even auto-rickshaws and kirana stores became part of the digital economy.

Today, UPI connects 675 banks and now touches every corner of India (NPCI Report, 2025). It handles 83.4 per cent of India's digital payment transactions (RBI Payments Data, FY2024). In rural and semi-urban areas, 38 per cent of users prefer UPI (EY-CII Financial Inclusion Report, 2024). This democratisation was no accident — it was engineered.

But UPI's true innovation wasn't just in numbers — it was in how it redefined platform economics and participation. Instead of enforcing rigid standards, it created a shared platform where banks, fintechs, and merchants could engage on their terms. Where competition usually fragments ecosystems, UPI built interoperable nodes in a unified system. Cohesion wasn't a byproduct — it was the goal.

Payments in India became critical infrastructure, not mere profit engines. Between 2011 and 2023, financial inclusion rose from 25 per cent to over 80 per cent (World Bank G20 Report, 2023), powered by Aadhaar, mobile adoption, and UPI. The government's ₹1,500 crore fund for promoting low-value transactions lowered entry barriers (Press Information Bureau, 2024). By 2025, 89

per cent of Indian adults held a financial account, up from 35 per cent in 2011, among the fastest global shifts, enabled by Aadhaar, Jan Dhan, and UPI (World Bank Global Findex Report, 2025).

## Beating Giants by Redefining the Game

As global giants leaned on margins and exclusivity, UPI rewrote the rules with openness, access, and shared innovation. Global incumbents took notice. Visa and Mastercard, long dominant, began rethinking India strategies. Visa's margin-led model thrived in wealthy markets — its 1980s and 1990s expansion proved that. But in India, that logic couldn't scale. UPI didn't win by charging more — it won by enabling access. UPI didn't beat them with margins — it outpaced them with openness. Legacy systems relied on exclusivity to protect margins. UPI flipped that. It unlocked participation, giving every player, like banks, fintechs and merchants, a stake. Inclusivity sparked innovation. NPCI's voice-based payments and Paytm's soundbox integrations didn't just enhance UX, they enabled digital access for first-time users.

## From Bharat to the World: UPI Is Now a Global Standard

Born out of inclusion, built on intent — UPI redefined platform economics, empowered millions,

and now inspires payment strategies from Bharat to the globe.

UPI's biggest success lies in reaching those left out of traditional banking systems. In 2023, NPCI launched "UPI for Her," driving adoption among women users and merchants, pushing gender equity into digital finance. Agent-led models and local language interfaces penetrated Bharat — India beyond metros.

And UPI's reach isn't just local. Its cross-border ties with Singapore, UAE, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius, plus QR acceptance abroad, hint at interoperable, real-time global payments (MEA Press Release, 2024; NPCI International Partnerships, 2024). What started as India's solution is becoming a global reference model.

Having observed financial networks rise, recede, and realign over decades, I view UPI not merely as India's digital breakthrough, but as a profound challenge to long-held assumptions. It dismantled the belief that closed, proprietary systems are the default path to dominance.

UPI demonstrated that openness — when governed with intent and balance — can outperform even the most entrenched incumbents. Its ascent was fuelled by structural design choices that prioritised participation over control.

In doing so, it reaffirmed a larger truth: transformative innovation doesn't require monopolies.

Digital banking service providers like i-exceed Technology Solutions exemplify the critical role of digital technology in modernising financial ecosystem.

The company has supported numerous banks across India in their digital transformation journeys, enabling the collective onboarding of over 150,000 customers daily. Its digital platform processes more than 30 million real-time transactions each day.

As a key enabler of digital banking infrastructure, i-exceed underscores how technology providers can drive broader financial inclusion, enhance operational efficiency, and scale the financial ecosystem at large.

Today, UPI is shaping payment strategies from Jakarta to Johannesburg. But its legacy runs deeper than numbers.

It proved finance and payments needn't be extractive or exclusive. They can be open, inclusive, and infrastructure for all.

India didn't just build a digital payments system. It built a model the world is now studying — and adopting. UPI may have started in India. But today, the world is playing by its rules.

(The writer is Global Digital Banking & Finance Industry Technologist. He is also the Co-Founder & CEO at i-exceed Technologies)

# On the rails to safety: RPF's relentless fight against human trafficking



MANOJ YADAVA

It was an ordinary afternoon at New Jalpaiguri Railway Station on July 21, 2025. The bustle of trains, announcements, and rushing passengers belied a dark undercurrent that too often hides in plain sight — human trafficking. Acting on a tip-off, Miss Sarika Kumari, Lady Sub Inspector of the Railway Protection Force (RPF), along with RPF and Government Railway Police (GRP) officials, swung into action. A quiet, coordinated search across several coaches of Train No. 13245 DN went underway and what they found was staggering.

Fifty-six young adult girls, confused and unsure of their journey's purpose, were being transported by two individuals — Jitendra Kumar Paswan and Chandrima Kar — who claimed they were escorting the girls to work in motor parts and mobile phone companies in Bengaluru. To avoid detection, the girls had been spread across various coaches. Upon inquiry, the girls could not provide details about their travel or employment, and even their parents were unaware of the specifics. Their coach and berth numbers had been scrawled in ink on their hands — a chilling reminder of how systemised such crimes have become. The traffickers failed to produce any valid documentation or give credible explanations. Following due process, both accused were arrested under relevant provisions of law relating to trafficking of children, and the rescued girls were released after verification.

Behind this success was not just a team of officers, but a vigilant security ecosystem determined to ensure that the vast Indian Railway network — the lifeline of the country — is not allowed to become a conduit for human exploitation.

## RPF's Expanding Role

For the RPF, this was just another day of silent, determined service. Among its many responsibilities — ensuring passenger safety, protecting railway property, and maintaining order — one role has gained increasing prominence over the last decade: preventing human trafficking.

Indian Railways, with its 13,000 trains, 7,500 stations, and an estimated 23 million passengers daily, is an artery of movement that connects remote corners of India to urban hubs. But what makes it a boon for mobility also attracts malefactors — unscrupulous elements who exploit the affordability, reach, and anonymity of the railway system to smuggle their victims. Women and children, particularly from marginalised regions, are targeted with false promises of jobs, education, or marriage, and pushed into child labour, prostitution and begging.

The RPF has grown into a pivotal force in ensuring that traffickers do not misuse this public infrastructure. Through sustained intelligence-based

operations and coordination with Civil Police, NGOs, and other agencies, RPF has positioned itself as a key stakeholder in the national fight against human trafficking.

## Building a Trafficking-Free Network

The RPF's proactive role in combating trafficking did not emerge overnight. Its evolution has been strategic, structured, and committed.

This transformation began with Operation Nanhe Farishtey, launched in 2020, with a mission to rescue children who were lost, abandoned, run-away, or trapped in exploitative conditions. While initially focused on minors, the operation opened a window into the broader machinery of trafficking — leading to a deeper institutional focus on dismantling networks that target not only children, but women and other vulnerable adults as well.

Nanhe Farishtey became a defining intervention, saving more than 64,000 children — 43,493 boys and 20,411 girls — many from the grips of child labour, organised begging rings, and forced servitude during last four and a half years. After rescue, the children are produced before Child Welfare Committees (CWCs) for reintegration or safe institutional care, with crucial support from Child Help Desks (CHDs) and District Child Protection Units (DCPUs). These interventions have been operationalised at 135 major railway stations, with plans to scale it up further.

Building on its success, the RPF formally launched Operation AAHT (Action Against Human Trafficking) in 2022, creating 750 Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs) across the Indian Railways network. These units conduct intelligence-based drives, surveillance operations, and coordinated rescues with NGOs and local police. Strategic MoUs were signed with the National Commission for Women and Aarambh India (an NGO), enabling capacity-building, real-time information exchange, and structured rehabilitation support.

## Detection Dynamics

The battle against trafficking is no longer just about vigilance; it is about precision, prediction, and integration. RPF's detection dynamics now involve a multi-pronged, tech-enabled strategy that combines human intelligence with digital surveillance.

Frontline railway workers — ticket examiners, porters, onboard housekeeping staff — are sensitised and trained to spot red flags. Simultaneously, data analytics backed CCTV surveillance and AI-powered facial recognition systems (FRS) help identify traffickers and potential victims based on movement patterns and known databases. The use of social and digital media platforms has further added a modern edge to detection. Cases reported through platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp helplines, and even crowd-sourced alerts have led to rescues. This evolving surveillance ecosystem ensures that traffickers no longer operate with impunity, even in the busiest and most chaotic transit points.

## Rescues, Arrests, and Reforms

In 54 months between 2021 and mid-2025, 2,912 human trafficking victims were rescued by RPF, including over 2,600 minors and 264 adults. In this same period, 701 traffickers were arrested. The force has also played a crucial role in identifying illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and Myanmar, many of whom were victims of trafficking rings that promised work or refuge. Over 580 such cases were detected between 2022 and 2024. These numbers are not merely statistical milestones; they represent dismantled networks, broken chains of exploitation, and lives restored to safety.

But rescue is only part of the equation. RPF ensures that victims are counselled, supported, and rehabilitated through coordinated action with NGOs, CWCs, and shelter homes. From Muzaffarpur to Secunderabad, Katihar to Ajmer, known trafficking routes have been disrupted. Trains such as the Gorakhpur-Secunderabad Express, Rajendranagar-Ajmer Express, and New Jalpaiguri-Amritsar Express have become focal points for surveillance.

## Prevention as First Line of Defence

While rescue and prosecution are vital, prevention remains the cornerstone of an effective anti-trafficking strategy. The RPF, in alignment with broader government initiatives, has deployed a public outreach and awareness campaign across the railway ecosystem. From short street plays at railway stations, to posters, banners, and standees, to broadcast messages via public address systems and rail display networks, the aim is to make every passenger a stakeholder in vigilance. Slogans such as "Stop Trafficking: Because Every Child Deserves to Be Free" are more than words — they are part of a cultural shift to recognise and report exploitation. Moreover, community engagement — through social media campaigns, school outreach, and partnerships with civil society — is being mainstreamed into the preventive framework. The integration of helplines like 1098 and 112 ensures that reports can be swiftly acted upon. Together, these efforts are reshaping stations into zones of safety — spaces where traffickers are no longer invisible, and victims are never alone.

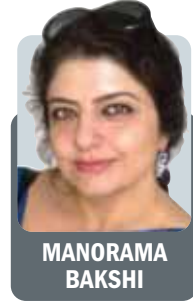
## Holding the Line, Together

On this World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, the story of the 56 girls rescued at New Jalpaiguri is not an exception — it is a reflection of a nationwide, relentless effort to combat one of humanity's gravest crimes.

But trafficking is a dynamic threat. It adapts, migrates, and conceals itself in the very systems meant to enable progress. The challenge, therefore, is ongoing. It requires constant vigilance, inter-agency synergy, policy innovation, and above all, a shared societal resolve.

(The writer is Director General, Railway Protection Force)

# Motherhood on the table and India's rising cesarean surge



MANORAMA  
BAKSHI

## The Butterfly and the Cocoon: A Metaphor We Must Reclaim

There's a parable I often return to: a man, seeing a butterfly struggle to emerge, cuts open the cocoon. The butterfly emerges — but weak, flightless. The struggle matters — it triggers strength and readiness. Labour, too, is not just pain; it is a biological and emotional preparation for both mother and child. Vaginal Birth, C-section, and Vaginal Seeding Babies born vaginally emerge bathed in maternal microbes

— especially Lactobacillus and Bacteroides — which help train their immune systems to distinguish friend from foe. C-section babies miss this microbial exposure. Research led by Dr. Maria Dominguez — Bello of NYU Langone, published in Nature Medicine, shows that "vaginal seeding" — swabbing C-section newborns with maternal vaginal fluids — can partially restore this microbial foundation. In a randomised controlled trial, seeded infants showed microbiota shifts closer to those of vaginally born babies. However, more extensive studies are needed, and the practice remains controversial due to infection risks. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists does not recommend it outside of clinical trials. Cesarean surgery is life-saving when indicated: for breech presentation, fetal distress, placenta previa, and other complications. But antenatal counselling should clearly distinguish medical necessity from elective preference.

Transparent discussion of medical indications: Clear communication of risks and benefits. Consideration of VBAC (vaginal birth after cesarean) and midwife-led care.

The Government of India, WHO, and UNICEF advocate: a) Institutional tracking of C-section rates. Promotion of midwife-led care for low-risk pregnancies, b) Strengthening public health systems for respectful, woman-centred maternity care

However, implementation remains uneven. Many private institutions continue to schedule surgeries not because they are needed, but because they are efficient, predictable, and profitable. C-sections are not the enemy. They are a vital part of modern obstetrics. The concern lies in the growing normalisation of planned, non-medical C-sections, particularly in better-resourced states and private hospitals. These surgeries bypass not just pain but physiology — denying the newborn a foundational exposure to microbes, hormones, and emotional imprinting. We must return to evidence-based, respectful birth practices. We must honour labour not as a burden but as a blueprint. Because when we wait — with patience, with presence, and with trust — we give wings not only to babies, but to the women who bring them forth.

(The writer is the Director & Head of Healthcare & Advocacy at Consocia Advisory, Founder of the Triloki Raj Foundation and senior visiting Fellow IMPRI)



## Weaponising tariffs

There is no need for the government to conclude a bilateral deal on US's terms

**WITH AN INTERIM** India-US trade deal stuck in limbo—despite five rounds of negotiations—US President Donald Trump has slapped a 25% tariff on India's goods to the US plus an additional penalty effective from August 1. That penalty pertains to India's purchases of Russian oil as sanctions on Moscow are imminent for its continued war with Ukraine. As if all of this were not bad enough, Trump has also earlier threatened to impose a tariff on Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) for moving away from the US dollar. This is clearly an example of coercive diplomacy as Trump is weaponising tariffs to ensure that countries with trade surpluses with the US pay higher tariffs and adopt measures like energy and defence purchases from America to reduce their surpluses. The US president insists on zero duty access for US goods into their economy, which countries like India find difficult to accept. The Indian government, for its part, is closely examining Trump's tariff missive to fashion an appropriate policy response.

Even if the August 1 deadline has not been met to conclude a deal, negotiations will continue when a team from Washington visits India on August 25. However, there is a warrant to temper expectations that any mutually beneficial deal will work out this autumn. Look no further as to what is in store for India with the deals Trump has worked with emerging economies like Indonesia and Vietnam. Indonesia faces a tariff of 19% despite eliminating 99% of all tariff barriers for a full range of US industrial, food, and agricultural products. In addition, Indonesia will purchase aircraft worth \$3.2 billion, and energy products worth \$15 billion. Vietnam faces a tariff of 20% while allowing US goods to enter the country duty-free. In addition, Vietnam also faces a 40% levy if there is transshipment of goods from China. The US's insistence on India opening its market to American goods is an important reason why an interim deal has so far been elusive.

Further talks are unlikely to make any breakthrough. Given its relatively low per capita income, India realises that it still needs to impose reasonable tariffs even as it is willing to lower the overall level of its tariffs under US pressure. Trump has always taunted India for being a tariff king with one of the highest duties in the world. On Wednesday, he took it one step further by terming India's trade barriers "obnoxious". India, for its part, has been willing to accommodate the US's requests for lower tariffs on specific industrial commodities but has held firm on its agricultural red lines—especially lowering duties on genetically modified maize and soya bean which are not allowed under our regulations. India has held firm on these red lines even with respect to its landmark Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with the UK.

India must be ready to impose retaliatory tariffs on certain US products in response to American tariffs on steel and aluminium. There is a need for similar strategic intent to ensure that we retain our autonomy in sourcing energy supplies from anywhere in the world, including Russia. India needs to assure the US that the BRICS don't have any intention to create a currency to rival the US dollar. The upshot is that India needs to hold firm and safeguard its national interests rather than succumb to US pressure to clinch an interim trade deal at all costs.

## China's AI strategy relies on frenzy and frenemies

**WANDERING THROUGH**THE halls of China's top artificial intelligence summit this week, I overheard heated debates on some of the thorniest issues facing the sector: How do we solve the problem of interoperability if hundreds of companies are launching their own AI agents? Which large language models are the most developer-friendly to build apps on? Are humanoid tools or companions?

Held on the banks of the Huangpu river in Shanghai, the World AI Conference convened thousands of people—as well as scores of robots—and brought to life all the passions and pitfalls of the current state of AI in China. It also put into stark contrast the chasm between the strategy pushed by Beijing and the one by the White House.

It's the first major gathering since DeepSeek's breakthrough reasoning model launched earlier this year, driving intense competition at home and proving China can go toe-to-toe with Silicon Valley. With that exuberance came the crowds of challengers, present in so many domestic industries, encouraged by government support and an open-source ecosystem that allows firms to quickly learn from rivals. When one of the so-called Little Dragons, Moonshot, released a massive open-source model that excelled at coding tasks, Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. was able to update their own Qwen model within about a week to improve benchmarks at the same skills that sent Kimi-K2 viral.

China's current AI frenzy represents the best and worst of classic capitalism: The competition propels innovation at a rapid clip, but not all of the companies will survive over the next five or 10 years. During the summit, state-backed media touted how the country has now released 1,500 large AI models—the biggest share globally—and is home to more than 5,000 AI companies.

Yet the domestic rivalries on display were overshadowed by a broader, geopolitical contest for supremacy. China's big gathering kicked off just days after President Donald Trump pledged that that the US will "do whatever it takes to lead the world in artificial intelligence". After unveiling a so-called AI Action Plan, he went on to declare that the US is the country that started the AI race, and "is going to win it".

In Shanghai, Premier Li Qiang headlined opening night by announcing that China will organise the launch of an international body to jointly develop the technology, with the goal of preventing it from becoming "an exclusive game for a small number of countries and enterprises". It dovetailed with this year's conference theme: "Global solidarity in the AI era." China is willing to share its development and products with the world, Li said, especially in the Global South.

Still, what these world leaders say is one thing, what they do is another. Trump's declaration of doing whatever it takes to win follows his decision to hand a major gift to Chinese AI firms. Washington reversed course on semiconductor restrictions, allowing Nvidia Corp.'s highly sought-after H20 chips to resume sales on the mainland. The policy U-turn was announced in the midst of, and likely influenced by, ongoing trade talks. It also came after Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang lobbied for his company to be able to keep its multi-billion-dollar slice of the lucrative China market.

And as much as Li pitches "solidarity", it's unclear how many countries will ultimately choose to align with China. Yet it's a far cry from Washington's "America First" AI policy goals and signals that Beijing's approach relies on convincing the world to use its many low-cost AI products being rapidly released. Fresh access to Nvidia processors is giving the industry new momentum, and the increasingly crowded field is driving down prices. Compare the two and China's plan seems more strategic in the long run.

One of the forums on Sunday featured a Zoom appearance from pioneering AI godfather Yoshua Bengio, who warned that the US-China competition was dangerous and that development was progressing so rapidly it may become impossible for humans to control.

Bengio has a point. But is anybody listening? Ambitions of AI acceleration from both sides of the Pacific suggest not.



The  
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{ OUR TAKE }

## Dealbreaker from Trump?

The fallout of US tariffs on India will go far beyond trade, may impact strategic ties

US President Donald Trump has unilaterally announced an end (to at least the current chapter) of the ongoing Indo-US trade deal negotiations, with the deadline of August 1 looming large. India, Trump said in a post on Truth Social, will face 25% tariffs and a “penalty” for buying energy from Russia. The details of what this penalty will be have not been spelt out yet. Even if the penalty is more than 1%, India will be facing a higher tariff than what Trump announced on April 2. With the caveat that this may well be just another deal-closing tactic, and that India will be able to talk or buy its way out, what does this entail for the Indian economy and Indo-US relations?

The US is India’s largest export market. India’s goods exports to the US were \$87 billion in 2024-25, which is almost 20% of the country’s total exports of \$437 billion. Given the fact that India faced very little tariffs on its exports to the US, the 25%-plus tariff will hurt. Trade is not the only headwind here. If India is forced to divert its oil imports from Russia to the US or other countries, there could also be an increase in the cost of energy imports. Similarly, being forced to divert defence purchases from Russia is bound to become significantly more expensive.

Have the talks stumbled because India was steadfast in protecting its agricultural and dairy markets? Was it because of the US insistence that India diversify energy and defence equipment purchases? Or was it because India would not sweeten the pot, the way Japan and the European Union did, committing billions of dollars of investment in the US? In principle, these are valid reservations. The question is will India be worse off with these tariffs or would some tactical manoeuvring have led to a better outcome? Hopefully, the government will give some details in the ongoing Parliament session.

The short-term economic pain, especially on the economic sentiment front — expect a bloodbath in the capital markets on Thursday — notwithstanding, there is a longer-term question to be asked here if the tariffs persist (there is always a chance that they will be scrapped as whimsically as they were announced). What does Trump’s abrasive move entail for the future of Indo-US strategic ties? China, which by Trump’s own admission is also a big buyer of Russian oil, is being offered a much better deal than India because of the rare-earth supply leverage it has. Where does this leave things such as the Quad — a proposed strategic bloc against China — of which India is a part?

There are no easy answers to these questions. But one thing is clear: In Trump’s trade lexicon, and with due apologies to Marshall McLuhan, the deal is the art.

## SIR and the sanctity of electoral democracy

The dust and din raised by the special intensive revision (SIR) of the electoral roll in Bihar is continuing amidst the Supreme Court’s constructive interventions to avoid the potential exclusion of many voters for want of the documents demanded by the Election Commission of India (ECI). Now comes the news that the poll body is taking steps in Delhi, Manipur and West Bengal to conduct SIRs to weed out possible discrepancies in their respective electoral rolls. A foolproof electoral roll is essential to uphold the sanctity of the electoral process, no doubt, but the intent has to be “mass inclusion” of voters, as the Court reminded ECI.

Universal adult franchise is the centrepiece of Indian democracy. Election is mostly the only occasion when the small man in India gains a voice. The vote is the only weapon he has at hand to enforce accountability in governance. ECI’s mandate is to protect it, not raise hurdles to deny citizens the right to vote. Its stubborn stance against the inclusion of Aadhaar, election identity card (EPIC), ration card etc., in the list of 11 documents acceptable for inclusion in the electoral roll on the ground that these can be easily forged was called out by the court — the judges said the EPIC, for instance, has a “presumption of correctness”.

The spectre of infiltration, built around threat-narratives about infiltration by Bangladeshis and Rohingyas, is invoked to justify SIR. ECI would be on a self-defeating trip if the revision leads to the invalidation of the ballot rights of millions of voters, which, in spirit, is a negation of their citizenship. After the first phase of SIR, Bihar, a state with a relatively high birth rate, saw its electorate shrink. This is ominous. ECI needs to tread carefully on SIR, in Bihar and elsewhere.

## Crypto gets stability with a GENIUS Act

The use-case is international remittances and a store of value for those living in countries in distress

Last month, I met two Lebanese women at a conference overseas. They were accompanying their businessmen husbands. We got talking and I found that they keep their money mostly abroad or in dollars and euros in cash at home. In 2019, the Lebanese government froze bank accounts, effectively locking over \$93 billion of citizens’ money and making it inaccessible. Therefore, when I read that the US has given stablecoins a formal legal backbone, it seemed that a giant step has been taken in legitimising a particular form of crypto currencies that finally have a use case, especially for people in countries with unstable governments and those with hyper-inflation.

Let’s get the basics out of the way first. A cryptocurrency is a specific type of digital token that is designed to function as a medium of exchange or store of value using blockchain to record transactions. Bitcoin is the most well-known example.

Cryptocurrencies have two major problems. One, there is no underlying asset. Remember that a fiat currency has the promise of the government to honour the value as an underlying

asset. Stocks have businesses and bonds have a loan contract as underlying assets with a value. But cryptocurrencies have no asset or promise that gives them value. Two, there are no rules of the game as these have been outside the regulatory gaze. This has encouraged all kinds of frauds to perpetuate. Over half the cryptocurrencies have failed since 2021, with billions of dollars lost by people gambling on a quick return.

The emergence of stablecoins over the past few years solved the first problem. A stablecoin is a type of cryptocurrency that has an underlying asset — typically the dollar or a US government bond.

The second problem is bad faith actors, like exchanges and issuers of these coins who can either embezzle customer money (like FTX did) or simply not buy the required asset causing an asset liability mismatch in the future. In the absence of road rules, the market has been the Wild West revisited.

The GENIUS Act that US President Donald Trump signed into law on July 18, 2025, attempts to put down some rules of the game. It mainly solves for customer protection through three key provisions. One, stablecoin issuers must have a 100% reserve backing with liquid assets (like US dollars or short-term treasuries). Two, they must make monthly public disclosures about their reserves. Three, they are forbidden from making mislead-

ing claims that their stablecoins are backed by the US government or are federally insured or are legal tender. A privately issued stablecoin is not a fiat currency.

So, what’s the use-case? The Lebanese women I met might be among the first to begin using a dollar-backed stablecoin to hold their money because they no longer trust banks in their own country. They might not know it today, but in a year, they will be using some form of a stablecoin to keep their money safe in their home country. Expand this story to countries with weak governance, weak macros, hyper-inflation, dictatorships, and persistent political instability, and you see a huge market for a trusted stablecoin.

While distressed-country use of stablecoins will be the first large customer base, a widening ripple will be in international money transfers and remittances. Personal international remittances are a \$740 billion a year flow. Business flows are a multiple of this. These are expensive given the global average cost for retail of sending remittances is just over 6% as of March 2025. While this is the average, in some places, the costs can be as high as 20% for small amounts. When the time taken to do the paperwork is included, the costs of using banks and other safe ways to transfer money abroad are very large.

A trusted, low-cost stablecoin issuer backed either by the dollar or



Monika Halan

## Indian Americans fret over Big Beautiful law

On July 4, as Americans marked the 249th anniversary of the nation’s founding, President Donald Trump signed into law his signature legislative achievement: The “One Big Beautiful Bill”. Spanning nearly 900 pages, the legislation overhauls the US tax code, boosts spending on defense, border security, and infrastructure, and introduces a wide array of industry-specific incentives and subsidies.

In addition, the law slashes funding for some entitlement programmes, most notably Medicaid, to help offset the cost of tax cuts. Yet, it will still add an estimated \$3 trillion to the national deficit of the US over the next decade.

While the bill’s sweeping provisions will affect virtually all Americans, immigrant communities, including Indian Americans, are poised to face a wide range of challenges due to its provisions.

One of the many contentious elements of the legislation is the \$170 billion allocated for border security and immigration enforcement. Of that, \$75 billion — which is roughly the size of the entire annual defence budget of India — is set aside as additional funding for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), an agency that has drawn widespread criticism in recent months for its aggressive detention of undocumented immigrants and controversial deportation tactics.

For the Indian diaspora in the US, recent enforcement actions have already provided a sobering preview of what expanded ICE funding could mean.

India ranks second only to Mexico as the country of birth for immigrants in the US. According to the Pew Research Center, 6% of all US immigrants were born in India. Indian nationals also make up one of the largest undocumented immigrant populations in the country, estimated at approximately 725,000, trailing only Mexico and El Salvador.

Earlier this year, dozens of undocumented Indian immigrants were deported in chains, triggering widespread outrage in India. With ICE now receiving a significantly expanded budget, many fear that such outrageous deportations could become more frequent.

It’s not only undocumented immigrants who are worried. The legislation’s emphasis on enforcement and scrutiny is also creating anxiety among Indian nationals who are in the country legally, particularly those on H-1B visas to work in specialty occupations.

Currently, more than a million Indian nationals, most of them on H-1B visas, are stuck in the so-called green card backlog. This is due to an outdated provision in US immigration law that limits any single country to no more than 7% of

the 140,000 employment-based green cards issued annually.

As a result, Indian applicants are eligible for only 9,800 green cards each year, despite making up a much larger share of high-skilled foreign workers. This means that those in the EB-2 and EB-3 categories for workers with advanced degrees and professional skills, the wait can stretch for decades, and some may never receive permanent residency in their lifetime.

It remains unclear how the new legislation will directly affect H-1B holders, but the mood within the community is one of heightened anxiety. Many H-1B professionals fear that the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement’s “America First” ideological opposition to foreign labour, combined with increased visa scrutiny under the current administration, could lead to tighter restrictions or even targeted enforcement.

This sense of uncertainty is not confined to the workforce. Indian students on F-1 visas are also feeling increasingly vulnerable, particularly in light of the administration’s growing crackdown on campus protests and heightened policing of free speech.

Beyond immigration and visa concerns, the law also contains financial provisions that could directly affect the diaspora households, especially a new tax on international remittances. Beginning next year, a 1% tax will be imposed on remittances sent by US residents to family and friends abroad. Earlier drafts of the legislation had proposed a much steeper 5% tax, but that provision was scaled back following intense lobbying from the money transfer industry.

Estimates suggest that remittances from the US to India, primarily sent by Indian nationals and Indian Americans, range from \$25 billion to \$29 billion annually, making the US the single largest source of remittance to India.

Another provision that will impact immigrant communities, particularly those lower-income households, is the significant cut to critical public services like Medicaid. According to projections based on estimates from the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO), the legislation would reduce Medicaid spending by \$1 trillion over the next decade, potentially leaving more than 10 million additional Americans without health insurance. While there’s a common perception that Indian Americans are uniformly affluent, this is far from the truth. Many families, especially recent immigrants or those in lower-wage sectors, depend on public health programmes for essential care.

All these provisions come with a substantial price tag. At the macroeconomic level, the legislation is drawing sharp criticism for significantly increasing the US national debt, which already exceeds \$36 trillion.

From visa holders navigating an increasingly hostile immigration landscape to families sending money home or relying on public health programmes, the ripple effects of the new law are wide and deeply personal. In attempting to fulfill its promise of putting America First, the “one big beautiful bill” may leave many behind, including Indian Americans who have long believed in the American dream.

Frank F Islam is an entrepreneur, civic leader, and thought leader based in Washington DC. The views expressed here are personal.



Frank F Islam



A trusted, low-cost stablecoin backed either by the dollar or US government bonds will slowly replace other ways of moving money across borders. AFP

US government bonds will slowly replace other ways of moving money across borders. Safety, trust and cost will be the three variables that will make regular remitters change over to the use of stablecoins over time.

So, will banks lose all this business? I’m going to make some predictions here. I see some banks and other trusted names in global finance using their trust to set up global payment systems based on a stablecoin framework. They will either buy out the existing players — Tether being the largest today — or issue their own coin with their own branding. Banks that are forward looking will do it fast and though it will cut their margins, they will at least still be in the game. I also see the demand for the dollar and US government bonds stabilise over time as the US asset-backed coins gain acceptance reinforcing the dollar-first global payment system. It will be imperative in the first few years that there are no major blowouts of a global stablecoin issuer.

What does it mean for you and me?

{ JEAN-NOEL BARROT } FOREIGN MINISTER, FRANCE

We (France) express our desire to recognise the State of Palestine and invite those who have not yet done so to join us

On France's move to recognise Palestinian Statehood

## Courts and the making of transgender rights

It is inspiring to recall that seven decades ago, Hansa Mehta, a member of the Constituent Assembly, ensured that the phrase “All men are born free and equal” in the first Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was changed to “All human beings are born free and equal”.

In Hindu mythology, there is an ancient cultural acknowledgment of gender fluidity. Yet, for decades, transgender people simply did not exist in the eyes of the law. They lived, struggled, raised families, danced at births, mourned at funerals, and were part of India’s social and spiritual fabric for centuries. Still, they remained on the margins, shunned from society, denied basic rights and targeted for their gender identities. And legally — on school forms, ration cards, voter IDs, and census sheets — they were invisible.

Until the late 1990s, voter registration forms did not provide an option beyond male or female, effectively disenfranchising transgender citizens. Public hospitals, welfare schemes, and official forms, all designed around a strict male-female binary, left them without access to essential services. Lacking legal recognition, many were unable to obtain basic identity documents, apply for jobs, or claim protections under existing laws — leaving them vulnerable to poverty, exploitation, and violence.

Until April 15, 2014. There are some judicial decisions in India that fundamentally changed the complex calculus of sexuality, power, religion, caste, masculinity, patriarchy, and gender. The Supreme Court’s decision in *National Legal Services Authority (NALSA) v. Union of India*, 2014 stands as one such example.

The legal battle began with separate petitions filed in 2012 and 2013 by the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), the Poojya Mata Nasib Kaur Ji Women Welfare Society, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a leading voice from the *hijra* (transgender) community — all seeking legal recognition of a third gender.

The petitioners argued that limiting legal recognition to binary genders is violative of the Right to Equality, Right to be Free from Discrimination, Equality of Opportunity, Freedom of Expression, and Right to Life or Personal Liberty (Articles 14, 15, 16, 19, 21 of the Constitution, respectively). The Supreme Court responded with clarity and conviction.

In a landmark judgment, the two-judge bench recognised transgender individuals as the third gender, who are fully entitled to all

legal rights bestowed upon citizens by the Constitution. The Court ordered states to grant legal recognition to transgender people, reservations in education and employment, and offer welfare — an ambitious list of affirmative actions that acknowledged historical harm.

Crucially, NALSA’s true breakthrough lay as much in recognizing a third gender as in affirming the right to self-identify — a radical move even by international standards. The Court asserted that one’s gender does not need to be authenticated by surgery, paperwork, or state verification — and that identity is an inherent aspect of personal dignity and autonomy. Justice KS Radhakrishnan (who was to retire in a month) said, “(…) the moral failure lies in the society’s unwillingness to contain or embrace different gender identities and expressions, a mindset which we have to change.”

Lauded globally as one of the most progressive interpretations of gender rights, the judgment also laid the groundwork for later verdicts like *Puttaswamy*, 2017 (the right to privacy), and *Navtej Singh Johar*, 2018 (decriminalisation of homosexuality). With one stroke of the pen, the Court had rejected the dehumanisation of those who do not fit neatly in gender boxes. But reality tells a different story. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, ostensibly passed in response to the judgment has been widely criticised for requiring certification of gender by district authorities — a clear contradiction of the right to self-identification upheld in NALSA.

Critics argue that the Act undermines the principles of autonomy, dignity, and equality established by the Court. Many trans-persons still face barriers to education, health care, and housing. Violence against them remains disturbingly common. Lack of livelihood opportunities means they are frequently forced into prostitution. But NALSA stands out not just for what it changed in the law, but for changing the conversation from control and classification to recognition and autonomy.

It reminds us that the Constitution is not a cold document, it is a living promise. And it begins the work of drawing those beyond the binary into the fold of citizenship — not as exceptions, but as equals. Courts have done their part. Now we must do ours.

Ashish Bharadwaj is professor & dean of BITS Pilani’s Law School in Mumbai. Insiyah Vahanvaty is a sociopolitical writer and author of *The Fearless Judge*. The views expressed are personal.



Ashish Bharadwaj



Insiyah Vahanvaty



OUR VIEW



# IMF report: Too coy for a Trump-shaken world

*The Fund’s ‘World Economic Outlook’ only has hints to offer on a global trade response to Trump’s tariff turmoil. India stares at a 25% plus US levy but we have others in the same boat*

At the best of times, the *World Economic Outlook* (WEO) published by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) does not pose any risk to human vision with blinding new insights. Ditto for its three quarterly updates. But these are not the best of times. On Wednesday, US President Donald Trump used his very own micro-blog platform Truth Social to declare that “while India is our friend,” imports from here would have to pay a tariff of 25%, plus a penalty for assorted US grievances, from 1 August. Other countries have had to contend with such posts too. As the world’s economies toss and turn amid choppy seas of trade uncertainty, policy watchers look to global bodies like the IMF for clues on how to reach calmer waters. The latest WEO update, issued on Tuesday, offers little navigational help. It makes some minor tweaks, generally upward, to its growth estimates released in April. Should we be happy that the world economy is expected to grow 3% in 2025, instead of the 2.8% estimated in April, and at 3.1% instead of 3% in 2026? Certainly, even if these are lower than the rates a post-pandemic world was hoping for and could have achieved had it not been for trade turmoil. The WEO puts the Indian economy’s growth prospects at 6.4% for both 2025-26 and 2026-27, 0.2 and 0.1 percentage points higher than its April figures. While this is good news, it’s only so in the prevailing context.

As the WEO’s April estimates were based on Trump acting out his ‘Liberation Day’ tariff threats, they assumed sharp hikes by the US and retaliatory barriers erected by its trade partners, with a harsh impact on inflation and growth both in America and elsewhere.

Trump’s actual import levies have shown some moderation since then. He has announced several trade deals, although the cumulative effect of his policy seems poised to raise tariffs from an average of 2.5% pre-Trump to nearly 18% once his deal-making is done and dusted. But these rates are not the only concern. Trumpian tariffs have turfed out the most-favoured-nation principle, the idea that a tariff levied on imports from one member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) must not be higher than the levy on shipments from another member, except as part of a free trade agreement. Also, the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism has no place in the new order dictated by the White House. By openly shunning rules, the US has signalled that might is right, with ‘might’ measured by what one can get away with. How should the rest of us adjust to the WTO’s abandonment by the world’s largest economy and issuer of the currency in which foreign trade is usually invoiced? The WEO update is largely silent.

Not that the report has nothing to say on what can be done. It advises structural reforms in areas like labour markets, education, regulation and competition, as well as steps to foster tech advances and the adoption of AI. It does not spell out motherhood and apple pie, but these are invisible appendages to the list. To be fair, the WEO does venture beyond the anodyne to suggest plurilateral or regional solutions, but without any elaboration. Perhaps the rest of the world could forge a pact to abide by WTO norms without the US. It won’t please Trump. But we’re at the raw end of his bargain anyway. For this, why blame a lack of lodestars in the IMF sky? The fault, as we know, is not in the stars, but in ourselves.

THEIR VIEW

# The 2026 Impact Summit could become the Bretton Woods of AI

*The New Delhi conclave would mark a historic moment if India lays down how AI should serve us*



**JASPREET BINDRA**  
is a founder of AI&Beyond and the author of ‘The Tech Whisperer’.

more than just another gathering of talking heads, but a rare opportunity for India to lead the conversation past alarm and action into actual impact.

The world is at an inflection point. Generative AI is no longer a novelty. It writes code, composes music, conducts research, automates jobs and even drafts legislation. In boardrooms, classrooms and courtrooms, AI is becoming invisible infrastructure, like electricity. The US is moving towards a hands-off regime, China’s approach is state directed. Europe is building a framework of rules. Most countries, including India, are still watching from the sidelines, unsure where to stand.

By 2026, we will likely have seen new versions of GPT, Gemini and Claude, which will be even more powerful, agentic and embedded. The guard-rails we set now will shape not just product design, but societal outcomes. We have to decide whether AI will amplify inequity or bridge it, empower individuals or surveil them, and will it accelerate development or deepen divides. India’s summit, then, is not just another event. It’s a platform from which a new kind of global AI diplomacy can be launched.

The AI conversation has so far been dominated by corporations and researchers, but it is governments that represent the will of the people and must create enabling environments for both safety and innovation. Too often, however, intergovernmental summits end up as echo chambers of good intentions and empty communiqués.

What we need now is some refreshing practicality: not just talking about AI governance, but showing it as the word ‘impact’ suggests. The AI Impact Summit must push for governments to open-source their playbooks—frameworks for data sharing, national compute strategies, skilling programmes and regulatory sandboxes. What worked in Europe may not work in Ethiopia, but all learnings must travel. India should invite countries to present not just vision statements, but detailed ‘AI

governance manifestos’: what they are doing on AI ethics, safety, infrastructure, talent and societal impact. A kind of AI CoP, if you will.

India knows how to host world-class events like the G20 in 2023. Arguably, though, the outcome of that summit was overshadowed by its spectacle. The AI Impact Summit must avoid that trap and India should be aiming for impact and outcome over performative wins. One idea is to design inbuilt accountability. Every commitment made at the summit should be assigned a lead country, a timeline and a review mechanism. Let the summit lead to a dashboard rather than just a declaration.

India is uniquely positioned to do this. It is the world’s largest democracy, a tech hub of startups and corporates, and holds a leadership position in the Global South. Its world-leading efforts with digital public infrastructure (DPI) have shown that inclusive tech at scale is possible. India can bring its DPI playbook to the global table with AI. India also has moral legitimacy. It can speak credibly on data dignity, avoiding AI colonialism and ensuring that foundational models are trained on world-views that are not just Western. It can advocate a shared ‘AI Commons,’ a pool of datasets, models and compute power that’s open, multilingual and inclusive.

This is also an opportunity for the world’s biggest tech companies and labs to co-create the agenda. The summit must insist on concrete commitments from them: sharing evaluation benchmarks, collaborating with governments on safety testing, investing in compute power for public-good AI and publishing transparency reports on model training and usage.

The year 2026 could see India take leadership of defining the desired impact of AI—AI for Good and AI for All. If India pioneers this effort, the site of its summit could come to be known as the Bretton Woods of AI: where ethics meets execution, safety meets scale and AI meets humanity.



JUST A THOUGHT

Trade should not be a weapon.

WARREN BUFFETT

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

# High levels of debt are a worry the world must confront

RAHUL JACOB



is a Mint columnist and a former Financial Times foreign correspondent.

Policy reports from multilateral institutions are often an antidote to insomnia. But not the *Global Debt Report 2025* released by the OECD in March. It has characteristics that compare favourably with a cliff-hanging pulp thriller. Factoid-after-factoid of growing developed-world indebtedness leaves the reader almost numb with worry. OECD sovereign debt has climbed from \$5 trillion before the global financial crisis (GFC) in 2007 to \$15.7 trillion last year. The culprit in part has been quantitative easing, when central banks increased money supply after the GFC. But the rise in debt at the government and corporate levels seems unyielding more than a decade-and-a-half later. This opening salvo from the report’s summary sets things in context: “Sovereign bond issuance in OECD countries is projected to reach a record \$17 trillion in 2025, up from \$14 trillion in 2023. Emerging markets and developing economies borrowing from debt markets has also grown significantly, from around \$1 trillion in 2007 to over \$3

trillion in 2024.” Add to it the fact that central banks are reducing their exposure to government debt even as corporate debt in the OECD is rising and you have the makings of a debt funding impasse that could easily spiral into a crisis. Also, pension funds in the West have less aggregate exposure to government bonds. As Philip Coggan observes in a recent article for the *Financial Times*, this is because employees in the West increasingly use defined contribution plans to fund pensions in which the responsibility to make investment decisions is on them. Unlike large pension funds, they tend not to invest in government bonds as much. This leaves developed-world countries increasingly dependent on foreign investors; the OECD report says that foreigners own more than a third of their government bonds. As many developing economies know from experience, foreign investors tend to take flight quicker when things turn tough.

What makes things more volatile is that while the low-interest rate environment has led to excess issuances, in a couple of years, a lot of these bonds will mature and will need to be refinanced at higher interest rates. But the bigger problem is that sensible economic policies, including debt reduction, are much harder to pursue with many popu-

list and nativist parties ever more prominent and able to increase their support bases via outlandish claims on social media. In early July, the UK served as an early chronicle of bond market turbulence. After a revolt against planned welfare reform from its own members, the Labour Party government backed down, forgoing what would have been £5 billion in savings by the end of the decade. Facing hostile questioning from the opposition, Prime Minister Keir Starmer appeared not to give his chancellor of the exchequer Rachel Reeves full backing. Reeves was distressed and seemed to tear up. The following day, UK bond yields bounced up as markets speculated that Reeves was on her way out. It took a renewed statement of support from the prime minister for calm to be restored.

There are broader lessons. The Starmer government is hemmed in by local election results in May that showed rapidly increasing support for the Reform Party and its anti-immigrant rhetoric. Against such a back-

drop, making necessary changes to the UK’s National Health Service (NHS), for example, or welfare benefits becomes harder. Sensible centrist leaders could seem dull in comparison with firebrands on the right who are economical with the truth on immigration as well as the need to bring down public debt.

Last week, the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) annual report on the British economy said Reeves’ rules to bring down the fiscal deficit were credible, but warned that “in an uncertain global environment and with limited fiscal headroom, fiscal rules could easily be breached if growth disappoints or interest rate shocks materialise.” These conditions apply to a host of developed economies, not just the UK.

If this were not a daunting enough backdrop, low interest rates since the GFC till recently have encouraged strange behaviour by OECD companies. “Corporates used the low-rate era to prioritise financial operations, partly severing the link between corporate investment and borrowing,” the

report notes. This anodyne statement understates the excessive financialization of developed-world economies where companies have been lured into corporate buyouts and shareholder payouts because the cost of money had been so low. “Corporates... partly severed the link between corporate investment and borrowing. This impacts the ability to meet upcoming refinancing needs,” the report said.

Meanwhile, ageing populations across the developed world add to health and pension costs. Last week, the IMF called upon the UK government to curb pension benefits and make higher income earners pay for medical care when using the NHS. In Japan, where the Bank of Japan (BoJ) has been the last central bank to exit quantitative easing, demand for government bonds has weakened among domestic banks. The BoJ has had to step in to buy government bonds. Yields have gone up markedly, but Japanese banks are uncertain where interest rates are headed, while those overseas who hitherto borrowed cheaply in yen to invest elsewhere are now unsure about this ‘carry trade’.

These are inherently volatile conditions for the world economy. Pity developing economies that need to finance high levels of debt amid such stormy weather.









## Arrest and unrest

Communal agenda is behind the arrest of nuns for human trafficking

The arrest of two Catholic nuns by the Chhattisgarh police on charges of human trafficking and forced conversion is another instance of growing religion-related harassment. Keralite Sisters Preeti Mary and Vandana Francis, from the order of the Assisi Sisters of Mary Immaculate, were escorting three tribal girls to an Agra convent for jobs when they were apprehended from Durg railway station on July 25 after a Bajrang Dal member filed a complaint. They have been booked under Section 4 of the Chhattisgarh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968 (conversion) and Section 143 of the BNS (trafficking). While Chief Minister Vishnu Deo Sai insisted that the nuns were engaging in “human trafficking and conversion... through inducement”, the kin of the girls have since clarified that there was no forceful conversion and they had given their consent to be taken to Agra. The arrests have led to condemnation across the political spectrum against communal vigilantism. Leaders across political lines have protested. Ruling Left Democratic Front and Opposition United Democratic Front MPs from Kerala held dharnas outside Parliament, and the Catholic Church, through its official mouthpiece, *Deepika*, and other church organisations too denounced the arrests.

This is not the first time that a proselytisation row has erupted involving Christian missionaries. Last year marked 25 years of the brutal killing of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two minor sons in Odisha. Despite the fact that the Constitution provides citizens the right to practise and propagate the religion of their choice, several States, including U.P., M.P., Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha, have misused provisions of anti-conversion laws that were intended only to prevent conversion through force or fraud or allurement. These laws are often used to criminalise interfaith marriages by labelling conversion by marriage as unlawful. In tribal-dominated regions such as Jharkhand, there is another tension brewing between Adivasis and both Christian tribals and Hindus. While Hindutva groups with the RSS’s backing are exhorting tribals to wake up to their Hindu roots, tribal outfits are resisting this and demanding a separate Sarna religious code. Tribal outfits allege that the Hindu groups are doing the same thing as Christian missionaries to subsume their distinct culture. In Chhattisgarh, which has around a 2% Christian population according to the 2011 Census, there is also a debate on whether tribals who are converting to Christianity should be delisted from the Scheduled Tribes. In such a churn, the onus is on political, religious and social organisations to focus on economic development, jobs and welfare. Government machineries should be used to enforce rights, guaranteed by the Constitution, not violate them.

## Top board

Indian women are catching up with the men in world chess

Divya Deshmukh’s astonishing performance at the women’s chess World Cup has put the limelight back on Indian chess, yet again. Rarely does a week pass without an Indian player achieving a significant feat in some corner of the world. Still, what Divya did at Batumi, Georgia, on Monday, deserves attention. The 19-year-old from Nagpur won one of the most prestigious tournaments, coming through a gruelling knockout competition, outwitting rivals much stronger and more experienced. She had started out as the 15th seed. That she defeated another Indian, the fourth-seeded Koneru Humpy and reigning World rapid chess champion, in the final, underlined the country’s domination of the event. Two other Indians, D. Harika and R. Vaishali, had also advanced to the quarterfinals. The great show in Georgia does not make India a superpower in women’s chess, though. That honour belongs to China, home to the last three women’s World champions. Though the Indian women, like the men, won the Chess Olympiad last year at Budapest, China has more depth. India may now boast the world’s best young talent among men, in the form of World champion D. Gukesh, World No. 4 R. Praggnanandhaa and No. 5 Arjun Erigaisi among others, but the bench in women’s chess is not all that strong.

Divya’s – and India’s – stunning success should no doubt inspire young girls to take up chess as a career. The huge media attention that Divya has received – she has been featured on the front pages of newspapers, became breaking news on TV and got plenty of traction online – could encourage even more parents to make their daughters learn chess. And India needs more girls to move the pieces on the chessboard. Though the current Indian lineup looks good enough to retain the Olympiad gold next year, it is imperative that the country needs to spot and nurture fresh young talent. There are a few players such as Vantika Agrawal and B. Savitha Shri, but in the world’s top 100, there are only eight Indians, while China has 14, including the top three. India’s chess administrators have to make some long-term plans for women’s chess, and should implement them quickly. After identifying a fairly large group of promising girls, they need to be properly trained and provided excellent coaches. Only few families can afford the highly expensive trainers and the travel to Europe, from where the Indian players usually make their norms for their Grandmaster or International Master titles. There should also be more such tournaments in India.

Imagine a crime scene, where two detectives arrive. The first person is Sherlock Holmes, who is calm, meticulous and relentlessly logical. He sees what others overlook, asks things that others miss, and lets logic and evidence guide every step. He knows that the truth cannot be extracted by force and that it must be uncovered through careful, patient investigation.

The other person is Dirty Harry, gruff, impatient and contemptuous of rules. He does not investigate; he intimidates. He does not gather evidence; he extracts confessions. For him, justice is about speed, not accuracy, even if it leaves behind broken bodies and ruined lives.

These are not just fictional characters. They represent two conflicting visions of policing in India. The question is this. In the fight against crime, do we want a Sherlock Holmes or a Dirty Harry in our police stations?

### A culture of impunity

The custodial death of Ajith Kumar, a 27-year-old temple guard, in June, in Tamil Nadu, is a grim reminder of the perils of the Dirty Harry-style of policing. The case (which involved missing jewellery from a car) happened just months after the Tamil Nadu Police Commission had recommended, among other things, a series of reforms to curb custodial torture.

According to a 2023 Lok Sabha reply, 687 people had died in police custody across India between 2018-19 and 2022-23, which is an average of two to three deaths every week. The data showed that these States had the highest numbers – Gujarat (81), Maharashtra (80), Madhya Pradesh (50), Bihar (47), Uttar Pradesh (41), West Bengal (40), and Tamil Nadu (36).

Official figures conceal more than they reveal. Many custodial deaths are quietly labelled as suicides, accidents, or sudden illnesses. Torture often occurs off the record – beyond lockups and CCTV surveillance. In Ajith Kumar’s case, it reportedly happened in police vans, abandoned buildings, a village tank bed, and in a cow shed behind a temple.

Custodial violence overwhelmingly targets the daily-wage worker, the migrant, the slum dweller, the Dalit, and the tribal. So, torture is not just bad policing. It is structural injustice that reflects and reinforces the entrenched hierarchies of caste, class and power.

Torture persists due to inadequate training especially for the public-facing constabulary that makes up 90% of the police force alongside poor infrastructure, pressure to deliver quick results, and weak institutional oversight. Disciplinary action is rare and criminal convictions rarer still.



K. Ashok Vardhan Shetty

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It is time for a policing reset where human dignity and professionalism replace fear, coercion and the illusion of quick justice

# Spectacle, privacy and sharing in the digital age

On a balmy evening in Boston, a Coldplay concert became the stage for an incident that reverberated far beyond the music. During a light-hearted “kiss-cam” segment, the camera focused on two individuals – the CEO of Astronomer, and the firm’s HR director. The startled reactions of the man and woman, captured by an audience member’s smartphone, ignited a digital firestorm. Within hours, the video went viral, inciting speculation about an alleged affair. Both individuals were married, and the online frenzy culminated in the CEO’s resignation. Fake apologies and doctored posts further muddled the waters, transforming a fleeting moment into a global morality narrative.

### The deeper issues

At first glance, the Coldplay episode may seem like mere tabloid material. Yet it exposes deeper anxieties about privacy, spectacle and morality in our hyper-connected society. It prompts us to question not only media ethics and platform accountability but also the nature of spectatorship itself. When personal discomfort becomes meme material and moral commentary, we must inquire. What is the cost of our participation? Media theorist Mark Andrejevic describes this as “lateral surveillance”, where individuals monitor and expose one another through digital instruments.

In his seminal work, *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*, he identifies this as a characteristic of participatory culture, distinct from institutional surveillance. The Coldplay video was likely shared in jest or curiosity, but its viral spread, propelled by platforms such as Instagram and X, led to reputational damage.

Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of surveillance capitalism elucidates this phenomenon – platforms are designed to amplify emotionally provocative and ambiguous content. The video’s success lay not in truth but in its ability to provoke speculation. Its virality was orchestrated by algorithms that favour engagement over ethics.

India has seen similar episodes. In 2023, a



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The Coldplay episode must prompt questions about media ethics, platform accountability and the nature of spectatorship

More troubling is societal tolerance of custodial violence, which normalises the abuse, turning crime into the routine and impunity into unofficial policy.

In *D.K. Basu* (1996), the Supreme Court of India had laid down detailed safeguards against custodial torture. In *K.S. Puttaswamy* (2017), it reaffirmed dignity and bodily autonomy as fundamental rights. Yet, torture remains rampant. The Law Commission of India’s 273rd Report (2017) urged Parliament to enact a standalone anti-torture law, but no such law exists. India has yet to ratify the United Nations Convention Against Torture. In 2025, India was ranked a “high-risk” country in the Global Torture Index – a searing indictment we can no longer ignore.

### On research and real world examples

The case against torture is not just moral or legal. It is scientific. Torture is often mythologised as a necessary evil – the quick fix when time is short and lives are at stake. Films and television shows often portray a suspect cracking under pressure, revealing the truth just in time. But decades of scientific research and real-world evidence tell a very different story.

In *Why Torture Doesn’t Work: The Neuroscience of Interrogation* (2015), neuroscientist Shane O’Mara explains that torture impairs the brain’s prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, the very regions essential for memory and clarity. Victims become disoriented, incoherent, and cognitively impaired; they will say anything, even lie, just to end the pain.

Experience bears this out. During the Algerian War (1954-62), French forces used torture extensively, only to find that much of the intelligence gathered from Algerian insurgents was useless or led to dead ends. In 2007, the International Committee of the Red Cross found that detainees from CIA “black sites” had confessed only to end their suffering, producing false or unusable information. In the United States, the Innocence Project used DNA evidence to overturn over 375 wrongful convictions, many based on coerced confessions. In Ajith Kumar’s case, the victim ‘confessed’ to hiding jewels in a cowshed – not because it was true, but because he wanted the beatings to stop.

The CIA’s now-infamous “enhanced interrogation techniques” – waterboarding, stress positions, sleep deprivation – were debunked in the U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee Report (2014). The 525-page partially redacted summary (from a 6,700-page report), based on classified CIA documents, concluded that these methods failed to yield actionable

video of a couple in the Delhi Metro went viral, leading to harsh trolling and moral policing, targeting the woman. Such incidents, often involving women, marginalised groups, or the economically disadvantaged, reveal a pattern: digital virality thrives on indignation and voyeurism, with disproportionate harm to the vulnerable. These instances highlight a key issue: visibility does not equate to consent. Philosopher Helen Nissenbaum’s theory of “contextual integrity” helps explain this breach: privacy is not secrecy, but control over how personal information circulates within specific contexts.

A concertgoer does not anticipate a transient expression to become global content. While recording may appear innocuous, mass dissemination, amplified by algorithms, disrupts those contextual boundaries. The public reaction to the Coldplay video ranged from humour to moral condemnation, crafting an unverified narrative of infidelity. Daniel Trotter describes this as “digital vigilantism” – a sort of informal justice where online users act as moral enforcers. Unlike formal systems, it relies on speculation, with rapid and often irreversible consequences.

### The issue of verification

The function of legacy media in such incidents is increasingly troubling. News organisations, often influenced by social media trends, tend to amplify viral content without adequate verification. In the Coldplay case, reports of the CEO’s resignation largely reflected online narratives, with minimal independent investigation. This reversal, where publication precedes verification, challenges the ethical foundation of journalism. Should private individuals be subjected to public scrutiny based simply on unverified social media content? What evidential standards should apply?

Platform design exacerbates these issues. Algorithms on TikTok, Instagram, and X prioritise emotionally charged content, emphasising engagement over accuracy. As media scholar Nancy Baym observes, platforms shape not just what we consume but how we

intelligence against al Qaeda. Worse, the time wasted chasing false leads had diverted attention from actual threats. So, what works? According to a Netflix documentary “American Manhunt: Osama bin Laden”, the vital lead (the courier who led the U.S. to bin Laden) was uncovered through good, old-fashioned detective work – non-coercive intelligence gathering, surveillance, and methodical analysis.

After the wrongful conviction of six men in the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings, the U.K. abandoned confession-based policing. It adopted the PEACE model (Preparation and Planning, Engage and Explain, Account, Closure, and Evaluation) that focused on building rapport and trust with a suspect, open-ended questioning, active listening, and video recording of the interviews. This model reduced false confessions, improved conviction accuracy and restored public trust. Countries such as Norway, Canada and New Zealand have adopted it with similar success. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) has endorsed it.

Post-9/11, the High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group (HIG), a joint initiative of the FBI, the CIA, and the Department of Defence, undertook extensive research on interrogation techniques. Its peer-reviewed studies confirmed that non-coercive, rapport-based methods consistently outperformed torture in producing accurate, timely, and actionable intelligence.

In Norway, far-right terrorist Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in 2011, was interrogated without threats or coercion. The police’s calm, professional approach led to a full confession and valuable insights into extremist networks, demonstrating that even the most heinous crimes do not justify abandoning legal principles. In the U.S., Najibullah Zazi, who plotted the 2009 New York subway bombing, cooperated with the FBI after being treated with respect. His detailed disclosures helped dismantle a wider terror network.

### Holmes, not Harry

The core issue is that this is not a debate about policing. It is a test of our democratic maturity. The law must protect the most vulnerable, not brutalise them. Every custodial beating is not just a wound on the body of a citizen. It is a stain on the soul of the state. India must immediately ratify the UN Convention Against Torture and enact a standalone anti-torture law. All States should embed the PEACE model into police training, and declare zero tolerance for custodial abuse. When Sherlock Holmes’s methods succeed in reality – not just in fiction – why should India cling to Dirty Harry’s shadow?

interact, encouraging performance over reflection.

In India, where digital literacy is inconsistent, and caste, gender, and religious hierarchies persist, the risks are amplified. Viral videos of Dalit or tribal creators, for instance, often provoke casteist backlash, turning digital visibility into vulnerability. The Coldplay episode also reveals how easily reputational harm can outpace facts. Legal protections such as privacy and defamation laws exist, but their ability to address algorithmically driven harm remains limited, particularly across borders.

### Reflect on digital behaviour

How do we traverse this complex terrain? First, public awareness around the ethics of digital sharing must grow. What one finds “share-worthy” may profoundly harm another. Educational initiatives, especially in schools and communities, can help foster empathy and self-restraint. Second, platforms must take greater responsibility for promoting morally ambiguous content. There is an urgent need for technologies that flag, contextualise, or slow the spread of sensitive videos. Third, journalism must reaffirm its gatekeeping role, prioritising verification and proportionality over viral allure. Most importantly, we as users must reflect on our own digital behaviour. The line between witnessing and exposing is razor-thin, and our choices to record, post, or comment carry consequences beyond the moment.

The Coldplay kiss-cam incident is not an outlier but part of a broader cultural shift, where spectacle frequently overrides sensitivity. As India and the world contend with the complexities of the digital public sphere, we must ask this: do we want a society that treats every moment as content, or one that prioritises empathy and responsibility? Our digital behaviour reflects our moral compass. In an age where any face in a crowd can become viral, the ethics of sharing call for urgent reflection. Only through mindful engagement can we build a digital culture that respects dignity.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### NISAR satellite mission

We must congratulate Team ISRO and NASA for the successful launch of the NASA-ISRO Synthetic Aperture Radar (NISAR) satellite. It is a milestone in the realm of collaborative satellite missions. Surely, such joint missions will foster peer-learning and exposure to cutting-edge space technologies. Further, in the context of

climate change imperatives, having uninterrupted all-weather data insights from the satellite will be of relevance.

G. Ramasubramanyam, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

ISRO’s success is also on a day when the attempt to send Australia’s first rocket into space, on Wednesday, ended in failure, just seconds after its launch in

Queensland. One wishes both countries success in their space programmes.

V. Subramaniam, Chennai

### Debate in Parliament

The jury is still out on the debate in Parliament, on Operation Sindoor. Is it not time that we focused on more pressing issues facing the nation than engaging in political blame games in

Parliament? While it is natural for political differences to arise, prioritising genuine discussions on real challenges is crucial for the progress of our country. This shift towards constructive dialogue and actionable solutions is not just a necessity but also a responsibility we owe to our nation. Let us ensure that Parliament becomes a

platform for meaningful change.

Mohammad Asad, Mumbai

### Rising chess star

Young talent Divya Deshmukh etched her name into chess history by defeating Grandmaster Humpy Koneru. Ms. Deshmukh’s victory is more than a personal triumph. It reflects India’s deep talent

pool and growing stature in women’s chess. It also underscores how sustained focus on nurturing female talent is beginning to pay dividends. Her journey, from an underdog to India’s newest Grandmaster, will inspire a generation.

R. Sivakumar, Chennai

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



# Boost the capacity of legal aid systems

Legal services institutions, established under the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987, are tasked with the mandate of providing free legal aid to nearly 80% of India's population. However, the actual reach remains modest. Between April 2023 and March 2024, just 15.50 lakh people received legal aid services – far below the scale envisioned. This marked a 28% rise from the 12.14 lakh reached the previous year.

Usually attached to local courts, prisons, and juvenile justice boards, these front offices offer free legal counsel through a panel of empanelled lawyers to the economically weak, those in custody, and others facing various vulnerabilities. In rural and remote areas, legal aid clinics serve village clusters. Nationally, there is one legal service clinic for every 163 villages, as per the India Justice Report 2025. The availability and presence of these services is dependent on financial and human resources available.

**Budget for legal aid**  
The budget for legal aid comprises less than 1% of the total justice budget (police, prisons, judiciary, and legal aid). It is provided by States as well as by the Centre through the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), which disburses grants to State Legal Services Authorities (SLSAs).

The total allocation nearly doubled from ₹601 crore in 2017-18 to ₹1,086 crore in 2022-23 across 25 States. This growth was due to an increase in State legal aid budgets, which cumulatively increased from ₹394 crore to ₹866 crore. Thirteen States increased their respective allocations to the legal aid budget by over 100%. They were led by Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh. During the same period, (2017-18 to 2022-23), NALSA's funds fell from ₹207 crore to ₹169 crore. The utilisation of NALSA funds also dropped from 75% to 59%.

As per the NALSA Manual for District Legal Services Authorities



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**Valay Singh**  
works with the India Justice Report

Without these resources, the system falls short of providing the quality of justice enshrined in the Constitution

2023, SLSAs have been barred from incurring expenditure from the NALSA fund on certain items without prior approval. These included hiring project or front office staff, purchasing or hiring vehicles and equipment, engaging outsourced personnel, expenses related to victim compensation, food distribution, and tree plantation. Instead, it directed that funds be used only for specific functions, with ceilings: 50% for legal aid and advice, 25% for awareness and outreach, and 25% for Alternate Dispute Resolution and mediation.

Since 2019, the national per capita spending on legal aid has doubled from roughly ₹3 to ₹7. According to actual expenditure figures from 2022-23 the highest spend was in Haryana (₹16), while Jharkhand (₹5), Assam (₹5), Uttar Pradesh (₹4), Bihar (₹3), and West Bengal (₹2) spent less than the average ₹6 per capita.

**A shrinking frontline**  
The impact of low fiscal prioritisation coupled with poor utilisation of existing funds is on frontline responders. Para-legal volunteers, who are trained community resources, create awareness, assist in resolving disputes, and act as a bridge between people and legal aid services. The total number of para-legal volunteers dropped by nearly 38% between 2019 and 2024. From 5.7 per lakh population, there were only 3.1 per lakh population in 2023. West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh had only one para-legal volunteer per lakh population.

Low budgets also constrict the ability to deploy para-legal volunteers (paid on a per day basis) on the ground. Over the years, both the numbers of para-legal volunteers trained and deployed have come down drastically. In 2023-24, out of 53,000 para-legal volunteers trained, only 14,000 were deployed, whereas in 2019-20, 63,00 were trained and 22,000 deployed. What is baffling is the

reluctance of States to revise honorariums for these para-legal volunteers, which, besides rare exceptions, are invariably below minimum wages across India. As of March 31, 2023, Kerala was the only State paying para-legal volunteers a daily honorarium of ₹750. Twenty-two States paid ₹500 per day, three paid ₹400, and the remaining three (Gujarat, Meghalaya, and Mizoram) offered ₹250, which is barely enough to cover basic daily expenses.

Till 2022, lawyers empanelled with legal services took up cases for both the accused persons and victims. Since 2022, NALSA has been operating a new central sector scheme – the Legal Aid Defence Counsel (LADC), for representing only accused persons. This scheme, modelled on the public defender system, is intended to complement the assigned counsel system. NALSA initiated the scheme to ensure that accused persons/convicts have access to quality and effective legal aid through dedicated lawyers. It is now operational in 610 of the 670 districts across India. In 2023-23, ₹200 crore was specially earmarked for LADCs by NALSA and it was fully utilised. However, in 2024-25, the allocation dropped to ₹147.9 crore. There is tremendous potential that the LADC holds as it also reduces the burden on other lawyers and the system as a whole. However, as the scheme is still fledgling, it would be too early to declare it a success.

Although States are making efforts to increase allocations for legal aid, long-standing issues such as inconsistent service quality, absent accountability mechanism, and a lack of trust continue to undermine its effectiveness. Much of these ills can be ameliorated with infusions of money and manpower. It is essential to boost the capacity of legal aid systems to make them truly effective. Without these resources, the system falls short of providing the quality of justice enshrined in the Constitution.

# An unsurprising judgment

A recent Supreme Court verdict has dashed the hopes of Telangana and Andhra

STATE OF PLAY

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As the Central government prepares for the next delimitation exercise, which will redraw constituency boundaries based on the first Census after 2026, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh were waiting for their Assembly constituencies to be increased, as promised in the Andhra Pradesh Reorganisation Act, 2014. However, a recent Supreme Court judgment has dampened their hopes.

According to the 2014 Act, the number of seats in the Legislative Assemblies was to be increased from 175 to 225 in Andhra Pradesh and from 119 to 153 in Telangana. However, the delimitation process was stalled as the Census could not be conducted in 2020-21 – first because of the COVID-19 pandemic and later for various other reasons.

Telangana has represented the matter to the Central government on many occasions. The State government brought it up during meetings convened by the Union Home Ministry to resolve bilateral issues between Telangana and Andhra Pradesh post-bifurcation and also during Southern Zonal Council meetings held under the chairmanship of Union Home Minister Amit Shah from time to time.

In a letter addressed to Union Home Secretary Rajiv Mehrotra in June 2016, the then Telangana Chief Secretary, Rajiv Sharma, recalled the provision made under Section 26 of the Act for delimitation of constituencies in the two States. As the new State of Telangana came into existence with effect from June 2, 2014, Mr. Sharma requested

the Home Ministry to place the matter before the Election Commission of India (ECI) for increasing seats in the Telangana Legislative Assembly from 119 to 153 as envisaged in the Act as soon as possible. Telangana's former Chief Electoral Officer, Rajat Kumar, also spoke of the impact of transferring a few mandals of Khammam district in Telangana to neighbouring Andhra Pradesh post-bifurcation. He said that the three constituencies were reserved for Scheduled Tribes.

Professor K. Purushottam Reddy filed a plea in the Supreme Court seeking readjustment of seats in the Assemblies of the two States, pointing to the exercise in Jammu and Kashmir as a precedent. In its judgment last week, the Supreme Court ruled out delimitation of constituencies till the completion and publication of the Census, which is expected to start in 2026. The Court dismissed his petition saying granting relief would be “contrary to the letter and spirit of constitutional design”. It said that “Article 170 [which deals with composition of Legislative Assemblies in States] has no application to Union Territories...” It said that the Centre therefore did not discriminate against the electorates of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, nor dampen their legitimate expectations by conducting delimitation of constituencies

in the Union Territory of J&K, which was being governed by a distinct constitutional and statutory regime. Justice Surya Kant also explained that there was a specific constitutional embargo in Article 170 stating that delimitation in States was barred until after the completion of the first Census post 2026. Article 170(3) lays down that “upon the completion of each Census, the total number of seats in the Legislative Assembly of each State and the division of each State into territorial constituencies shall be readjusted by such authority in such a manner as Parliament by law determine”.

The next Census, scheduled to begin in 2026, is likely to be conducted in two phases. The official headcount and house-listing process that will precede it are expected to be completed by March 1, 2027. The numbers will take a few years to be finalised and released. The Delimitation Commission can base its work only on the published Census figures and this could further delay the delimitation exercise in the two States. This means that the exercise will start only after the publication of the next Census data.

While the verdict has dashed the hopes of the States, it is also unsurprising. No political party, including the Bharat Rashtra Samithi which claims to have played a crucial role in drafting the Act, seems to have paid notice to the wording of the Act. As former MP B. Vinod Kumar rightly said at a press conference, simply adding the words “notwithstanding Section 170 sub clause 3” in the 2014 Act would have resolved the problem. If that had been done, delimitation in these two States would possibly not have been clubbed with delimitation across the country.

# Share of AC berths doubled in last decade in long-distance trains

Government data also shows that the share of passengers who travelled in AC coaches has tripled in the last decade

DATA POINT

**Nitika Francis, Devyanshi Bihani, Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

In the last decade, the share of air-conditioned (AC) berths/ seats in non-suburban trains (long-distance trains) has doubled, while the share of non-AC berths/ seats has declined considerably in India. In parallel, the share of passengers who travelled in AC coaches has tripled, while the share of those who travelled in second class has declined considerably.

Suburban trains are meant for short distances, usually up to 150 kilometres, to facilitate movement within cities, suburbs, and extended suburbs. These trains operate with electrical multiple units rakes or EMUs. Non-suburban trains cover longer distances and this analysis is restricted to them.

These conclusions assume significance, given that the Indian Railways is keen on increasing the number of AC three-tier coaches in long-distance trains – the only class of travel which has fetched consistent profits for the organisation – in place of sleeper and other coaches. While news reports show that in many long-distance trains, sleeper and second class coaches are being substituted with AC three-tier coaches, the government has refuted such claims in a recent reply in the Lok Sabha.

In a question answered on July 23, the Minister of Railways, Ashwini Vaishnaw, had said that the share of non-AC coaches has “significantly increased to about 70%”. However, the data shared in the reply does not specify the base year from which this increase was calculated. The data shared by the Minister also claimed that in FY25, 1,250 general coaches have been utilised in long-distance trains, while the corresponding figures for AC coaches were not divulged.

However, data for non-suburban trains collated from the Indian

Railways Annual Reports of 2023-24 and 2013-14 show substantial increase in AC berths/seats. In the last decade, the share of non-AC berths/seats declined from over 84% to 68% of the total available berths/seats in non-suburban trains, while the share of AC berths/seats increased from close to 16% to about 32% (**Chart 1**).

The increase in berths/seats was particularly pronounced in AC three-tier coaches. The share of these in the total increased from around 10% to 24% in the last decade. On the other hand, the share of berths/seats in sleeper coaches decreased from 33.3% to 29% and the share of ‘other non-AC’ coaches came down from 51% to 39%.

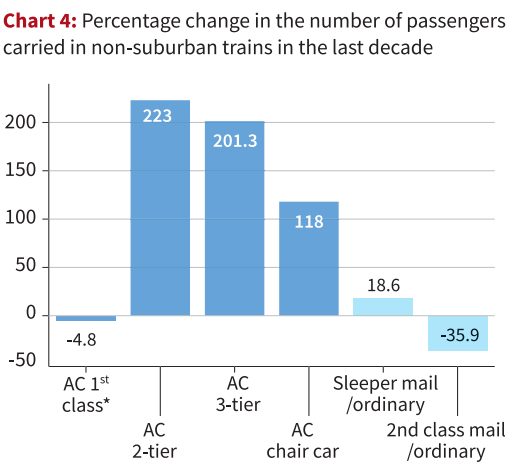
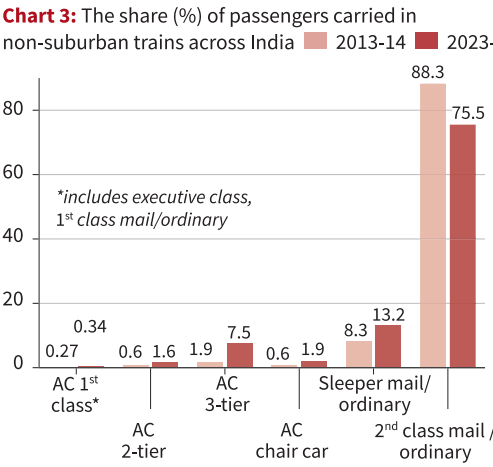
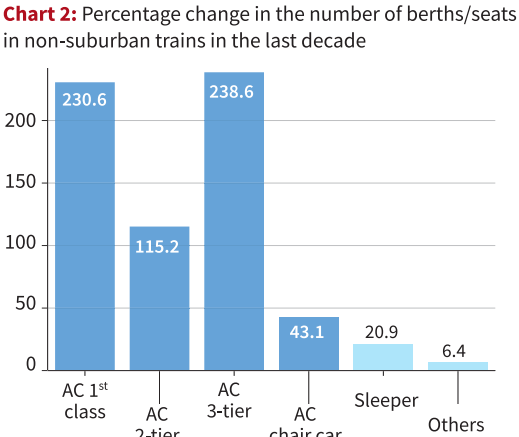
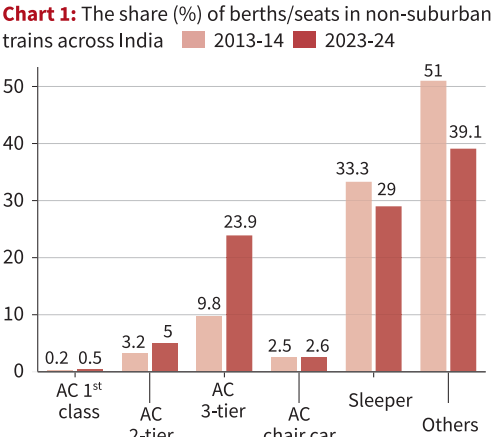
An analysis of the percentage increase and decrease in berths/seats over the past decade also highlights a growing preference for AC coaches. In 2023-24, the berths/seats in AC three-tier coaches had increased by 238% from 2013-14. In contrast, the berths/seats in sleeper coaches increased by only 21% and ‘other non-AC’ coaches increased by only 6.4% in the same period (**Chart 2**).

A similar pattern can be seen when analysing the number of passengers who travelled across various classes of non-suburban trains. For instance, the share of passengers in AC three-tier coaches in total increased from less than 2% in 2013-14 to 7.5% in 2023-24. In contrast, the share of those in second class mail/ordinary coaches in total declined from over 88% to 75.5%. Those in sleeper mail/ordinary coaches increased from 8.3% to 13.2% (**Chart 3**).

An analysis of the percentage increase and decrease in passengers carried also shows a similar pattern. In 2023-24, the number of passengers in AC three-tier coaches increased by 201% from 2013-14. On the other hand, those carried in second class mail/ordinary coaches decreased by 36%. Passengers carried in sleeper mail/ordinary coaches increased by just 18.6% (**Chart 4**).

## A class apart

The data for the charts were sourced from the Indian Railways Annual Statistical Statements 2013-14 and 2023-24



## FROM THE ARCHIVES



FIFTY YEARS AGO JULY 31, 1975

## Progress at Brezhnev, Ford mini-summit

Helsinki (Finland), July 30: The U.S. President, Mr. Gerald Ford and the Soviet leader, Mr. Leonid Brezhnev reported progress towards a nuclear arms curb agreement after a mini-summit to-day that overshadowed the opening of the 35-nation European Security Conference.

The host country President, Mr. Urho Kekkonen, officially opened the conference, the biggest gathering of world leaders in 160 years, proclaiming it “a day of joy and hope for Europe.”

But with its final document – a non-binding set of principles – already agreed upon, the super summit served mainly to spur a feverish round of diplomatic activity.

Mr. Ford and Mr. Brezhnev met for two hours and 15 minutes in the first of their two scheduled mini-summits being watched closely by the 33 other European and North American leaders here. They are aware that only agreement between the two super powers can bring peace to this continent ravaged by war for centuries.

The U.S. President and Mr. Brezhnev met reporters at the U.S. Embassy where they conferred before going to Helsinki's Finlandia Hall to attend the opening of the Security Conference.

The Kremlin chief agreed with the U.S. President that the declaration of the European Security Conference, to be signed by 35 countries at an East-West summit here on Friday, would lead to greater stability in Europe.

He said: “I want all the nations of Europe to live in peace with each other and not interfere in each other's domestic affairs.”

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JULY 31, 1925

## War graves

London, July 30: In the Commons, Mr. Worthington Evans said it was the intention of the Government in conjunction with the Dominions' Governments to establish an endowment fund of five million sterling for the maintenance of the war cemeteries. He proposed to ask the House to vote £50,000 as the United Kingdom's contribution for the current year and a further sum every year, increasing as the cost of the construction work finishes until the capital sum realises the British share of the total amount required for the permanent maintenance of the war graves.



# Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Individuals arrested under UAPA between 2018 and 2022

**8,947** Only two cases filed under the anti-terror law, Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, were quashed by courts across the country between 2018 and 2022. Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai presented the data from the latest NCRB report. PTI

The growth in Europe's economy in the April-June quarter

**0.10** In per cent. Europe's economy barely grew in the April-June quarter as earlier efforts to ship goods ahead of new U.S. tariffs reversed, and output fell for the continent's largest economy, Germany. GDP grew an anaemic 0.1% compared to the previous quarter. AP

Road projects facing delays over land and clearance issues

**489** Hundreds of road projects, which were originally scheduled for completion by March 2025, are pending due to delays in land acquisition, forest/wildlife clearances and railway approvals, Parliament was informed on Wednesday. PTI

Persons rescued from various districts in Madhya Pradesh

**2,900** Several people, including school children, were stranded in parts of Madhya Pradesh's Shivpuri district due to a flood-like situation after heavy rains, prompting the authorities to call the Army for rescue and relief work. PTI

Estimated amount from cooperative fossil fuel levies every year

**66** In \$ billion. Smaller coalitions of fossil fuel-importing countries could generate \$66 billion annually to help developing nations cut emissions, according to a new study by the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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## Why were the 2006 Mumbai blasts accused freed?

What was the verdict handed down by a special Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act court in 2015? What happened in Mumbai on July 11, 2006? Why did the Bombay High Court state that the confessional statements of the convicts were inadmissible? What has the Supreme Court said?

EXPLAINER

Aaratrika Bhaumik

The story so far:

**O**n July 21, the Bombay High Court acquitted all 12 accused in the 2006 Mumbai serial train blasts case, overturning the 2015 verdict by a special Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act (MCOCA) court that had sentenced five of them to death and seven to life imprisonment. Delivering a scathing indictment of the Mumbai Police's Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS), a Division Bench of Justices Anil S. Kilor and Shyam C. Chandak observed, "Punishing the actual perpetrator of a crime is a concrete and essential step toward curbing criminal activities, upholding the rule of law, and ensuring the safety and security of citizens. But creating a false appearance of having solved a case by presenting that the accused have been brought to justice gives a misleading sense of resolution. This deceptive closure undermines public trust and falsely reassures society, while in reality, the true threat remains at large. Essentially, this is what the case at hand conveys". Accordingly, the judgment ordered the release of 11 men after 19 years of incarceration. One of the accused had died in custody in 2021 due to COVID-19. Only one among them, Wahid Shaikh, had been acquitted earlier by the trial court in 2015 after it found no evidence against him. He had spent nine years in prison before being exonerated.

What is the case?

Nearly two decades ago, on July 11, 2006, Mumbai was shaken by a coordinated series of bomb blasts that left an indelible scar on the city's collective memory. Within a matter of minutes, seven explosions ripped through suburban trains on the Western Railway line during peak evening rush hour, killing 189 people and seriously injuring 824. According to the Mumbai Police, the bombs had been assembled using pressure cookers and strategically planted to cause maximum devastation during the city's busiest commute hours.

In the immediate aftermath, the Congress-led Maharashtra government handed over the investigation to the Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS). Eventually, 13 individuals were put on trial in connection with the blasts and 17 others, including Pakistani nationals, were named in the ATS chargesheet.

Why did the High Court set aside the convictions?

The prosecution's case rested primarily on eyewitness testimonies, the recovery of explosives, and confessional statements. However, the High Court found the evidence to be fundamentally compromised. It opined that the confessions were extracted through "barbaric and inhuman" torture, the eyewitness accounts lacked credibility, and that the recovered materials were "vulnerable to tampering" and therefore inadmissible. Some of the key findings include:

Unreliable eyewitnesses: The prosecution's case relied heavily on eight eyewitnesses, including taxi drivers who allegedly ferried the accused and train passengers who claimed to have seen them planting the bombs. However, the court deemed this testimony "unsafe," citing significant delays and a lack of corroboration. Most witnesses approached the police over three months after the incident, casting doubt on the



**Murky truth:** Indian railway officials clear debris of a local train which was ripped open by a bomb blast at Khar Mumbai on July 11, 2006. AFP

reliability of their recollections. The court was particularly critical of the two taxi drivers, who remained silent for nearly four months. It found it implausible that they could accurately recall the faces of passengers given the fleeting and routine nature of taxi rides in a metropolis like Mumbai. Similarly, a witness who had assisted in preparing sketches of the suspects was never brought to testify in the trial or asked to identify the accused in court. A significant procedural lapse that further weakened the prosecution's case was the invalidity of the test identification parades. The special executive officer who conducted them, Shri Barve, lacked the legal authority, as his tenure had ended more than a year earlier. As a result, the identifications made during these parades, including those of three accused, were ruled inadmissible.

Coerced confessions: The High Court held that the confessional statements of the 11 convicts were inadmissible, citing grave violations of statutory safeguards. Most notably, the Bench concluded that the confessions had been extracted through torture. The judgment detailed chilling allegations by the accused, who described being beaten with belts, having their legs forcibly stretched apart, being subjected to electric shocks, and being deprived of sleep. These accounts were corroborated by medical reports from King Edward Memorial and Bhabha hospitals.

The prosecution's case was further weakened by the striking similarity across the confessions, even though they were recorded by different officers at different times and locations. The statements were found to be "verbatim", including the phrasing of questions, responses, and

even grammatical errors, raising serious doubts about their voluntariness. The court also found that key procedural safeguards were ignored. The accused were not informed of their right to legal counsel before their statements were recorded, and there was neither certification of the language used nor any confirmation that the confessions were read back and acknowledged by them.

No 'prior sanction' under MCOCA: The High Court delivered a decisive blow to the prosecution by holding that the very invocation of the Maharashtra Control of Organised Crime Act, 1999 (MCOCA), was unlawful. The statute requires "prior sanction" by a competent authority, a police officer not below the rank of the Deputy Inspector General of Police, before it can be invoked in a case. This is a crucial safeguard since the stringent anti-terror law reverses the burden of proof, allows prolonged detention and dilutes evidentiary standards. The court found that the sanctioning officer had granted approval without examining the necessary documents, some of which were submitted only after the approval had been issued. "Mere reproduction of some expressions, used in the definition of 'organised crime', 'continuing unlawful activities' or 'organised crime syndicate' to show the compliance, cannot be said to be in tune with the letter and spirit of the law relating to grant of approval for invocation of the provisions of the MCOCA," the court underscored. The prosecution's failure to call the sanctioning officer as a witness further compounded the lapse. The court concluded that without his testimony, the approval for invoking MCOCA lacked legal validity.

Destruction of evidence: A key point of

contention was the Call Detail Records (CDRs) of the accused. Although the defence repeatedly sought access to them, the prosecution claimed the records had been destroyed. The court found this deeply troubling, noting that the CDRs were crucial for establishing the accused's whereabouts during alleged conspiracy meetings and for verifying or refuting claims of contact with operatives in Pakistan. It concluded that the destruction of such potentially exculpatory evidence appeared deliberate and amounted to the suppression of material facts. This, the court held, cast "serious doubts over the integrity of the investigation" and constituted a "grave violation of the right to a fair trial."

The judges also found serious lapses in the handling of physical evidence allegedly recovered, such as RDX granules, detonators, pressure cookers, circuit boards, hooks, and maps. They pointed out that the prosecution's failure to maintain a clear chain of custody as well as not ensuring secure sealing before submission to the Forensic Science Laboratory severely compromised the evidentiary value of these items.

What did the Supreme Court say?

On July 24, the Supreme Court stayed the High Court's verdict, taking note of the Maharashtra government's concern that the ruling could have adverse implications for several ongoing trials under the MCOCA. However, a Bench of Justices M.M. Sundresh and N. Kotiswar Singh clarified that the stay would not affect the release of the 12 accused, who had already walked free following their acquittal. The court also issued notice to all the former convicts on the State's appeal challenging their acquittal.

THE GIST

Nearly two decades ago, on July 11, 2006, Mumbai was shaken by a coordinated series of bomb blasts that left an indelible scar on the city's collective memory.

The prosecution's case rested primarily on eyewitness testimonies, the recovery of explosives, and confessional statements. However, the High Court found the evidence to be fundamentally compromised. It opined that the confessions were extracted through "barbaric and inhuman" torture, the eyewitness accounts lacked credibility, and that the recovered materials were "vulnerable to tampering" and therefore inadmissible.

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BUILDING BLOCKS



GETTY IMAGES

# How does the Indian harmonium produce its lively music?

The sounds of an Indian harmonium seem ‘alive’ because the instrument doesn’t run on the clinical power of electrical energy but on a human body in motion. This may also explain why it became a staple of Indian classical, devotional, and folk music

Vasudevan Mukunth

The Indian portable harmonium is a close cousin of the larger foot-pumped organs once found in European churches and homes. It’s a wooden box roughly the size of a small suitcase. You sit on the floor behind it and pump a pair of bellows with one hand and play piano-like keys with the other. All these instruments work on the same simple idea: air is pushed past metal strips called reeds; when they vibrate, musical notes are created. The sound of the harmonium has been a staple of both Indian folk music and mainstream cinema.

**How does a harmonium use air?** A harmonium doesn’t have strings, membranes or electronic circuits. Instead, its ‘fuel’ is air in motion. When the bellows attached to the instrument are pulled open, they suck some of the air in the room into their folded chambers, funnelled through inlet valves. When you push the bellows closed, the air is squeezed forward into an airtight wooden compartment that lies directly under the harmonium keys. Because the compartment’s walls don’t move, the air pressure within rises above normal atmospheric pressure by a small amount, usually a few kilopascals. The

compartment also holds a slender internal spring or a weighted flap that helps maintain this pressure, even if you don’t pump the bellows at a regular rate. In fact, as long as you pump the bellows every few seconds, the reeds will feel enough pressure to make sounds.

**How does a harmonium make sound?** The keyboard on top of the harmonium resembles a piano in miniature. But unlike in a piano, each key is only a lever. If you press a key, its far end tilts upward inside the box, lifting a pallet lined with felt. The pallet covers a hole that leads from the pressurised wooden compartment to a single metal reed. When the key is at rest, the pallet closes the hole and no air flows. When you press the key, the pallet opens, allowing high-pressure air to rush through the hole and towards the reed. Most Indian harmoniums expose 1.5 to 3 reeds to each hole. A stop rod next to the keyboard allows you to choose which set of reeds, called a bank, is active at any time. If you slide out one stop rod, an extra airway opens so the same key can expose a second bank that is tuned to one octave higher or lower, creating a more organ-like tone.

**How does each reed operate?** Every reed is essentially a tongue of brass

or phosphor-bronze nailed on top of a rectangular slot in a metal frame. When air pressure rises on the front side, the tongue bends slightly into the slot, allowing a puff of air to slip past to the rear. The same puff now exerts pressure on the back side of the tongue, pushing it forward again. This rapid seesawing motion sets up a vibration with a frequency of hundreds of hertz for higher notes and around 100 Hz for the lower ones. The vibrating reed shreds the air stream into pulses, which bounce around inside the box before spreading into the room as sound waves. Because the reed is fixed at one end and free at the other, its pitch depends mainly on its length, thickness, and mass. The shorter or thinner the reed, the higher its natural frequency will be. Unlike flutes or trumpets, the harmonium’s reeds sit inside a wooden cavity rather than an open pipe. As a result, larger cavities produce lower notes and vice versa. The wooden compartment, the leather that makes the bellows, and even the player’s lap all absorb or reflect certain frequencies, giving each instrument a unique timbre. Because warmer air is less dense, reeds in such an atmosphere will also have a slightly higher pitch. Professional players thus often carry small screwdrivers to

tweak the reeds’ sounds before a performance.

**Why does the sound seem ‘alive’?** The harder you pump the bellows, the louder the sounds will be. This is simply because stronger pumping raises the pressure in the compartment and moves the reeds harder. Fluent players often use quick pulses on the bellows to produce sharp accents and ease off to create graceful decrescendos. Many designs also include a coupling lever that, when engaged, connects a key to the key one octave higher, so pressing a single note automatically depresses its octave partner without forcing the player’s fingers to stretch. Second, because the reed’s vibrations feed on the pumping, the instrument can be made to respond to the smallest motions. Players can brighten a note by pumping in a short burst or stall it to thin the note. More fundamentally, the sounds of an Indian harmonium seem ‘alive’ because the instrument doesn’t run on the clinical power of electrical energy but on a human body in motion. This may also explain why it became a staple of Indian classical, devotional, and folk music, including its willingness to accompany singers outdoors, through power cuts, and even play through the humid monsoons.

## THE DAILY QUIZ

Former Kerala Chief Minister V.S. Achuthanandan passed away recently at the age of 101. A quiz on the Communist icon, popularly known as VS

Radhika Santhanam

**QUESTION 1** Alappuzha is a major production hub for this product. VS worked in this industry and also organised workers of this industry. Name the product.

**QUESTION 2** In 2009, VS was removed from the Politburo for taking a stand against Pinarayi Vijayan in the SNC-Lavlin case. He likened Vijayan to a Soviet leader. Name that leader.

**QUESTION 3** In 2014, delivering a blow to VS, the Kerala High Court found fault with his government’s decision in 2007 to raze resort buildings which appeared to be built on encroached land in X. Name X, a tea plantation town.

**QUESTION 4** During the 1962 India-China war, VS was imprisoned for a year because he defied the CPI’s stance. What did he do to incur the wrath of the party?

**QUESTION 5** VS deeply admired X. This revolutionary served as Prime Minister and later as President of his country in the Caribbean. VS was also likened to this leader by former CPI(M) general secretary, Sitaram Yechury. Name the leader.

**QUESTION 6** This celebrity received an offer in the early 2000s to become the face of a soft drink brand. When he agreed, he found himself embroiled in a controversy. When VS issued an ultimatum to the actor, he withdrew his decision. Name the celebrity and the brand.



**Visual question:** This is a martyrs’ memorial to those killed in an uprising against the Travancore monarchy. VS was involved in organising workers ahead of the uprising. Name this revolt.

**Questions and Answers to the previous day’s daily quiz:** 1. The title of the art society exhibition in 1890 where Van Gogh’s work was displayed. **Ans: Les XX (Les Vingt) in Brussels**

2. The short-lived artist colony Van Gogh hoped to establish in Arles, and its only member. **Ans: The Studio of the South; the only artist who joined was Paul Gauguin**

3. The Red Vineyard was purchased by this person. **Ans: The Red Vineyard was purchased by Belgian artist Anna Boch**

4. Van Gogh’s reported final words. **Ans: His final words were reportedly: “La tristesse durera toujours” (The sadness will last forever)**

5. This artist painted Van Gogh on his deathbed. **Ans: Émile Bernard**

Visual question: The title of this painting, and how it stand outs among Van Gogh’s body of work. **Ans: The painting is titled ‘Orchard with Cypresses’. It was sold at Christie’s in November 2022 for a staggering \$117.18 million, making it the most expensive Van Gogh painting ever sold at public auction**

**Early Birds:** Nobody got all the correct answers



## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian  
S. Upendran

“What’s wrong? Why the long face?”  
“Long face! Listen, I’m terribly unhappy about something, so please don’t....”  
“.....that’s what I want to know. Why the long face? ”  
“Long face! Long face! What are you talking about?”  
“If you say that someone is walking around with a long face, it means he/she is looking very unhappy or serious. For example, I can say, after losing in the final, Anand was walking around with a long face.”  
“Can I say, every year before the Board exam, the principal walks around with a long face?”  
“You certainly can. I guess the principal has a lot of students like you. So, he’s worried if you guys will pass or not! Ha! Ha!”  
“That’s not funny.”  
“Sorry. Yesterday, I saw Sujatha going around with a long face and today it’s you. Is there a long face virus going around!”  
“Sujatha has every right to be walking around with a long face.”  
“Why? Anything happened?”  
“Haven’t you heard? I broke her father’s camera yesterday. And she’s really mad about me.”  
“You broke her father’s camera and she likes you for that?”  
“She likes me for that? Are you crazy? I’m trying to tell you that she is really angry with me. She is really mad about me!”  
“Not mad about me, but mad at me!”  
“What?”  
“If you say that someone is mad about something, it means he/she is crazy about it. He/she likes it very much. For example, my cousin Karthick is mad about cricket.”  
“Sujatha’s father is mad about photography.”  
“For years you have been mad about Madhuri!”  
“And you’ve been mad about Goldie Hawn!”  
“True. If on the other hand, someone is angry with you, then you say mad at. For example, the students were mad at the teacher for giving them a surprise test.”  
“Sujatha’s dad was mad at her for taking the camera out of the cupboard.”  
“Are your parents mad at you too?”  
“My father was extremely angry. He’s offered to pay Sujatha’s father.”  
“Sounds pretty serious.”  
“It is. My father is really mad at me. Well, I guess I’d better be going. I’d better study.”  
“Why? Do you expect the teacher to give you a pop quiz tomorrow?”  
“A what?”  
“A pop quiz! You know a surprise test!”  
“Is that what pop quiz means? A surprise test?”  
“That’s right. When I was in fifth standard, my teacher used to give a lot of pop quizzes.”  
“Last year we didn’t have a single pop quiz. I hope the trend continues this year too.”  
“Then, why are you going home to study?”  
“Just trying to impress my pop, I guess. See you!”  
*Published in The Hindu on June 17, 1997.*

## Word of the day

**Bellow:** a very loud utterance (like the sound of an animal); shout loudly and without restraint

**Synonyms:** holler, roar, yowl, bawl

**Usage:** *His bellow filled the hallway.*

**Pronunciation:** newsth.live/bellowpro

**International Phonetic Alphabet:** /ˈbɛləʊ/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to [letters@thehindu.co.in](mailto:letters@thehindu.co.in) with the subject ‘Text & Context’



# DEBATE MUST GO ON

Government and Opposition flagged crucial changes in national security even as they also stooped low to conquer

AFTER A LONG time, Parliament came alive and voices of the people’s representatives, across the political spectrum, rang out in the House with urgency and concern on a vital national issue. Ever since Operation Sindoor was carried out in the wake of the terror attack at Pahalgam, there have been unanswered questions. A fuller public debate was waiting to be joined, after the military dust settled. The deliberations in the Lok Sabha over two days broke a silence, filled a gap. At the same time, that the three Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorists who extinguished 26 lives on April 22 were killed in Dachigam in the Kashmir Valley on Monday in “Operation Mahadev” brings a needed moment of closure for the families of the victims, and for the nation that shares their grief. Alongside the long-awaited debate in Parliament and the success in Dachigam, mention of The Resistance Front, a proxy outfit of LeT, which has claimed responsibility for the Pahalgam attack, in a key UNSC report — the first mention of the LeT in the report since 2019 — brings a diplomatic victory for India.

But while Parliament did well to discuss Operation Sindoor — what led to it, how it was conducted, and its aftermath — an overtly partisan and short-term politics also narrowed the scope of the debate in the House. Both the members of the government and Opposition spoke, but it did not always seem that they listened to each other. For Prime Minister Narendra Modi to paint the main Opposition party, Congress, as compromising national interest, and as the spokesman for the enemy, as it were, is unseemly. For him to then connect the dots from Congress’s stance vis-à-vis Pakistan to its alleged “*tushitkaran*” or appeasement of the minority at home is disquieting and uncalled for. As was Home Minister Amit Shah’s reference to the “*dhamm*” of the terrorist. While BJP criticism of earlier Congress governments on national security is legitimate political thrust and parry, the debate on Operation Sindoor needs a common ground of respect and reciprocity, not labelling and name-calling. At the same time, Rahul Gandhi’s challenge to the government — to lay Pakistan low once-and-for-all — was bellicose, and belonged more in a clumsy insta-reel than in the nation’s highest forum of debate. His show-me-your-guts dare to the PM to call out US President Donald Trump for his claims of choreographing the India-Pak ceasefire was immature.

Yet, the debate flagged crucial changes that will unfold and resonate in times to come. Rahul Gandhi may deny and dismiss it, but a “new normal” has indeed been consecrated by Operation Sindoor, red lines have been redrawn by India vis-à-vis Pakistan. It is true that this recalibration may not always open up space for manoeuvre for Delhi, but may also limit it. India’s challenge will be to ensure that it is not straitjacketed by the recast concept of deterrence. In a global environment where Trump has upended established patterns and certainties, and China is tilting the balance, India will have to move forward carefully, in its neighbourhood and beyond — calling Beijing and Washington names is neither diplomacy nor strategy. In that journey, Operation Sindoor constitutes an important milestone. The debate that has begun in Parliament must go on.

## MOVING THE NEEDLE

Announcements by London and Paris on recognising Palestine signal growing European frustration with Israel’s war in Gaza

OVER A CENTURY ago, the UK helped lay the foundation of the Israel-Palestine dispute with the 1917 Balfour Declaration, pledging support for a “national home for the Jewish people”, while promising to safeguard the “civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”. The creation of an independent State of Israel in May 1948, and its success in fending off five Arab states, meant that the Declaration’s contradictory promises catalysed a conflict that continues to bring devastation to the West Asian region. Nearly 108 years later, the UK has said that it will recognise Palestinian statehood in September unless Israel agrees to a ceasefire, a two-state solution, and halts its de facto annexation of parts of the occupied West Bank. PM Keir Starmer has also set conditions for Hamas: A ceasefire, the release of hostages, withdrawal from governance, and disarmament. The UK’s move follows France’s announcement that it will recognise Palestinian statehood in September, as it joined Saudi Arabia in co-chairing a high-level UN conference in New York to push for the much-debated two-state solution.

The London and Paris announcements, which could make them the only two G7 nations to recognise the State of Palestine in less than two months, signal growing European frustration with Israel’s war in Gaza, where civilians are facing a humanitarian catastrophe under sustained bombardment and a blockade on aid — now easing under mounting international pressure. Yet, Starmer’s plan has contradictions of its own. If Israel meets all the conditions, would the UK then refuse to recognise Palestinian statehood, after all? Statehood should be framed not as a concession but an inalienable right of the Palestinian people. Britain’s stance appears to be a pressure tactic aimed at curbing the ongoing atrocities in Gaza. But if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refuses to stand down, Starmer may be compelled to follow through on his pledge come September.

Today, 147 of 193 UN member states have formally recognised the State of Palestine — a list that includes India. Speaking at the New York conference, India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Parvathaneni Harish, noting that India was among the first to recognise Palestine in 1988, emphasised that global efforts must now focus on a two-state solution. France and the UK moving the needle marks the first significant step within the West towards a durable resolution of the dispute. Much, however, will depend on the US — both in the long term and when it comes to immediate pressure on Israel for humanitarian relief and a ceasefire.

## SPEAKING FOR VOICELESS

Nandu Ram brought ‘lived experience’ into mainstream sociology and significantly changed Dalit discourse

IN SILENCING THE *Past*, Haitian anthropologist Michel Trouillot showed how diverse histories are silenced during the production and reproduction of mainstream history. These undocumented voices shape the folklore and the everyday narratives of the marginalised. In India, the historical silencing of Dalits, Adivasis, and other communities moved sociologist and former JNU professor Nandu Ram. He documented the unarchived histories — he published the five-volume *Encyclopaedia of Scheduled Castes in India* — and also brought “lived experience” into mainstream sociology, significantly changing Dalit discourse.

Ram, who died on July 13 aged 78, was born to a family of Dalit labourers in Uttar Pradesh. Having grown up in a village where his family was forced to live on the outskirts, he experienced both spatial segregation and inequality. These experiences, coupled with his understanding of ethnographic nuances, led to the publication of *The Mobile Scheduled Caste: Rise of a New Middle Class*, where he identified the emergence of a “Dalit middle class” that was the result of affirmative action and Ambedkarite resistance. His edited anthologies, like *Beyond Ambedkar: Essays on Dalits in India* and *Dalits in Contemporary India*, showed how Dalit politics could be read both through and beyond Ambedkar.

Though his works were sometimes criticised by scholars for failing to delineate Dalit-OBG relations, Nandu Ram was among the first sociologists who brought Ambedkar into mainstream sociological discourse. In his introductory address at the first Dr Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture, Ram said, “Both the left and right-wing historians of modern India...have almost siphoned the Dalit movement(s) in their writings.” He devoted his life to retrieving and restoring the balance.



AMITABH MATTOO

THE DEBATE ON Operation Sindoor did not rest on pleasantries. Sixteen hours of verbal combat in Parliament — impassioned, insightful, much of it revealing, followed India’s precision retaliation to the brutal Pahalgam terror attack. Operation Sindoor was a moment of muscular assertion. But what followed in Parliament was no less critical: A vibrant, at times strident, affirmation that India’s democracy has the spine to scrutinise even its sharpest sword. This was no ordinary debate. It was as much a test of India’s strategic reflexes as it was of its democratic sinews.

The strikes themselves were extraordinary. Coordinated across air and ground, targeting more than 100 terror-linked assets, they sent a message not just to Pakistan, but to the wider region. And yet, the Opposition was not content with applause. It demanded answers. Why had intelligence failed to prevent the Pahalgam massacre? What were the exact terms of engagement? And, crucially, were President Donald Trump’s repeated claims that he had “halted” the offensive and the claim that Indian jets were downed entirely baseless? These were not seditious questions. They were democratic ones. In a mature republic, strength is not demonstrated through denial, but through debate. It is here that India revealed the deeper character of its political culture.

To its credit, the government did not flinch. The Defence Minister laid out the operational contours of the strike. The External Affairs Minister dismantled Trump’s outlandish claim that he had halted Indian jets through a call that never occurred.

The Prime Minister, often accused of strategic silence, spoke with gravitas and lucidity: Combining what was described privately by one Opposition leader as “steel with statesmanship”, he affirmed that the armed forces had been accorded full operational autonomy in choosing the moment, method, and magnitude of Operation Sindoor. The result: A calibrated, 22-minute retribution that crippled terror-linked targets. He categorically dismissed the notion of foreign mediation. No leader had restrained India; Pakistan had sought reprieve, not the world. Atmanirbhar Bharat, he declared, is no slogan — it is doctrine. With defence exports spanning over 100 nations, India is shedding dependence and asserting sovereign capability. Finally, in an oratorical flourish that resonated across party

Op Sindoor debate in Parliament reaffirmed a conscientious republic unafraid to question, challenge



In the final reckoning, Sindoor may come to symbolise many things: Tactical audacity, calibrated resolve, and the emergence of a more assertive India. But its true significance lies in what followed. A vibrant Parliament, diverse, cacophonous yet conscientious, rose to the challenge of testing statecraft with scrutiny. It did not defer to secrecy, nor did it descend into spectacle. Instead, it engaged. And in doing so, it reaffirmed to the world that India’s strength does not lie in authoritarian silence but in argumentative democracy.

lines, he enunciated a new red line: The distinction between terrorists and their sponsors has dissolved, both will be met with unflinching reprisal. And yet, the shadows lingered.

Trump’s assertions were diplomatically offensive and factually absurd. But in the echo chamber of global perception, even fiction can acquire dangerous resonance. India’s delay in demolishing the claim ceded narrative ground not on the battlefield, but in the global imagination. In today’s strategic environment, perception is as potent as projection. And information is now the fourth domain of warfare.

Operation Sindoor thus reveals two intertwined facets of India’s emerging strategic identity: A capacity to strike with technical finesse and political will, and a parallel maturity to subject those strikes to democratic scrutiny. In a region where strongmen muzzle dissent and silence Parliament, India demonstrated that a strong Prime Minister and a questioning legislature can co-exist, not in contradiction, but in creative tension.

Let us mark five enduring lessons from this episode — shaped not only by military strategy but also by the intensity of parliamentary debate. First, the China-Pakistan nexus is no longer theoretical. It is operational. The coordination in disinformation, drone surveillance, and military posturing points to an emerging twin-front hybrid challenge. India must rethink its security architecture through this prism. Deterrence must evolve from episodic retaliation to a holistic, two-theatre posture.

Second, intelligence remains our Achilles’ heel. The tragedy of Pahalgam was not merely the loss of life. It was the failure of foresight. India’s intelligence architecture is still over-centralised, turf-ridden, and reactive. Reform must focus on fusing human and technological capabilities, decentralising decision-making, and enabling predictive analytics.

Third, doctrine must replace demonstration. Sindoor, like Balakot and Uri before it, was tactically impressive. But deterrence is not built on episodic fireworks. It requires strategic clarity. If we are now in the domain of pre-emptive, precision operations, the red lines, thresholds, and strategic aims must be publicly understood, if not fully disclosed.

Fourth, narrative sovereignty must be institutionalised. The Trump distraction was not just a media sideshow. It was a revelation of our unpreparedness in the information war. In

the age of social media and disinformation, speed and credibility of messaging are as vital as stealth and strength. India must build strategic communication infrastructure that can speak with authority, agility, and global reach.

Fifth, Parliament must become a permanent participant in national security discourse. The Sindoor debate was heartening in being largely civil and substantial. There were no walkouts, no partisan shouting matches, not even many monopoly claims on patriotism. Even the sharpest critics acknowledged the professionalism of the armed forces and the necessity of the strike. What they demanded was transparency, institutional learning, and strategic foresight. That demand must now be met with structure. A standing bipartisan committee on national security, empowered with briefings, oversight, and consultative authority, can bridge the gap between operational secrecy and democratic responsibility. In choosing to deliberate, not defer, Parliament reminded us that scrutiny is not the enemy of strength, but its most durable companion.

In the final reckoning, Sindoor may come to symbolise many things: Tactical audacity, calibrated resolve, and the emergence of a more assertive India. But its true significance lies in what followed. A vibrant Parliament, diverse, cacophonous yet conscientious, rose to the challenge of testing statecraft with scrutiny. It did not defer to secrecy, nor did it descend into spectacle. Instead, it engaged. And in doing so, it reaffirmed to the world that India’s strength does not lie in authoritarian silence but in argumentative democracy.

In that sense, the real triumph was not just the success of Sindoor, but the maturity of the republic. India struck. India debated. And in doing both, India reaffirmed its character — not merely as a strategic actor, but as a polity that is as thoughtful as it is forceful not merely as a rising power, but as a thinking republic.

Let others strike in silence. India, still loud, still argumentative, still proud, walks a different path, where the sword and the sceptre speak to each other. That is the Indian idea. And it is, still, worth believing in and with passion.

*The writer is dean and professor, School of International Studies, JNU, and former member of India’s National Security Council’s Advisory Board*



SURJIT S BHALLA

I GOT TO know Meghnad Desai well over the last two decades, and especially over the last 10 years. He had been unwell for some time, but his mind was as acute and incisive as ever. It was a life well lived, and I want to celebrate my good fortune of having known him “closely” over the last decade. In many discussions (arguments) between friends, Meghnad was never at a loss for insight. Gentleness marked his approach to people — but not towards bad ideas.

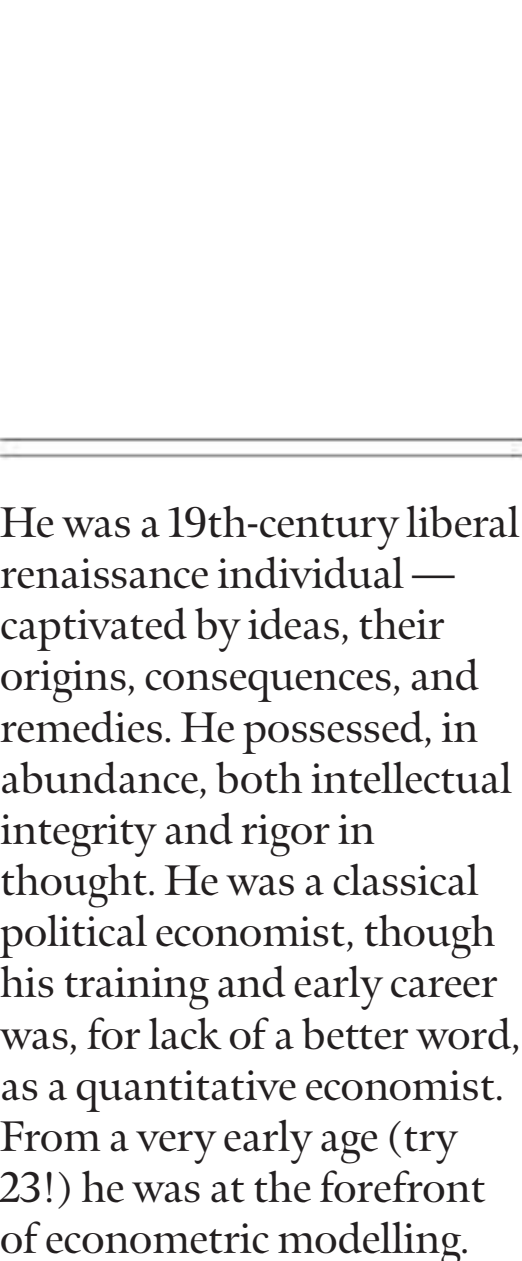
I had the occasion to visit him often at the House of Lords, dining and even being allowed to sit in on the debates. No visit to London was complete without a joint meal with Meghnad. We had a lot in common — cricket, economics and the difficulty of economic reforms in India, and a passionate interest in politics and films (and he has many books on politics, and one book on films — *Nehru’s Hero: Dilip Kumar in the Life of India*).

His greatest accomplishment is his book *The Rediscovery of India*. It starts with Vasco da Gama and extends to the end of the UPA’s first term. His views on the destructive economic policies of the Congress party, Jawaharlal Nehru to Sonia Gandhi, anticipated what is now conventional wisdom.

Meghnad was kind, a gentle and modest soul, with a lot to be immodest about. In many ways, he had no equal. He obtained his PhD at

# AN ECONOMIST OF MANY PARTS

Meghnad Desai resisted affiliation to any one school of thought



## JULY 31, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

GOLDEN TEMPLE CLASH

THE AKALI DAL (Longowal) has called upon all Sikhs to observe “Shukrana Diwas” (thanksgiving day) on August 16 to hail the Centre-Akali accord on Punjab. Earlier, gunfire and violence, in which around 30 persons were injured, erupted outside the Teja Singh Samundri hall following a clash between members of the moderate Akali Dal (L) and the extremist “United” Dal. None was, however, seriously injured. The episode lasted around 45 minutes.

HEAT ON BHAJAN LAL

AMIDST NOISY PROTESTS from the Congress-L benches, the Opposition parties in the Rajya

Sabha demanded the resignation of Haryana Chief Minister Bhajan Lal. The Janata Party leader in the House, M S Gurupadaswamy, speaking on behalf of Opposition leaders, provoked a loud chorus of protests when he demanded that Bhajan Lal resign to ensure that the inquiry ordered into the charges against him is fair.

NEW HARYANA CAPITAL

TOPTOWN PLANNING experts from the world will be consulted for Haryana’s new capital, Chief Minister Bhajan Lal told newsmen in Chandigarh. While announcing the setting up of a high-level site selection committee of senior officers, the Chief Minister gave the assur-

ance that the state’s new capital would be beautiful and better than the city of Chandigarh in all respects. The committee has been asked to submit a report within three months.

INDIA DISOWNS MUNNA

THE FESTIVAL OF India authorities clarified that Munna, the dancing bear, was sent to Paris for the festival by the Indian Hotels Corporation — the Taj group. Although Munna, whose recent kidnapping received wide press coverage, attended the inaugural mela in Paris, it was not under the aegis of the Government of India. The Indian Hotels Corporation retained Munna’s services after the event to “amuse patrons” of their restaurant in Paris.





The IndianEXPRESS

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THE WATER FRONT

After China's new project on Brahmaputra, India's plans to build  
storage facilities on the river must acquire urgency

LAST WEEK, THE Chinese government started work on the construction of a massive hydropower project on the Yarlung Zangbo, just before the river bends and enters Arunachal Pradesh, where it is called the Siang. The river then flows into Assam, where it is called the Brahmaputra. The \$170 billion project, linked to Beijing's developmental goals in the Tibetan region, is expected to generate 60 GW of electricity, roughly three times more than the Three Gorges Dam. The project has stirred old anxieties in the river's downstream, especially in Arunachal Pradesh and Bangladesh. Arunachal Chief Minister Pema Khandu has described the Chinese project as a "ticking water bomb". An increase in the Chinese capacity to manipulate the river's flows once the dam is constructed could increase the risks of floods in the country's Northeast, he has said. The fact that very little is known of the project's storage capacity has aggravated the unease. The risk could also stem from sudden surges in downstream flows — from unannounced water releases or from increased discharge as a result of the warming climate or even engineering errors. Hydrology experts fear that the Chinese project could disrupt water flow to the hydro projects proposed in the country's Northeast — the region holds nearly half of India's hydropower potential, over 80 per cent of which remains untapped.

India's Brahmaputra predicament is unlike that of most lower riparian states. The river gains most of its volume only after it enters Arunachal Pradesh, fed by largely river-fed tributaries in the Eastern Himalaya, such as the Lohit and the Dibang. In the Brahmaputra's lower riparian regions, the unpredictability of flood patterns is already a big challenge. The fears about inundation due to the river's changing flows are, therefore, not unfounded. In 2013, India and China signed a MoU on sharing information on river flows. But, by all accounts, Beijing has not always been open to sharing hydrological data. A more effective response to the Chinese dam would be to build up the defences of vulnerable regions in the Northeast. In 2017, when the Yarlung Zangbo dam was still at a planning stage, Niti Aayog had proposed a multipurpose project in the Siang region as a strategic counter to the Chinese hydro station. Besides generating electricity, the project's storage facility can cushion the Northeast from the risks of being flooded by water released from the Chinese dam. However, work on the Siang dam has progressed at a slow pace, largely because a section of the local population has opposed the project. The Ministry of Jal Shakti tasked the National Hydro Power Corporation to prepare a pre-feasibility report but vital investigations have not been conducted.

Fears about displacement and livelihood losses have found expression in the opposition to the Siang project. The political class and technical experts must come together to build safeguards and remove such apprehensions. The work on building storage facilities downstream of the Brahmaputra cannot be postponed.

BREAKING THE CHAIN

ICMR's push for TB diagnostic tests in primary healthcare centres  
could be crucial for early detection and treatment of infection

WITH THE AIM of making clinical testing for a wider range of diseases more accessible, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has updated its National List of Essential Diagnostics to include rapid diagnostic tests for sickle cell anaemia, thalassaemia, Hepatitis B and syphilis, among others. Significantly, there is a push for early detection of tuberculosis (TB) at the lower levels of the healthcare system — the list recommends collecting samples at the level of the sub health centre (SHC) for molecular TB testing in order to identify asymptomatic individuals, as well as the TB skin test in community healthcare centres, to detect the presence of the pathogen in those without an active infection.

WHO data shows that since 2015, India has made good progress in tackling TB. There has been a 17 per cent drop in the number of reported cases and a 20 per cent drop in the number of deaths. More than 85 per cent of those detected with the infection have received treatment and efforts to contain multi-drug-resistant TB are yielding results. It is evident that the TB problem is not intractable, but given India's massive disease burden, accounting for 27 per cent of the global cases, there is no room for complacency. The challenge is compounded by the problem of subclinical TB, where infected individuals do not yet present symptoms like persistent coughing. A study published in The International Journal of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease in 2024 found that 39 per cent of TB cases in India are subclinical, and therefore more likely to escape detection and continue spreading. This is why the attempt to tackle TB as early as possible matters. The ICMR's update, making molecular TB testing available at the level of the community health centre (CHC) — with sub-centres and primary healthcare centres (PHCs) also sending samples to be tested — could be crucial to providing timely treatment and breaking the chain of transmission.

Despite making significant progress, India is unlikely to meet its target of eliminating TB by the end of the year. The government has made the expansion of primary healthcare a key pillar of its policy, with the aim of bringing a broad spectrum of services closer to the people through the network of over 1.7 lakh centres around the country. The broadening of the TB diagnostics must be factored in, equipping SHCs and PHCs to identify and treat infected individuals as early as possible, even as initiatives to reduce the financial burden of treatment and improve access to nutrition are strengthened.

BLIZZARD OF OZZ

Father of heavy metal and one of its most outlandish figures,  
Ozzy Osbourne leaves behind the music and the showmanship

LACK SABBATH FRONTMAN John Michael 'Ozzy' Osbourne, father of heavy metal and one of its most enduring and outlandish figures, died on Tuesday at 76. Earlier this month, suffering from Parkinson's and unable to stand without assistance, Ozzy rose from beneath the stage at the jam-packed Villa Park in Birmingham, less than a mile away from his home in Aston, where he grew up, seated on a custom-made throne fashioned like a bat. Forty thousand metalheads, who had gathered for a final hat tip to the metal pioneer, roared to the theatrical nod to that shocking moment from 1982 when Ozzy chewed off the head of a bat thrown on stage.

Ozzy's bat bite, while not deliberate — he later said he thought it was a rubber toy — clouded the line between performance and reality. The confusion allowed for the power of the absurd to prevail. Parents were worried if kids lined their eyes with kohl, wore black and blared the music of "Satan's friends". Ozzy, the freak, was the children's hero, their "Prince of Darkness". He himself grew up on a steady dose of The Beatles. After leaving school, he worked as a labourer and in a slaughterhouse before being recruited by bassist Geezer Butler as the singer for his band Rare Breed in 1967. With guitarist Tony Iommi and drummer Bill Ward, they became Black Sabbath in 1969. The eponymous debut album, followed by *Paranoid*, *Master of Reality* and *Sabbath Bloody Sabbath*, shot through the charts. While Ozzy's substance abuse and alcoholism got him fired by the band in 1979, he embarked on a solo career and was off-balance thereafter musically, and otherwise.

A strange Act Two came with *The Osbournes*, a reality-TV peek into his home. It had Ozzy roaming around in a robe, flinging profanities, trying to figure out a TV remote. While it took away the rock star myth, the vulnerability made it work the TRPs. It felt the same during the farewell concert, when he sang "Mama, I'm coming home", struggling with the notes. The metalheads sang along, letting him feel the last song. Just before it was time to leave.



PRATAP BHANU MEHTA

THE SILENCE AND denial around the moral catastrophe unfolding in Gaza only seems to grow in proportion to the scale of atrocity being inflicted on the Palestinian people. It is as if humanity is in moral regress. The fragile gains of international law — those slivers of humanitarian sensibility that once insisted atrocity on this scale must be unacceptable — are being steadily eroded.

There are signs of progress. The facts of what is happening in Gaza are more widely acknowledged, and the debate over how to legally and morally name the horror has intensified. Yet, paradoxically, the atrocity is also being made more invisible. Any ceasefire now will already be too late. The world will assuage its conscience only after mass death and destruction, and call the wreckage "peace".

But the silence around Gaza demands deeper analysis. Perhaps it was always naïve to believe that humanity was capable of sustained moral progress. As Bruce Robbins argues in *Atrocity: A Literary History*, moral indignation in the face of atrocity is historically rare. For much of human history, violence was treated like the weather — brutal, routine and morally unremarkable. Killing civilians was normal, and even the victims did not always think of themselves as morally wronged — only defeated. Often, mass violence was invested with redemptive meaning.

Even rulers with moral qualms about violence applied those doubts selectively. As a character in one of the few novels to confront moral culpability during wartime — Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* — says, "So it goes."

Robbins's powerful meditation exposes the many ways humanity evades confronting atrocity. Moral demands rarely override the narcissism of group identities. Even when atrocities are condemned, the critique is hemmed in: It must not destabilise existing hierarchies. Conservatives often fear mass violence not because of its human toll, but because it might disrupt order. Societies struggle to indict themselves; self-accusation is psychologically intolerable. Literature is saturated with violence, but most writers ultimately find it difficult to indict their own societies in the face of atrocity.

We are increasingly in a world in which moral concern is no longer trusted. It is pathol-

Across democracies, the silence and inaction  
over Gaza sends that message

Is there any precedent for this — where state after state not only denies the horror, but also actively expects silence? The US is effectively policing speech on Gaza, not just within its borders but globally. UN officials are being sanctioned with barely a murmur of protest from the international community. In India, criticism of Israel is now tantamount to being seen with the "wrong side". The states of West Asia now extensively regulate criticism of Israel. Australia is considering adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that, as Richard Flanagan noted in *The Age*, would render some of the most morally courageous Jewish voices — Joseph Roth, Tony Judt, Omer Bartov — effectively anti-Semitic.

ogised. Those who speak of atrocity are seen not as conscientious objectors but as the sort of people who feel superior in feeling bad about these things. They use it to make others feel bad. The function of atrocity talk is performing superiority, virtue-signalling, making others uncomfortable. Humanity's moral conscience, in the face of tribal loyalty, is shrinking terrain.

Yet there is still something alarmingly distinctive about Gaza. Is there any precedent for this — where state after state not only denies the horror, but also actively expects silence? The US is effectively policing speech on Gaza, not just within its borders but globally. UN officials are being sanctioned with barely a murmur of protest from the international community. In India, criticism of Israel is now tantamount to being seen with the "wrong side". The states of West Asia now extensively regulate criticism of Israel. Australia is considering adopting a definition of anti-Semitism that, as Richard Flanagan noted in *The Age*, would render some of the most morally courageous Jewish voices — Joseph Roth, Tony Judt, Omer Bartov — effectively anti-Semitic. Much of Europe has already made Israel its "reason of state". While some states are complicit, through sins of omission or commission, in failing to push back against the atrocities in Gaza, it seems that much of the world is becoming complicit in drawing a veil of silence over them.

One of the most important moral lessons of the Holocaust is being forgotten: That "never again" must be a universal ideal. To defend that principle is not to deny the Holocaust's specificity, but to protect its moral legacy. To reduce it to a licence for state violence is a betrayal of its memory. Anti-Semitism is a real and urgent problem. But its political weaponisation now threatens to empty the term of moral content. The most reactionary forces invoke it not to combat hate, but to silence criticism, stifle reflection, and protect impunity.

Most Western democracies are now sacrificing their democracy and civic freedoms — not for the Jewish people, but for the policies of the state of Israel. In West Asia, too, the discussion of Palestine is hemmed in by state repression. Fear of retaliation, of being seen on the "wrong side", chills public discourse. Even social movements seem unable

to articulate a language of universal principle: That no one should be targeted for who they are; that the mass killing of non-combatants is never justifiable. We are trapped in a nihilistic moment, where only one question matters: Which side are you on? Not: What are the limits of power, the principles that must bind all states and actors?

This tribalism is not new; nor is hypocrisy. But rarely in recent memory has there been such a drastic foreclosure of moral reflection. It is as if we now believe that vindication will not come from being humane, but from letting power operate unrestrained, whatever form that power takes.

The horror in Gaza is so palpable that explanation or contextualisation often feels obscene. These are now tools of evasion, not illumination. The evasions and silences are linked to the broader civic failures of democracy. In a powerful essay in *Harper's Magazine*, Speaking Reassurance to Power, Pankaj Mishra connects the silence over Gaza to the collapse of civic courage in democracies. He writes that "for all its claims to superior virtue, the American intelligentsia manifests very little of the courage and dignity it has expected from artists and thinkers in less fortunate societies".

Mishra sees this failure as rooted in complicity: The American intelligentsia, too close to the machinery of imperial power and too dependent on the largesse it doled out, was often disabled from speaking truth. It was meant to offer reassurance. Or rather the criticism that it permitted was costless. But the disquieting thought he offers is whether the willed silence over Gaza, and the relative lack of resistance to authoritarianism, are linked. They both speak of an easy adjustment to the realities of power. But this is not only America's problem. Across democracies, we are witnessing the ease with which civic discourse renders mass death invisible.

If Gaza's corpses can vanish from our conscience, how much easier it will be to ignore the quiet, shadowy encroachments of our own states, which are increasingly going after whoever they choose. What the silence and inaction over Gaza is saying is: Only brute power rules. As Vonnegut said, "So it goes."

The writer is contributing editor,  
The Indian Express

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SANTOSH K SINGH

ANY VISUAL OF *kanwariyas* brandishing sticks and swords and indulging in violence, as witnessed on several occasions recently, goes against all that religious pilgrimages have traditionally stood for. The holy month of Shravana signifies the arrival of the monsoon season. Rains placate the parched land and *kanwariyas* start their journey. The pilgrims collect water from the Ganga and carry it in a palanquin to offer it to Lord Shiva. It is believed that the water helps reduce the bitterness of the poison that Lord Shiva has carried with him since *samudra manthan*.

Mircea Eliade, Romanian scholar of history of religion, considers a pilgrimage to be an act or journey towards transformation, a quest for a higher order of the sacred, away from the everyday world of the profane. Humans have a tendency to come close to what he calls *Axis mundi*, or the centre of the world — a point where heaven and Earth connect. Eliade considers these experiences to be hierophanies or the appearance of the sacred in the everyday world, which are universal across societies and cultures. Pilgrimages are moments of hierophanies.

The *kanwariya* pilgrimage has a rich, profound and ancient past. Baidyanath Dham or Baba Dham, now in Jharkhand, is renowned for its great *kanwariya* tradition. In Shravana, pilgrims rush to Sultanganj in Bihar, where they take a bath in the Ganga, take water from the sacred river in pitchers and start walking

IN GOOD FAITH

Two distinct childhood memories, in particular, remain indelible. Once, an elderly aunt, in her 60s, returned from the Kanwar Yatra. She looked weak. Her feet were swollen and bruised because of the continuous walking. The whole family and the neighbourhood came to tend to her feet and seek her blessings. It was believed that the blessings she had earned in the pilgrimage would pass on to those who served her.

barefoot to Baidyanath Dham. They are popularly known as *bam* and address each other as such. A popular chant during the journey happens to be "*Bol bam, bol bam; Bol re bhaiya bol re didi bol bam*" (Chant O brother, chant O sister, chant O bam). Typically attired in saffron clothes and carrying decorated palanquins of all sizes and colours, these *bams* walk day and night, navigating difficult terrains. The entire journey brims with camaraderie. More distinguished among the *bams* are those who walk non-stop and are known as *daak-bam*. People will make way for them, treating them with utmost reverence. All the ordinary barriers — of caste and class — will evaporate amid this bonhomie of faith. All one can hear are stories of support, gestures of sacrifice and help, like in the case of a stranger who carried an elderly *bam* on his back for several kilometres. People return home having experienced not just divinity and *communitas* but also lessons in fellow feeling and togetherness.

Two distinct childhood memories, in particular, remain indelible. Once, an elderly aunt, in her 60s, returned from the Kanwar Yatra. She looked weak. Her feet were swollen and bruised because of the continuous walking. The whole family and the neighbourhood came to tend to her feet and seek her blessings. It was believed that the blessings she had earned in the pilgrimage would pass on to those who served her. The gains of pilgrim-

age were transmissible to the deserving and eligible. One learnt profound lessons in humanity in these moments: Any attempt to achieve higher goals must necessarily celebrate the pain and suffering of the process.

The onset of rains and the beginning of Shravana also brings back the memory of the dance of the saintly fellow who would come visiting every household in the village, seeking alms to undertake the *kanwariya* pilgrimage to Baidyanath Dham. His devotional songs were melancholic and left a deep impression. That he came from the outskirts of the village made no difference whatsoever. People watched him perform with awe and reverence. Two lines that he repeated often — "*Baba ho virage Odisha desh me. Bolu bhaia Ram-e-Ram*" (Lord Mahadev who belongs to Odisha desh, let's all chant the name of Ram) — continues to resonate, reminding us of a time when Odisha and Bihar were part of the Bengal Presidency. In that world, religion organised societies and people used to communicate through its symbolic meaning. Today, are we even listening to our gods and what they signify in essence? Religion without its core of compassion loses its profundity, and thus, its soul.

The writer teaches Sociology at Dr BR Ambedkar University, Delhi. His latest book is The Deras: Culture, Diversity and Politics. Views are personal

JULY 24, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

RAJIV-LONGOWAL MEET

PRIME MINISTER RAJIV Gandhi and the Akali Dal chief, Harchand Singh Longowal, met for over half an hour in an effort to solve the Punjab problem. It was followed by another meeting between two aides of Longowal and the members of the political affairs committee of the cabinet. According to informed sources, the trend was hopeful.

OPTIMISM IN PUNJAB

THERE WAS GENERAL optimism in Punjab over the talks between the Centre and the Akali Dal leaders in New Delhi with various political par-

ties including the Congress-I, the BJP and the CPI(M) welcoming the fresh initiative. The only notes of dissent came from the merged Akali Dal of Joginder Singh and the All-India Sikh Students Federation (AISSF).

MORE DIE IN GUJARAT

AT LEAST SIX persons were killed, three in bomb blasts and three in stabbings, in different incidents in Ahmedabad city, taking the toll in violence to 45 since the withdrawal of the Army. The police fired a dozen rounds in the Kach-ni-Masjid locality in the Jamalpur area to disperse a mob pelting police pickets with stones. In another incident in the Jamalpur area, an SRP

jawan fired one round in the air to scare away two pedestrians who were attacking an autorickshaw driver. Two people were arrested in connection with the incident.

RENT CONTROL

THE DELHI METROPOLITAN Council passed some amendments watering down the legislative proposals to change the Delhi Rent Control Act, 1958. While Opposition members described the proposals as grossly antitenant, ruling party members expressed this feeling through amendments aimed at toning down some of the proposals heavily favouring landlords.





The missing voters

Bihar SIR, data indicates, is not an exercise in revision but large-scale deletion. If carried out across the country, it will lead to mass disenfranchisement



DESHKAAL  
BY RAHUL SHASTRI AND  
YOGENDRA YADAV

THE CONCLUSION OF the first phase of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) in Bihar has already offered evidence of mass underenfranchisement of up to 94 lakh eligible adults. The publication of the draft electoral rolls (DER) on August 1 will break many records — all dubious. Compared to all other states, Bihar is set to be a complete outlier, a state with the highest proportion of “missing voters”. This will be the largest one-time deletion of voters at any point in the history of Indian elections. This may well be the largest exercise in disenfranchisement of voters anywhere in the world in the 21st century. And this is just the beginning. Further deletions will follow in the second phase of scrutiny of the enumeration forms, especially those the BLO has marked “non recommended”. We are assured that the same process will be followed in the rest of the country.

The numbers are already alarming. As per the Election Commission of India’s (ECI) press release of July 27, a total of 7.24 crore enumeration forms have been collected. Only these names will be listed in the DER, as compared to 7.89 crore names that existed on the state’s voters’ list on June 24, the day SIR was ordered. The ECI claims that the remaining persons are dead (22 lakh), or have permanently shifted or are untraceable (36 lakh) or were enrolled at multiple places (7 lakh) or were “not willing to register as an elector for some reason or the other” (no numbers given). As per the SIR order, these 65 lakh names will not figure on the DER. Even if there are no further deletions, Bihar’s electorate in 2025 will be smaller than the 7.36 crore electors in the 2020 assembly elections.

The ECI’s counterargument would be that the earlier voter list was severely inflated. All that the ECI has done is prune the list of dead, duplicate and dubious names. Preparing a smaller but more authentic list cannot be an exercise in disenfranchisement. This argument merits a reasoned response based on statistics. For this, we need to focus beyond the figure of 65 lakh and its breakdown offered by the ECI.

Globally, the quality of electoral rolls is judged on three counts — accuracy, completeness and equity. Accuracy is about eliminating false or erroneous entries on the voters’ list. Completeness is about not leaving anyone behind and ensuring that every person who is entitled figures on the voters’ list. Equity is about a fair representation of all social groups in proportion to their share of the eligible population. At this stage, in the absence of a list of names, we are in no position to assess the accuracy and equity of the DER in Bihar. But based on the numbers, we can provisionally evaluate its completeness.

For that, we need to follow a “missing voters’” approach, drawing upon Amartya Sen’s famous argument about “missing women”. He captured this phenomenon by defining it as the shortfall of the actual number of women in a country or region compared to the expected number of women as measured

TABLE 1

ELECTORS TO ADULT POPULATION RATIO IN INDIA, 2024

State	Adult Population	Electors	Electors/Adult Popn Ratio
Andhra Pradesh	4.07 Cr	4.13 Cr	102%
Assam	2.5 Cr	2.45 Cr	98%
BIHAR	7.93 Cr	7.71 Cr	97%
Chhattisgarh	2.08 Cr	2.07 Cr	100%
Gujarat	5.16 Cr	4.8 Cr	93%
Haryana	2.18 Cr	2.01 Cr	92%
Jharkhand	2.67 Cr	2.58 Cr	97%
Karnataka	5.07 Cr	5.47 Cr	108%
Kerala	2.73 Cr	2.77 Cr	101%
Madhya Pradesh	5.81 Cr	5.66 Cr	97%
Maharashtra	9.56 Cr	9.29 Cr	97%
Odisha	3.23 Cr	3.37 Cr	104%
Punjab	2.36 Cr	2.15 Cr	91%
Rajasthan	5.46 Cr	5.34 Cr	98%
Tamil Nadu	5.93 Cr	6.23 Cr	105%
Telangana	2.88 Cr	3.32 Cr	116%
Uttar Pradesh	15.63 Cr	15.41 Cr	99%
West Bengal	7.54 Cr	7.6 Cr	101%
INDIA	98.87 Cr	97.8 Cr	99%

by the natural sex ratio. Similarly, we calculate “missing voters” as the shortfall between the expected number of persons in the voting age population and the actual number in the voters’ list. The Census-based projections (state-wise, year-wise, age-group-wise) in the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections (2019), by the National Commission on Population, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, are the best source for population. These figures are used by the Government of India and by the ECI itself as recently as January 2025.

Table 1 presents the figures for adult population and the number of electors for the country and major states in 2024. The shortfall is indicated by the “Electors to Adult Population Ratio” (EP Ratio, calculated by dividing the total number of electors by the total population of the voting age group. A score of 100 per cent indicates the ideal scenario of a perfect match. It shows that in 2024, the all-India EP Ratio was a healthy 99 per cent, suggesting a shortfall of just 1 per cent. At 97 per cent, Bihar was just below the national average. Its voters’ list was not inflated but slightly deflated. Note that the denominator of the EP Ratio, the official projection of the adult population, is not subject to any inflation on account of inclusion of the dead or migrants, as the Census counts people wherever they happen to be on a given day.

Table 2 presents the same data for the state of Bihar from 2019 onwards. It shows that Bihar has hovered around the national average, with a slight decline from 102 per cent in 2019 to 97 per cent in 2024. The special summary revision completed in January 2025 and subsequent changes till June 24 added many names to the voters’ list, but since the population had also grown, the EP Ratio remained the same.

The last row in Table 2 shows the drastic and adverse impact of the SIR. In July 2025, the adult population of Bihar was projected at 8.18 crore. So that is the number we should expect on the voters’ list, against the actual number of 7.24 crore. The shortfall of 94 lakh

TABLE 2

LIKELY IMPACT OF SIR ON ELECTORS TO ADULT POPULATION RATIO IN BIHAR

Juncture	Adult Population	Electors	Electors/Adult Popn. Ratio
2019 Lok Sabha Election	6.97 Cr	7.11 Cr	102%
2020 Vidhan Sabha Election	7.27 Cr	7.36 Cr	101%
2023 Special Summary Revision (SSR)	7.68 Cr	7.58 Cr	99%
2024 Lok Sabha Election	7.93 Cr	7.71 Cr	97%
2025 January Special Summary Revision	8.07 Cr	7.8 Cr	97%
24 June 2025 before Announcement of Special Intensive Revision (SIR)	8.16 Cr	7.9 Cr	97%
25 July 2025 Closing of Enrolment of SIR	8.18 Cr	7.23 Cr	88%

Note: All Population Projections calculated from the Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections (2019), by the National Commission on Population, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Data on electors from ECI website.

would be the number of “missing voters” in Bihar on August 1, 2025. Even if we allow for Bihar’s prevailing EP Ratio, it should still have been around 7.93 crore. This suggests a dramatic and unprecedented fall from 97 per cent to just 88 per cent, a sudden drop of 9 percentage points in the EP Ratio. A comprehensive and *de novo* writing of the voters’ list such as the SIR should have led to a net addition of about 25 lakh voters. Instead, the SIR has taken a deep dive in the opposite direction by bringing the figure down further by 69 lakh.

We do not know if the SIR will lead to an improvement in the accuracy of the voters’ list, but we do know that it has worsened the completeness and in all likelihood the equity of the voters’ list. If the SIR leads to a Bihar-like drop in the EP Ratio in the entire country, we are looking at the potential disenfranchisement of about nine crore Indians.

As of now, we do not know where these “missing voters” are. Many of these could well be part of the 65 lakh names that are presumed by the ECI to be dead or away or untraceable. But our field experience confirms that a significant proportion of these “missing voters” are adult persons who live in Bihar and have not been included in the previous and current voters’ lists for one reason or another. Even if most of the deletions made by the ECI are genuine, the SIR failed to reach these adult residents who are eligible to vote. Oddly, for such a grand exercise of revision, the ECI has not reported a single case of addition. Clearly, the SIR was not an exercise in revision, but solely an exercise in deletion.

Needless to say, this evidence flies in the face of the Supreme Court’s call for “mass inclusion, not mass exclusion”. We wait to see how the court responds to the mounting evidence of under- and disenfranchisement due to the SIR.

Shastri and Yadav work with the national team of Bharat Jodo Abhiyaan. Yadav has filed a petition in the Supreme Court challenging the SIR

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

“In the past month, a wall of secrecy [in Israel] has cracked. The public has begun to learn of the severe psychological effects of the war in Gaza.” — HAARETZ, ISRAEL

Needed: New drivers of growth

Limits of trade as a pathway to prosperity are evident. To become a developed country by 2047 India needs new economic ideas



ISHAN BAKSHI

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS INIMICAL to India’s economic interests, such as China’s curbs on the export of rare earths and fertilisers, and the reported withdrawal of engineers and technicians working on Foxconn’s iPhone plants, raise the question: How should India respond? Any immediate response will more likely be geared towards ensuring that supply chain disruptions are minimal. Beyond that, however, there is a larger question: Will shifts in the global order, changes to the trading architecture and the weaponisation of trade, the growing economic imbalance between India and China and Delhi’s economic and strategic realities, be the trigger for much-needed and far-reaching changes in the policy architecture? Will they spawn a new development compact, one that places growth and development front and centre?

Looking back, growth has not always been the top priority. Post Independence, the overriding objective was to ensure the stability of the Union. Partition and the integration of princely states created the grounds for veering towards a strong Centre that prioritised stability. The centralising impulses of the Constitution also flow from this intent. To ensure that this compact held, deals were struck with various pressure groups over the decades. A strong Centre also complemented the overly centralised planning model adopted by governments in matters of economic policy. Sluggish growth over the years did not prompt a re-think of either approach or priorities. While some pro-business policy changes were introduced in the 1980s, increasing economic efficiency was not the predominant objective. As Dani Rodrik and Arvind Subramanian have argued, these changes were less about the economy and more about “garnering political support from existing business groups”.

This framework, however, did not deliver prosperity. Growth was anaemic and poverty was widespread. The crisis in 1991 created the space for a new compact where growth became the overriding objective. Economist Stefan Dercon has argued that the policy shift in the 1990s was a decisive step towards a development bargain. Dercon views development bargain as a commitment by those who wield power — the country’s political and economic elite — “to shape politics, the economy and society to strive for growth and development”.

This bargain — formulated at a time when the political system was transitioning away from a period of one-party dominance to an era of coalitions where power was less concentrated at the Centre — had buy-in from parties across the political spectrum. With a broad consensus on the nature of policies to be pursued, subsequent governments stayed the course. The NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee doubled down on the reforms push, and the UPA under Manmohan Singh trod along the path while adding a slew of welfare programmes to ensure the stability of this compact.

This period coincided with the high noon of globalisation — a time when the rising tide of global trade lifted all boats. The pace of

poverty decline accelerated and new pathways to upward mobility emerged. Investment activities gathered steam, exports surged, capital inflows soared and millions moved out of agriculture. While growth did slow down sharply during the UPA’s second term, in large part due to policy mistakes, steps were taken during its final years to arrest the decline.

In the run-up to the 2014 election, the overriding concern was to shore up the economic momentum. The BJP’s rise to power was largely on the back of a promise to provide good governance and ensure high growth and development. The shift from a coalition era to one where a single party commanded a full majority was also taken as a sign that the pulls and pressures from allies would no longer be a hindrance in fulfilling the compact, which could now be pursued aggressively. The first few years of the new government did see several steps being taken towards this end. There was also a continuity in ideas — ideas that were birthed in earlier governments such as inflation targeting and GST found resonance.

Somewhere along the way, however, the growth imperative weakened. The pandemic made matters worse. And as inequality rose and pathways for upward mobility shrivelled, the compact frayed and the political class pivoted towards populism. Cash transfers, tax giveaways and other populist schemes became the norm across political parties and governments as short-term electoral considerations took precedence over longer-term economic benefits. Few fresh ideas were articulated to reinforce the compact. Perhaps the Production Linked Incentive Scheme and the unstated strategy of promoting a handful of private firms as national champions can be considered new ideas. Even then, the limits of both were apparent.

This weakening of the consensus around the compact comes at a time of significant changes in the global order. In the Trumpian era, trade, a pathway for many nations — from Bangladesh to Vietnam — to climb the ladder of prosperity has become a casualty. At this time, when the tailwinds of “hyper” globalisation are no longer available, a strategy to rely just on trade deals with the developed world, but not seek deeper integration with countries at the heart of global supply chains, will limit the gains that are being envisaged. Alongside, the rapid adoption of AI will impact large swathes of IT jobs. Considering that the IT sector has provided millions with pathways to upward mobility — the great Indian middle class grew on the back of this sector — new drivers of growth are needed.

This new reality is at odds with hopes that the country will become a developed nation by 2047. That goal, in any case, is a tall order, if the economic history of the world is anything to go by. Only a handful of countries have managed to ascend to the high-income category. And even if India manages to sustain its growth over the coming two decades — per capita income has grown at 5.7 per cent in dollar terms over the past 10 years — then average incomes would be just shy of \$10,000 in 2047. The question is whether this or higher growth can be achieved.

Growth does not miraculously endure. It isn’t easy to sustain the momentum over such long periods without a development bargain and without an elite compact. Unless that happens, the goal of becoming a developed country will remain elusive.

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MRIDULA MANGLAM

The politics of care

Building empathy on campus must begin by listening to the dissenting student

HAVE INDIA’S EDUCATIONAL institutions always been sites of silent, systemic violence? Spaces meant for learning, for nurturing questions, and for producing knowledge are turning into graveyards of unrealised dreams. From student suicides to institutional apathy, from unaddressed harassment to symbolic initiatives like “Campus Mothers”, the violence remains constant, structural, and often deadly. The recent suicide of a student in Odisha who set herself on fire after being denied justice for sexual harassment, the tragic case of Darshan Solanki at IIT Bombay, and the long, painful list that includes names like Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadi, are not disconnected events. These are not isolated tragedies, but a reflection of systemic violence. They show how institutional spaces can push students to the brink, and then respond with symbolic gestures instead of accountability. Academic spaces continue to be shaped by patterns of violence that define the everyday lives of students. There are countless students whose names will never be known. Those who live and study within institutions that shame, isolate, and silence them. Those who endure relentless academic pressure, wait months for fellowships to be released, face discriminatory behaviour from faculty, or are punished for simply demanding dignity. Women students who are moral-policed, students from marginalised communities who are made to feel they do not belong and stu-

dents struggling with mental health who are offered no support. They are made to carry these burdens quietly, as though suffering is an expected part of their education.

In this context, the editorial ‘Mum’s not the word’, (IE, June 14), argues that though the intention behind the initiative may be good, its gendered framing is problematic. However, it stops short of questioning the logic of such initiatives. The issue is not only about who is being assigned the task of care but also about what this task is meant to replace. The editorial narrows its critique to the gendered framing of the “Campus Mothers” initiative — it fails to confront a deeper concern that such gestures of care are being used to substitute structural accountability with symbolic empathy.

This initiative at IIT Kharagpur must be seen for what it is: A displacement of responsibility. The institution, in assigning women such as faculty or non-teaching staff as emotional points of contact, has not created support structures. It has rebranded care as an individual act, rather than a systemic responsibility. The burden of care is both feminised and depoliticised. It is taken away from structures with the power to change condi-

tions. It is reinforcing a gendered logic in which women are made responsible for tending to emotional wounds, regardless of where those wounds come from. Their academic expertise, institutional authority, and professional roles are sidelined to make room for a more palatable identity: The ever-giving, ever-listening, ever-available mother.

To imagine care differently, we need to turn to political frameworks that have treated it as a collective right, not a personal burden. Feminist thinkers like Kristen Goshree have shown how collectivised care systems, especially under socialist frameworks, allowed women greater freedom, dignity, and autonomy. Care cannot be a temporary plaster over structural wounds. Students need care. They need to be seen and heard. But modelling it into motherhood turns care into something private, emotional, and feminine, rather than collective, political, and structural. It is a redistribution of institutional neglect. The editorial recognises this. It notes that “a more inclusive and thoughtful model that invites faculty, staff and residents of all genders to serve as trained campus mentors would reflect the span of empathy, equality,

and shared responsibility”. But a truly empathetic care system hinges on listening to the student. The editorial overlooks this imperative. Student movements have already imagined what collective care can look like. Through peer support networks, anti-caste collectives, and demands for institutional changes like functioning grievance bodies, these students have built spaces of care grounded in solidarity. Student organisations and collectives are often the only ones demanding structural change. Yet, in several institutions, they are the first to be surveilled, vilified, and punished. This is part of a broader refusal to engage with dissent, to treat students as stakeholders, or to acknowledge the violence embedded in campus hierarchies.

Care, if it is to be meaningful, cannot come from silencing those who resist. It must come from listening to them, learning from them and building with them. To truly reimagine care, institutions must first learn to listen. It is students who have already begun to show what solidarity, support, and resistance can look like. Institutions must follow their lead. It is through their vision that campuses can imagine something better — structures of care rooted not in symbolism, but in justice and shared responsibility.

The writer is a research scholar at the Department of Political Science, AKDC, affiliated to the University of Allahabad

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

SKILL GAP

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Cracks in IT’ (IE, July 30). Indian IT jobs are under threat and AI is the prime suspect, with US President Donald Trump’s protectionist regime an incidental accomplice. But the real culprit is the relentless demand for higher skills. What manufacturing faced in earlier decades — automation, process optimisation and the race to move up the value chain — is coming for IT. For years, writing basic code was a passport to prosperity. Now, AI writes it faster, cheaper and often better. The demand has shifted from coders to problem-solvers. Those who upskill will lead. R Narayanan, Navi Mumbai

LATE RESPONSE

THIS REFERS TO the report ‘No world leader asked India to stop Op (Sindoor)’ (IE, July 30). The statement is much-delayed response to President Donald Trump’s assertion that he forced the two countries to agree to a ceasefire. PM Narendra Modi’s silence on Trump’s claim has given the Opposition ammunition and dealt a blow to his image. Kamal Laddha, Bengaluru

WEST’S RESILIENCE

THIS REFERS TO the article, ‘West vs Rest, a fiction’ (IE, July 30). C Raja Mohan rightly deconstructs the myth of Western decline. The West’s liberal ideals of individual rights, open science, and secularism remain aspirational globally. The West’s internal churn may suggest decline, but its resilience lies in self-correction. Meanwhile, China’s model, despite growth, still struggles with dissent and democratic legitimacy. The real global contest isn’t military but moral, between openness and authoritarianism. The West, imperfect yet reformatory, still leads that moral arc. Zainab Irshad, Patna

GOLDEN AGE

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, ‘Board of her own’ (IE, July 30). By toppling her illustrious compatriot Koneru Humpy, Divya Deshmukh won the FIDE Women’s World Cup. Her sharp openings, tactical surprises and fearless play left a trail of elite players in her wake. She became a grandmaster at the age of 19. Indian chess is clearly in its golden age. SS Paul, Nadia





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If there are questions of current or contemporary relevance that you would like explained, please write to [explained@indianexpress.com](mailto:explained@indianexpress.com)

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

## WHY AIRDROPS IN GAZA ARE SEEN AS A RISKY LAST RESORT

THREE COUNTRIES have begun dropping boxes of aid by parachute into the Gaza Strip after Israel announced it would allow airdrops, and more are expected to follow.

Britain's Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, said on Tuesday that "UK aid has been air-dropped into Gaza today". The United Arab Emirates and Jordan started parachuting parcels into Gaza on July 27 in co-ordination with Israel.

The development has come at a time when Israel has been accused of limiting the number of trucks delivering aid to Gaza by road.

Aid agencies working in Gaza, however, say parachuting crates of aid is a risky and inefficient alternative to tackle the widening hunger crisis there.

### How airdrops work

Typically, airdrops are done by military planes carrying bundles of supplies and food. The supplies are loaded on pallets or flat platforms, and wrapped in netting to stay in place. Those pallets are attached to parachutes and pushed from the backs of aircraft to reach delivery sites.

Aid pallets can weigh 1,200 pounds when packed with food and more than 2,000 pounds when packed with water, according to an estimate by The Washington Institute, a foreign policy think tank.

Several countries, in coordination with the Israeli air force, dropped aid in Gaza last year, but stopped after some falling parcels killed and wounded people, and damaged property, and others landed in the sea or Israel.

But getting aid on the ground in Gaza has become far more dangerous. Responding to unrest at some aid sites, Israeli soldiers have repeatedly fired at crowds in the past two months, killing



Humanitarian aid supplies over northern Gaza in March, 2024. NYT

hundreds of people.

"When you're airdropping food, there's supposed to be a lot of preparation, planning and communication," said Jeremy Konyndyk, the president of Refugees International. But in conflict zones like Gaza, it can be difficult to coordinate with those on the receiving end to ensure operations go smoothly, Konyndyk added.

### Limitations of airdrops

Airdrops are expensive and inefficient compared to delivering aid by trucks. While the average plane can fit about two truckloads worth of aid, Konyndyk said, there is a much greater supply of available trucks and people to drive them.

Aid planes require specialised cargo and experienced crews, while any commercial truck driver can deliver aid by land.

While costs vary, Konyndyk estimated that airdropped aid was roughly about 11 times as expensive per commodity as aid delivered by truck.

Also, fragile goods, like certain medicines and water, are difficult to airdrop because they can be destroyed by the impact of landing.

THE NYT

AMITABH SINHA & ALIND CHAUHAN  
NEW DELHI, JULY 30

AN 8.8 MAGNITUDE earthquake, one of the strongest on record, struck the Kamchatka Peninsula, in Russia's far-east, about 6,500 km east of Moscow, on Wednesday morning, triggering a tsunami that struck several countries on both sides of the northern Pacific Ocean.

The tsunami generated waves as high as 3-4 metres in the Kamchatka Peninsula and some other places, about five feet in Hawaii, and about two feet in Japan. Flooding and damage were reported from several places, but no lives were lost.

The earthquake in Kamchatka was the strongest since the 9.1 magnitude quake that had struck Japan in 2011. That quake too had caused a major tsunami which then led to the nuclear disaster at Fukushima.

### Rare but not unusual

Wednesday's event was rare — only five earthquakes of magnitude 8.5 and above have occurred in the past 20 years — but it occurred in a region that is one of the most earthquake prone in the world.

Kamchatka Peninsula lies on the Circum-Pacific seismic belt, more popularly known as the "Ring of Fire", that witnesses the maximum number of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions on Earth.

This seismically active belt encircles almost the entire Pacific Ocean — on its eastern side is the western coast of the Americas, and on its western side lies the Far East and Oceania. It touches countries like the United States, Mexico, Chile, Peru, New Zealand, Australia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Japan and Russia.

According to the United States Geological Survey (USGS), the Ring of Fire accounts for more than 80% of the planet's largest earthquakes. The biggest recorded earthquake, of magnitude 9.5 in Chile in 1960, occurred in this belt, and so did a magnitude 9.2 event in Alaska in 1964. In fact, each of the 23 events of 8-plus magnitude recorded in the last 20 years have happened along this seismic belt.

The nearly 2,000-km long region extending from Kamchatka Peninsula in the north to northern Japan in the south, and includ-

AMAAL SHEIKH  
NEW DELHI, JULY 30

EARLIER THIS month, a special POCSO court in Mumbai granted bail to a 40-year-old female teacher accused of sexually assaulting a teenage boy, noting the consensual nature of their relationship.

The order comes amid ongoing debates about bail jurisprudence under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, a stringent legal provision which specifically deals with sexual offences against minors (those under the age of 18).

Note that the law departs from the standard criminal law principle of "presumption of innocence" — instead of the prosecution having to prove the guilt of an accused, as is the norm, the accused bears the burden of proving his innocence. Over the years, getting bail in POCSO cases, especially in early stages of an investigation, has been challenging.



Pittsburgh Steeler centre 'Iron Mike' Webster. X/@steelers

Osnato and Vincent Giliberti published a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* that stated that a concus-

## TEN STRONGEST EARTHQUAKES IN THE LAST 20 YEARS

DATE	MAGNITUDE	LOCATION*
March 11, 2011	9.1	Tohoku region, Japan
July 30, 2025	8.8	Kamchatka Peninsula, Russia
February 27, 2010	8.8	Maule, Chile
April 11, 2012	8.6	Northern Sumatra, Indonesia
September 12, 2007	8.4	Bengkulu, Indonesia
September 17, 2015	8.3	Illapel, Chile
May 24, 2013	8.3	Okhotsk Sea
November 15, 2006	8.3	Kuril Islands
July 29, 2021	8.2	Alaska Peninsula
August 19, 2018	8.2	Levuka, Fiji

\*The epicentre of the quakes was near these locations

Source: USGS



ing the volcanically-active Kuril Islands of Russia, has witnessed more than 130 earthquake events of 7-plus magnitude since 1900, USGS data show. In 1952, this region even recorded a magnitude 9 earthquake.

### Process of subduction

The Circum-Pacific seismic belt is home to multiple subduction processes, in which the Pacific tectonic plate is clashing against continental land.

Subduction is a geological process in which one tectonic plate — put simply, a large section of the Earth's crust — presses against another. Usually, the heavier or denser plate, that is, the one with more mass per unit of area, tends to go below the lighter plate. But this process results in deformities and creates a huge stress at the plate boundaries. It is this stress that is released in the form of earthquakes.

The Himalayas were created due to subduction, as a result of the Indian plate pushing against the Eurasian plate. This is also the reason why the Himalayan region is one of the most earthquake-prone in the world.

Vineet Gehlot, director of the Dehradun-based Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology, says that the region is one of the very few areas where subduction is being observed over land. "A majority of the subduction zones are under the sea," he told *The Indian Express*.

"The Pacific Ocean, particularly the so-called Ring of Fire region, is witnessing several such processes. The Pacific plate is denser, and is subducting under the continental plate at several places on both sides... There is no other place on Earth where so many subduction processes are happening. And this is why the region produces so many earthquakes," Gehlot said.

### Other active regions

The Circum-Pacific seismic belt is one of the three large earthquake zones of the Earth. The Alpine belt — spanning from Indonesia through the Himalayas and further to Afghanistan, Iran, and Turkey — which runs mostly over the land, is the second-most earthquake-prone zone in the world.

But unlike the Ring of Fire, which accounts for around 80% of all big earthquakes, the Alpine belt contributes only 15-17%, according to USGS. However, this belt traverses some of the most heavily populated areas on the planet, which makes earthquakes in the region extremely deadly. In general, while the strongest earthquakes often take place under the ocean, the ones on land, even if they are weaker, are often more deadly due to their proximity to population centres.

The Kamchatka quake stuck off the coast of the peninsula, which is sparsely populated. Official statistics from 2023 put the

population density in the Kamchatka Krai of the Russian federation to be roughly 0.62 persons per sq km, which is why the quake did not result in any casualties, even though the much weaker 7.6 magnitude earthquake in Nepal in 2015 killed more than 15,000 people.

The third most prominent seismic belt is what is known as the mid-Atlantic ridge, which runs north-south through the middle of the entire Atlantic Ocean, from the Arctic to the Antarctic region. This subduction zone is in the middle of the ocean, deep underwater, and far away from land. This zone produces relatively moderate earthquakes, and their impact is minimal considering their distance from land.

The strength of an earthquake is, in part, dependent on the length of the faultline, that is, the extent of the plate boundaries that clash against each other. A larger faultline is more likely to produce a stronger earthquake. A 9.5 magnitude earthquake, the largest that has been recorded, is essentially the limit to how strong an earthquake can be. To produce anything stronger, say an event of magnitude 10 or more, a faultline extending to almost the entire Earth would be required. No current faultline is capable of producing a quake that strong.

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# Judicial discretion & bail in POCSO cases

### Bail in POCSO cases

POCSO offences are cognizable and non-bailable: arrests can be made without a warrant, and bail is not automatic. But the law does not contain specific statutory guidelines on bail.

Under Section 483 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 (Section 439 of the erstwhile Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973), factors under consideration for bail include the nature and gravity of the offence, severity of the punishment, risk of flight, and likelihood of tampering with evidence or influencing witnesses. Over the years, courts have carved additional thresholds for bail in POCSO cases.

The Delhi High Court in *Dharmander Singh* (2020) identified the age of the victim, the age of the accused and the age gap, the relationship between the two parties, elements of coercion, conduct of the accused post-offence, etc. as factors to be considered

in POCSO cases. But the court clarified that this list is not exhaustive, and serves as a "non-binding guide".

The Supreme Court in *Deshraj @ Musa vs State of Rajasthan & Anr* (2024) granted bail to an 18-year-old boy who had been in jail for five months in a POCSO case involving a 16-year-old girl. The relationship appeared to be consensual. Since the trial would take time, and given the the age gap and the time already spent in custody, the court granted bail to the accused.

These decisions reaffirm that bail under POCSO remains a matter of judicial discretion where courts weigh constitutional liberties against the risk to the victim.

### Consent under POCSO

POSO does not recognise consent below the age of 18. Any sexual act with a teen, even if voluntary, is treated as an offence. This creates a legal grey zone in cases where teenagers enter into consensual relation-

ships that later attract criminal charges.

In recent years, courts have begun considering these nuances while granting bail. Bail may be considered favourably if the relationship appears to be consensual, and especially where the victim has recorded a statement before the magistrate to that effect.

Nonetheless, securing bail is often difficult in the early stages of POCSO cases. Courts tend to wait until the victim has recorded her statement and the prosecution has collected key evidence, even if it means prolonged pre-trial custody for the accused.

In an ongoing case, Senior Advocate Indira Jaising has requested the SC to bring down the age of consent from 18 to 16. The criminalisation of adolescent relationships, she argued, is a direct infringement of fundamental rights of the person. The Centre's response stated that "such changes, even in the name of reform or adolescent autonomy, would undermine the legal protections designed to safeguard minors and potentially increase the risk of child abuse".

EXPLAINED  
LAW

EXPLAINED  
SCIENCE

# CTE, 'brain commotion' caused by sports injuries that NYC shooter had

ARJUN SENGUPTA  
NEW DELHI, JULY 30

IN A note that police found in his wallet, the gunman who killed four people in New York on Monday claimed he had chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) — a result of playing [American] football in high school.

CTE is a degenerative brain disease linked to repeated brain trauma. It can lead to debilitating symptoms such as depression, memory loss, aggression, impaired judgment, erratic behaviour, suicidal tendencies, anxiety, and dizziness.

The disease is most commonly diagnosed among athletes, especially those in contact sports, and has been referred to in recent years as a "silent epidemic" because it often goes undiagnosed and its causes are underplayed.

### Accumulated trauma

CTE is not caused by a single blow to the head — rather, it is the result of the accumulation of years of concussive and sub-concussive impacts that lead to noticeable and progressively debilitating symptoms over time. (Concussions cause the brain to move rapidly within the skull, potentially stretch-

ing and damaging brain cells.)

The "repeated blows to the head... injure the brain's cells and blood vessels, [creating] areas of microscopic bleeding and abnormal protein deposits called tangles, which kill brain cells", says an article on the website of the Harvard Medical School.

Researchers have estimated that around 17% of people with years of repetitive concussions or sub-concussive incidents will develop CTE, the article says. The disease can only be definitively diagnosed after death, during autopsies.

### 'Punch drunk' in boxing

Greek physician-philosopher Hippocrates (460-377 BCE) described *commotio celebri* — "commotion of the brain" — as a vigorous shake or blow to the head that caused temporary loss of speech, hearing, and sight.

In the 16th century, the Italian physician Jacopo Berengario da Carpi proposed that this 'brain commotion' was caused by the brain getting 'bruised' after hitting the skull.

While da Carpi's understanding of what we now refer to as a concussion was largely accurate, scientists remained unsure until the early 20th century whether such injuries had any long-term impacts.

Then, in 1927, neuropsychiatrists Michael



Pittsburgh Steeler centre 'Iron Mike' Webster. X/@steelers

Osnato and Vincent Giliberti published a paper in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* that stated that a concus-

sion was not a "transient state" — it could lead to "structural cerebral injury", causing significant "secondary degenerative changes".

Harrison Martland, a forensic pathologist and boxing enthusiast, immediately linked these findings to the antics of many popular boxers at the time. "Fans called them 'cuckoo', 'goofy', or 'slug nutty', and people enjoyed screaming at them as they staggered around the ring like intoxicated fools," an article in *The Atlantic* said.

Martland coined the term "punch drunk" to describe this disease that afflicted pugilists. "Punch drunk most often affects fighters of the slugging type...who are usually poor boxers and who take considerable head punishment, seeking only to land a knockout blow," he wrote in his 1928 submission to *JAMA*.

Martland's claims would be clinically proven in 1973, when neuropathologist J A N Corsellis cracked open the skulls of 15 former boxers and studied their brains under a microscope. In his paper, *The Aftermath of Boxing*, published in *Psychological Medicine*, Corsellis provided detailed descriptions of damage to the brain tissue of the deceased boxers, and coined the term "*dementia pugilistica*" to refer to the disease.

### The Webster case

But there was still not much mainstream conversation about CTE. Also, the condition was framed as being explicitly boxing-specific. It was not until the 2000s that the scale of the problem began to be understood.

A pivotal moment in this story was the death — and subsequent diagnosis — of the legendary Pittsburgh Steelers centre Mike Webster in 2002. Webster died after a heart attack, but he had displayed years of erratic behaviour after his retirement from pro football.

"One day he peed in the oven... He would walk up to strangers and rant. 'Kill' em! I'm gonna kill 'em!... His teeth started falling out. He got Super Glue, squirted each fallen tooth, and tried to stick them back in...," *The Atlantic* article said. When pathologist Bennet Omalu examined Webster's brain under a microscope, his findings echoed those of Corsellis some 30 years back.

The Webster case triggered a lot of CTE research, and eventually led to the National Football League (NFL) acknowledging the link between football and the disease. As research expanded beyond traditional combat sports like boxing, researchers found

that even seemingly minor hits had major long-term repercussions.

"When you expose your head to long-force trauma with or without a helmet, with or without symptoms, there is a significant risk of permanent brain damage 40 years later," Omalu told the *BBC* in 2015.

### No silver bullet

Growing awareness of CTE has led to many reforms in sport. NFL rules have been modified to better protect players from head trauma, England's Football Association (FA) has banned youth players from deliberately heading the ball, and cricket has introduced the concept of a "concussion substitute".

Based on our current understanding, however, the risks of CTE can at best be mitigated, not eliminated. Over the past couple of decades, researchers have experimented with all kinds of equipment from helmets to mouthguards to mitigate the risk of CTE among players. Research has looked at woodpeckers, birds that drill into trees without getting concussions.

There is currently no treatment or cure for CTE. Athletes in certain sports remain at high risk. In 2023, Boston University's CTE Center studied 376 former NFL players, and diagnosed as many as 345 with CTE.



## The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

### Ailing panchayats

Compromise on fund allocation unacceptable

THE world's fastest-growing major economy is apparently giving a raw deal to rural local bodies, which are the pillars of grass-roots governance. The Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj has expressed concern over the "steady decline" in the allocation of funds to Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), as reflected in Union Budgets in recent years. The panel has urged the Centre to ensure on priority that village bodies get adequate performance-linked funds so that they can effectively discharge their duties. Failure to do course correction would strike at the root of fiscal decentralisation enshrined in the 73rd Amendment, which granted much-needed constitutional status to PRIs over three decades ago.

Mahatma Gandhi envisaged panchayats as self-governing and self-sustaining institutions capable of managing their affairs "even to the extent of defending themselves against the whole world". This vision is in sync with the Modi government's emphasis on *Aatmanirbharta*, with the Prime Minister describing *Gram Swaraj* (village self-rule) as a step towards achieving the goal of *Viksit Bharat*. Thus, it is vital to loosen the purse strings so that the PRIs' ability to address local development needs is not hampered.

Another matter of concern is the inadequate devolution of funds to PRIs from state coffers. States are duty-bound to set up State Finance Commissions on a regular basis so that the flow of Central grants continues uninterrupted. A robust mechanism is needed to deter state departments from diverting money meant for panchayats. It is important to monitor the utilisation of funds devolved to rural local bodies in order to prevent corruption and promote transparency. Accountability has to take precedence as around two-third of India's population resides in rural areas. Financial and administrative empowerment of panchayats can contribute in a big way to the country's inclusive and sustainable development. Central and state governments must go the extra mile to help villages shed the tag of "poor cousins" of cities and towns.

### Fight against drugs

Himachal needs collective pledge

THE Himachal Pradesh Cabinet's decision to ask all new government employees to furnish an undertaking that they do not consume *'chit-ta'* (heroin) infuses fresh vigour to counter the mounting drug problem. Earlier, dope testing had been made mandatory during police recruitment in the hill state. The measures are an admission of the severity of the crisis, and the need to extend all-out support to the campaign against drug abuse. Neighbouring Punjab is an example of what delayed action can result in. It also provides a template for both successes and failures in the long-drawn battle. First and foremost is to end the discourse of deniability regarding the situation on the ground. A multi-pronged strategy is vital, one that mandates zero tolerance towards those in the business of producing and selling drugs, and shows the way out to addicts.

In Himachal's case, the inter-departmental synergy at the Cabinet briefing lends hope. The challenge is to ensure effective execution and not reduce it to mere optics. Detailed presentations were given on the steps being taken to combat drug abuse by not just the police force, but also by the social justice and empowerment, and health departments. Plans are afoot to have integrated rehabilitation centres at every district headquarters. Awareness campaigns, counselling, follow-up, and capacity building to help individuals recover are being actively pursued. Mahila Mandals, Yuvak Mandals, Panchayati Raj Institutions, civil society organisations and the Education Department are being tasked with educating the public, especially the youth, about the dangers of drug abuse. These are positive signs, but the fight demands 24x7 commitment.

A collective pledge is the only answer. The government strategy must have enough room to allow a critical review of its performance and encourage new solutions.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

## The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, JULY 31, 1925

### Motilal Nehru's statement

THE statement which Pandit Motilal Nehru has made in an interview with the *Associated Press* on the subject of his acceptance of a membership of the Sandhurst Committee is neither superfluous nor unimportant. Whether it was or was not necessary to make this statement in order to meet "the ignorant criticism of Nehru's action by the Simla correspondents of certain Indian-edited journals," it was certainly necessary in order to let the public know what the action of the Pandit meant and what it did not mean. It is perfectly true that the more intelligent section of the public, except where it was interested in misunderstanding or misrepresenting Nehru's action, was under no delusion or misgiving about its meaning, and some of us have the satisfaction of finding, from Nehru's statement, that the interpretation they put upon the action was literally correct. But this can scarcely be said of the man in the street, whose judgment really, often imperceptibly, affects vital national issues, and who, it must be admitted, is apt, in such matters and without proper guidance, to read either too much or too little into the decisions of political parties and their leaders. Nehru's action had been attacked from two points of view, first, that it was inconsistent with the professed policy of the Swaraj party, and secondly that it was inconsistent with Nehru's own action in refusing to be a member of the Muddiman Committee. In both cases, he gave a clear and convincing answer to the critic. He pointed out that the policy of the Swaraj party had always been to adapt itself as far as it could to the changing needs of the situation.

# OPINION

## Two-state solution nears a dead end

Israel not prepared to accept a Palestinian state, whether it comprises just Gaza or all Occupied Territories



TS TIRUMURTI  
FORMER PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE  
OF INDIA TO THE UN

IN 2018, when I was Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs, in charge of the Arab world and Israel, a high-level Israeli official came to meet me in Delhi. Since India and Israel have such excellent bilateral relations, he said, it is time this got reflected in the "Palestinian track" of our relations as well — India and Israel had always differed on this track, with India standing for a separate Palestinian state.

I explained to him that India-Israel relations had grown by leaps and bounds since we had established diplomatic ties in 1991, precisely because we had kept the two "tracks" separate and had agreed to disagree on the Palestine issue. If we were to now combine the two and something adverse were to happen on the Palestinian track, it would surely impact our relations with Israel as well. This zero-sum situation was not desirable for either of us, I added.

This, in a nutshell, is the problem today in India-Israel relations. After India merged the two tracks a few years ago, the Palestinian track began to get diluted. This happened as the bonhomie grew between India and Israel, and positive regional developments took place in the Gulf, such as the Abraham Accords and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Even if India still supported a two-state solution (for both Palestine and Israel), it abstained on some Palestinian-related UN resolutions, where it had traditionally voted with Palestine.

This is, once again, changing. As the world watches the impunity and brutality with which Israel has treated Palestinians, India's pro-Israel tilt is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain.



DISTANT: It will be years before Gaza returns to the pre-October 2023 situation. REUTERS

New Delhi had also perceived the stand of several Gulf and Arab countries on the Gaza war as a vindication of its own pro-Israel tilt. Countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE remained on the sidelines of the Gaza war, since their larger interest was to remove the threat of Iran and its proxies from the region. But once those objectives were achieved — as Iranian nuclear reactors were bombed and powerful Iranian leaders assassinated — the same Gulf and Arab states have now begun to take a more vocal position on Gaza. Realising that we need to be vocal, if not assertive, on Palestine, India called for a ceasefire in Gaza, though we abstained on a similar UNGA resolution less than two months ago.

On July 28, Saudi Arabia and France convened a UN high-level international conference with the goal of recognising Palestinian statehood. Even if all these measures are a case of "too little, too late," considering there is hardly anything left of Gaza after nearly 60,000 people, mostly women and children, have been killed and infrastructure and livelihood destroyed, the meeting looked more like a collective catharsis for the international community, which has stood by silently for over a decade ignoring the Palestinian issue. The world waits with "bated breath" for a handful of European countries to "recognise" a Palestinian state, when most countries have done so decades ago — India being among the first.

I still remember how, when India was in the UN Security Council in 2021-22, UNSC member states would line up every month inside the Council to strike all the right notes on Palestine. They did exactly the opposite outside the Council — like pushing for normalisation of relations with Israel without giving the Palestinian issue even a footnote in those agreements.

Meanwhile, the level of violence in the West Bank is increasing by the day. Illegal Israeli settlements are growing, creating new tensions on the ground. Since October 2023, at least 964 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), by Israeli forces or Israeli settlers. In West Bank cities like Jenin, Tulkarem and Taybeh, military

The goal of the Palestinians has always been a Palestinian state — a nation which belongs to Muslims, Christians and Jews.

operations, air strikes, and Israeli settler attacks have uprooted people from their homes. Christians, too, have been targeted — the old church in Gaza, the Church of Saint Porphyrius, was attacked, killing 18 Palestinians. Even Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in Gaza was attacked. The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem had said that the "greatest existential threat" to Christian community has come from Israeli settlers.

In fact, the big disservice Hamas has done is to redefine the Palestinian cause as one between Muslims and Jews rather than between Palestinians and Israelis. The goal of the Palestinians has always been a Palestinian state — a nation which belongs to Muslims, Christians and Jews. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), before and after Yasser Arafat, encompassed factions from one end of the ideological spectrum to the other. The rise of Hamas had suited Israel, because it helped it to oppose the PLO and President Arafat and discredit them as the genuine voice of the Palestinians.

The fundamental question remains: Is Israel prepared to accept a Palestinian state, whether it comprises just Gaza or all Occupied Territories? The answer is "No" since even the Israeli public does not support it after the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas. Ironically, the Israeli defence minister has proposed a ghetto for Palestinians in Gaza — he calls it a "humanitarian city" — except that he misses the irony of a Jew proposing a ghetto for non-Jews. Meanwhile, PM Netanyahu's far-right coalition leaders have said that the West Bank, which they call by the Biblical name, Judea and Samaria, will be annexed by the end of 2025. And so the Israeli Knesset voted last week, 71-13, in favour of a non-binding resolution to annex "Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley."

And what will come out of the rubble called Gaza? Once again, it is clear that the world will become engrossed with the process rather than substance — a ceasefire, return of hostages, humanitarian aid, disarming Hamas, rebuilding infrastructure and livelihood. All this will receive the highest priority and precedence. Any talk of simultaneously starting negotiations for statehood, for an independent Palestine, will be firmly put on the back-burner. In any case, nothing can be done without the US on board. The US holds the view that any recognition of a Palestinian state will be a vindication of October 7 Hamas attacks.

As for Gaza, it will be years before it returns to the pre-October 2023 situation, when it was still occupied and there was no pathway for a Palestinian state. This may well satisfy the world. After all, it was good enough for the world, less than two years ago. The Israelis are threatening to go back to an era when there were Israeli settlements in Gaza. The International Court of Justice's recent ruling on the borders for a future Palestinian state goes back to an even earlier era i.e. pre-1967 — before Israel, inter alia, occupied Gaza Strip, West Bank, East Jerusalem and Syrian Golan Heights! So, how far in history does the world want to go?

In the meantime, even if Israel has not annexed the West Bank, Israeli settlements would have covered a major part of the West Bank and changed the ground realities irreversibly. In effect, a two-state solution, both Palestine and Israel co-existing side by side, will soon become impossible.

#### THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

You can't continue to victimise someone else just because you yourself were a victim once. — Edward Said

## Beyond the glow of a digital world

SONIKA SETHI

WAITING for my pizza in the mall, I let my gaze wander, as it always does, despite my children's warnings. It is in such places, amid the soft clatter of cutlery and the indifferent glow of neon lights, that my instincts sharpen, catching the smallest of human details.

At the next table, a middle-aged man sat in front of a laptop, his fork moving to his mouth more out of habit than hunger. At another table, a young couple — apparently married — sits side by side in silence. Each wears earpods, their attention fixed on a single phone propped before them, the glow of its screen replacing conversation.

A few feet away, three colleagues share a table but not a moment; two men and a woman, bound by work, yet each lost in a separate digital orbit. Their heads dip low, faces illuminated by their respective screens, thumbs flickering like nervous tics. Around them, the murmur of the mall swells, but human voices remain curiously absent.

Finally, my gaze settles on a cluster of young men — school-mates or college friends, perhaps — radiating a carefree joy rare in such spaces. Their laughter rings out, unburdened, as if the world beyond their table holds no claim on them. Not one hand strays toward a glowing screen; no notifications compete for their attention. Conversation flows between them like a swift, unbroken stream, spilling over with ease and energy. Watching them, I feel a quiet solace — and a flicker of faith in humanity restored.

As twilight spreads across the streets, I step out for a stroll, hoping to free myself from the clutches of gadgets. A curious spectacle unfolds: two-wheeler riders glide past, their smartphones mounted proudly at the centre of their handlebars, cradled in silicon grips like prized trophies. Screens flicker with movies and games, while the riders split their gaze — one eye tracing the road ahead, the other devoured by the glow of a digital world, as reality and distraction race side by side.

I slip into a narrow side lane, grateful to escape the blinding headlights and relentless glare of horns. Tucked within the quiet is an old shop, its shelves lined with hand-painted clay idols of Hindu deities. There are no customers. I cannot say if they ever come or if the idols simply gather dust in patient silence. In the shop's patio, two elderly people sit side by side, unhurried, as though time itself has slowed to match their quiet companionship.

The man sits on a chair, the woman on the shop's low platform, both with spectacles perched on their noses. The dextrous movements of the paintbrushes in their steady hands are unhurried yet precise, layering the idols with strokes of vibrant hues. The bustling world beyond the lane fades, leaving only their shared rhythm and the soft scent of paint.

#### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

##### Political blame game

The parliamentary debate on Operation Sindoor was reduced to a political blame game. Key questions raised by the Opposition were left unanswered. The ruling party should have presented a white paper outlining the goals and outcomes of the operation. Military operations inevitably involve risks and losses; so, honesty and transparency are vital. The initial attempt to conceal the loss of jets, later confirmed by the armed forces, hurt the government's credibility. Parliamentary sessions must focus on truth, accountability and national interest — not party agendas or time-wasting rhetoric.

HARSHARANJIT SINGH, MOHALI

##### Robust intelligence a must

Apropos of 'Mission successful', after the dastardly Pahalgam attack, the security situation was reviewed by the Home Minister in consultation with officers of security forces. Promptly, a hunt for the terrorists started on treacherous terrain. Ultimately, the whereabouts of the perpetrators were ascertained, and a team of the Army, CRPF and the J&K Police conducted Operation Mahadev to neutralise the terrorists after an intense firefight. Now, it may be ensured that necessary measures, including a robust intelligence mechanism, are put in place to thwart any nefarious activity at the frontline or in the hinterland so that peace prevails.

SUBHASH VAID, NEW DELHI

##### India, China not on same page

Refer to 'Don't rush into a detente with China'; India needs to tweak its China policy. Beijing has never honoured various LAC agreements. Our government claims that there has been some progress to resolve the border issue. But China has not said that it has agreed on any border issue with India. The construction of hydroelectric power plants on the Yarlung Zangbo river without considering the dangerous implications for Arunachal Pradesh is the latest anti-India decision. Technical support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor was another step detrimental to India's interests. Curbs on the supply of rare

earth magnets in the wake of US tariffs may hit the production of EV vehicles in India.

WG CDR JS MINHAS (RETD), MOHALI

##### Historical responsibility

Apropos of 'World court's climate verdict: A mirror to state inaction', the advisory opinion delivered by the International Court of Justice stands as a moral nudge amid escalating climate inaction. Though non-binding, it marks the strongest judicial reaffirmation of obligations under the UNFCCC, Kyoto Protocol and Paris Agreement, reflecting cautious restraint and respect for state sovereignty. India's long-standing emphasis on historical responsibility and the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities finds validation in the verdict.

MEHARGURVIR, BY EMAIL

##### Nations must act now

Refer to 'World court's climate verdict: A mirror to state inaction'; the ICJ has declared climate change as an existential threat and stated that nations can be held legally accountable for greenhouse gas emissions. India neither joined the signatories nor opposed the declaration as it is dependent on coal to meet its energy requirements. Developed nations are emitting double the per capita greenhouse gas emissions than their developing counterparts. Thus, a more inclusive approach is needed to tackle this global threat. The interests of developing nations ought to be safeguarded.

AMANDEEP BAINS, SIRSA

##### Electoral farce in Bihar

It is unfortunate that the Supreme Court has gone soft on the Election Commission of India (ECI) over its refusal to include documents like Aadhaar, voter ID card and ration card as proof of the voter's identity. The ECI's declaration that it has almost completed the mammoth task of verifying the identity of around eight crore voters within a month indicates that the entire exercise is a farce. The SC must come to the rescue of 63 lakh voters whose names have been removed from the electoral rolls.

THARCIUS S FERNANDO, CHENNAI



# Rising voice, but waning influence



SMITA GUPTA  
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST  
BASED IN NEW DELHI

ON Tuesday, Priyanka Gandhi's performance in the Lok Sabha debate on Operation Sindoor reminded one of her talents for public speaking — her swift reflexes, use of gentle mockery and ability to stay on message. Using the Pahalgam massacre — rather than Operation Sindoor, which was a response to it — she tore into PM Modi, telling him that it was not enough to take credit for successes: it was more important to take responsibility for intelligence and security failures and the well-being of the people. The government had also failed on the foreign policy front: Pakistan's army chief Asim Munir, she reminded Modi, had been invited to lunch by US President Trump; and Pakistan, ironically, had been appointed to key counter-terrorism bodies at the UNSC.

By personalising the tragic story of those who fell to terrorist bullets, she ensured that she had the attention of MPs and TV viewers. By blaming the Modi government for luring tourists to the Kashmir Valley without providing a modicum of security, she questioned the ruling dispensation's ability to rule.

She turned Home Minister Amit Shah's attack on Sonia Gandhi for apparently shedding tears for terrorists killed in the 2008 Bala House encounter against him, saying: "My mother shed those tears when her husband (Rajiv Gandhi) was martyred by terrorists. If I am standing in this House and speaking about the 26 people killed in the Pahalgam terror attack, it is because I know and... feel their pain." It was a virtuoso performance.

Since the 1990s, Priyanka has been a visible public figure, accompanying first her mother Sonia on her election campaigns, and then, since 2004, brother Rahul Gandhi as well. She is an effective and engaging public speaker, something that has made her much in demand during election campaigns. On Tuesday, she demonstrated that she knew that Parliament speeches demanded a gravitas not needed on the campaign trail.

But while the 53-year-old's performance on Tuesday was a coming-of-age moment, her importance in the Indian National Congress (INC) has been steadily diminishing. Yes, she is the MP from Wayanad; yes, she is a member of the party's highest body, the CWC.

But she no longer holds an official post and, indeed, is "no longer a part of the INC's central decision making", party insiders tell me. She is no longer a party general secretary. And, those close to her in the party — former Chhattisgarh CM Bhupesh Baghel, Rajya Sabha MPs Rajiv Shukla and Randeep Surjewala, to name three — no longer wield the same clout in the party. (Baghel has since switched his allegiance to party general secretary KC Venugopal, it is learnt). Power is centred in Rahul Gandhi today. And his tight circle of advisers, led by Venugopal, runs the Congress. Some old-timers even say that the latter wields "even more power than the late Ahmed Patel, who at least shared some of his responsibilities with other senior leaders."

The breaking point reportedly came after Priyanka aide Sanjay Singh was held responsible for financial irregularities in the party, and in the wake of conflicting decisions from the camps of the two siblings. An attempt was made to make her the Mahila Congress head — a downgrading of her position — and she resisted it. Eventually, it was felt that Rahul should remain the key party leader and Priyanka focus on her role as MP.

And that is what she did on Tuesday.

## The Tribune TWO VIEWS PRIYANKA'S SPEECH



PTI

Priyanka showed that she knows that Parliament speeches demand a gravitas.

The Congress has kept Priyanka on the margins. Her talent remains unused.

# The sindoor in Priyanka's sari



SHEELA BHATT  
INDEPENDENT JOURNALIST  
BASED IN NEW DELHI

ON July 29, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra almost reintroduced herself to her party and the country. Her speech in the Lok Sabha during the debate on Operation Sindoor was sharp and angry. She was wearing red, the colour of power and sindoor. She dwelled on issues that are close to people's hearts. She talked about the lack of security for tourists in Pahalgam, intelligence failure and the Modi government's lack of accountability.

It's well known that the Congress has been divided between the supporters of Rahul Gandhi, 55, and Priyanka, 53. In 2004, when Rahul first fought the election from Amethi, I asked a Congress leader what made Sonia choose Rahul over Priyanka. He responded simply: "What would any Indian mother do? Italian mothers are quite like Indian mothers. Both are possessive about their son."

In early 2006 at the AICC plenary in Hyderabad, considered to be the turning point in the Nehru-Gandhi family's attempt to control and reshape the Congress, about 12000 Congresspersons cried for elevating Rahul Gandhi to the top job. The party had already been in power for some 20 months and the Hyderabad session was aimed at consolidating the Gandhi mystique.

When Rahul spoke, it was brief: "I am still learning the ropes." He looked reluctant, modest and cautious. I asked a leader: "If

Rahul is so reluctant and behaving like an outsider, why aren't leaders demanding that Priyanka lead the party?" He said, "Arre, yehi to dikkat hai. Give us anyone from the Nehru-Gandhi family. We can shape him or her into a national leader, but Priyanka's surname is Vadra. In the hoardings, the Gandhi name will work wonders, not Vadra." It was a chilling explanation.

Priyanka carries the pain of Karna. She is a mere party general secretary without portfolio. The party, in a deep crisis, has kept her on the margins. Her talent remains unused.

She has a better grasp of the Hindi heartland. She speaks fluent Hindi. Above all, Priyanka has in dollops the quality that matters most in Indian politics: flexibility. After she was elected from Wayanad, Kerala, she did not hesitate to meet Home Minister Amit Shah for a small issue regarding her constituency.

Certainly, Priyanka has angularities. Her alleged mood swings are an occasional source of conversation. But she understands well how to use power — with ease and authority. In contrast, Rahul Gandhi proudly believes he's an outsider within his party. He is also stubborn and can go to any extent to prove his point even if it hurts the party interest.

Priyanka seems to have inherited the old Congress culture. She meets all leaders with ease. Rahul keeps them at a distance.

But the party insider insisted that the siblings enjoy the best of relations. Rahul recently claimed, "When my sister speaks, I know what she is thinking. And when I speak, she knows what's going on in my mind." The family of three remains united. The BJP has not been able to exploit the differences in their approaches.

Moreover, in his first two terms, Modi did not take any serious action in the cases against Robert Vadra in the Haryana land deals. This shows that the BJP is aware that it would have helped Priyanka gain sympathy. The government understands the importance of Priyanka Gandhi Vadra.

# When Parliament should have spoken as one



VIVEK KATJU  
FORMER SECRETARY, MINISTRY  
OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

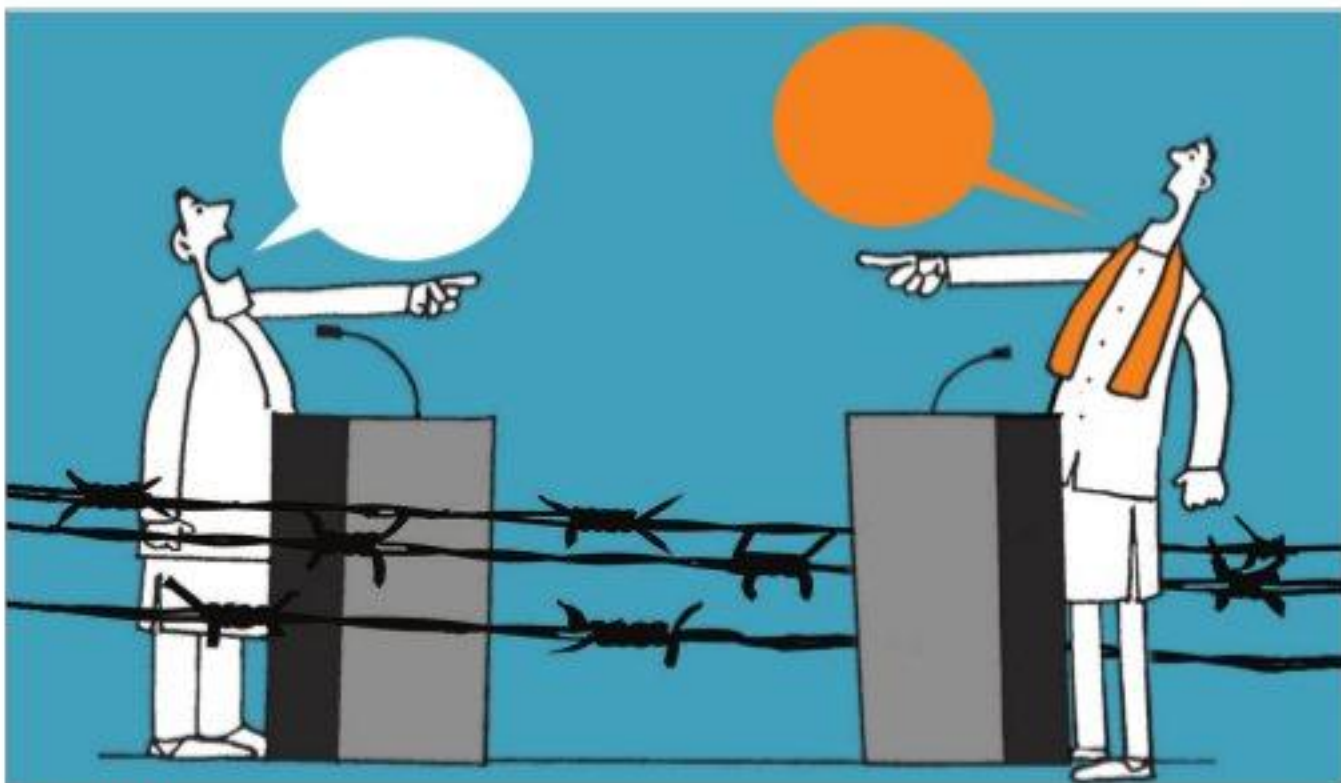
WAS it too much to hope that after all the political point-scoring on the Pahalgam attack and Operation Sindoor was done, a unanimous resolution would have been adopted by both Houses of Parliament against Pakistani terror? A resolution would have been a natural corollary to the sending out of the seven all-party delegations to show that India stood together after the Pahalgam attack and had endorsed the government's kinetic action.

It would have also been a potent signal to the international community that the unity displayed by India's political class on Pakistani terror was not ephemeral but a reflection of national determination. Alas, the thought of a resolution did not even cross the minds of our leaders, whether in government or opposition; such is our current polarised polity.

Consequently, the special parliamentary discussion did not rise above party politics. It became mainly an exercise in political declamation, of levelling accusations and counter-accusations, of evasion and silence. Of course, Parliament is quintessentially a political platform, but it is also the highest constitutional forum for serious debate to forge a national strategic consensus on security issues. This discussion gave a chance to leaders for an intense, constructive probing of these vital matters.

Some strategic concerns were raised by the opposition — such as the nature of Sino-Pak nexus and its impact on India's defence. Instead of responding positively, the ruling dispensation decided to regurgitate all the mistakes made by the Nehru-Gandhis. Thus, these issues were lost in an avalanche of rhetoric, which was only occasionally punctuated by some important diplomatic and strategic points. Perhaps, the most significant were made by PM Modi on India's position on the Indus Waters Treaty. The operationalisation of India's intentions will not be easy for the rivers allotted to Pakistan under the treaty, except for the Chenab.

It was legitimate for the Opposition to ask questions relating to the security and intelligence aspects of the



RHETORIC: The special parliamentary debate on Sindoor did not rise above party politics. SANDEEP JOSHI

attack. After all, the terrorists freely roamed the Baisaran valley on April 22 for over an hour, killing 26 men at will. The government did not respond to these queries but took credit for the elimination, just a day before the discussion, of three of the Pakistani perpetrators. The security forces did a good job in killing these men, but the questions on the absence of security will not go away with their avoidance by the rulers.

The government also maintained a stony silence on the global narrative that India had lost aerial platforms on the first day of Operation Sindoor. The Opposition pressed in vain for it to come clean. The government could have

A unanimous resolution should have been adopted by both Houses against Pak terror. It would have been a signal of India's unity on terror.

chosen to adopt the valid position taken by the Indian military that despite some initial losses, it was able to decisively find pathways through Pakistani aerial defences to strike nine of its airbases. Clearly, Modi sought to bypass the question when, in somewhat colourful language, he reported how abjectly the Pakistani Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) asked his Indian counterpart to end hostilities. This may appeal to a section of the ruling dispensation's faithful, but would not put to rest the global narrative that India did not gain a decisive military edge over Pakistan in Op Sindoor. Modi's revelation that India neu-

tralised Pakistan's aerial attack on May 9-10 was useful, but would it contribute to correcting international perceptions on Operation Sindoor?

The government avoided direct refutation of US President Donald Trump's claims of mediating between India and Pakistan. External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar clarified that there was no conversation between Trump and Modi from April 22 to June 17. That, of course, proves nothing. Modi asserted, "No world leader had asked India to pause Operation Sindoor." While no country may have specifically used such a formulation, in all their conversations with their Indian counterparts, the representatives of major powers were wanting armed India-Pakistan hostilities, which began with Operation Sindoor, to end.

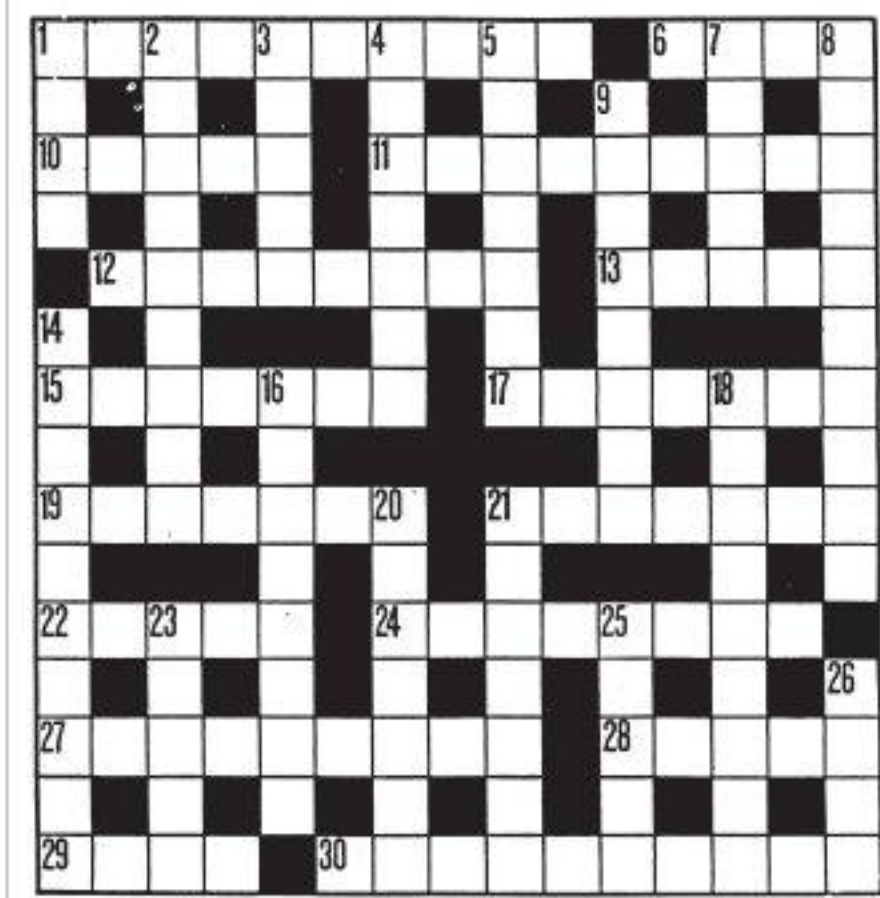
What India needs to conclusively establish is that an unacceptable terrorist attack by one nuclear state on another is the first step on the escalatory ladder; hence, Pakistan must strike out the use of terror against India from its security doctrine. Regrettably, this most important strategic point was not unequivocally stated by any ruling dispensation speaker. It was equally important for the Opposition to have endorsed it. But that would have required backroom discussions to be held prior to the

debate on the message that should go out to the nation and world from the Parliamentary debate. Obviously, no such conversation took place.

Jaishankar said this about India's future approaches towards Pakistan: "There is now a new normal. The new normal has five points: One, terrorists will not be treated as proxies. Two, cross-border terrorism will get an appropriate response. Three, terror and talks are not possible together. There will only be talks on terror. Four, not yielding to nuclear blackmail. And finally, terror and good neighbourliness cannot coexist. Blood and water cannot flow together."

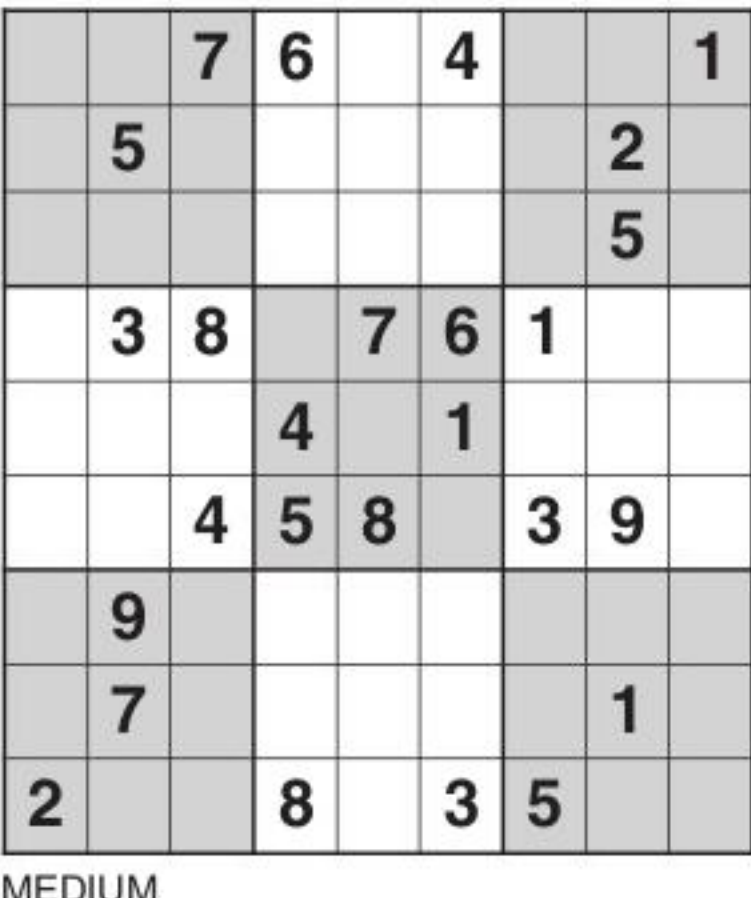
Apart from a few sections of the political class who favour that the doors of dialogue with Pakistan should not be shut, the points mentioned by Jaishankar enjoy wide acceptance with the Indian people. A Parliamentary resolution containing these issues, with an appropriate part regarding India's desire for good ties with Pakistan but that it needs to abandon terrorism, would have found acceptance with all sections of Parliament. That is what should have emerged from these discussions. It would have carried global credibility. But that needs a political leadership, which despite political bickering, is in conversation on major national issues. That seems absent today.

## QUICK CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**
- 1 Simply as a precaution (4,2,4)
  - 6 Commotion (4)
  - 10 Negotiate (5)
  - 11 Provided abundantly (9)
  - 12 A disadvantage (8)
  - 13 Instanced (5)
  - 15 Get ready (7)
  - 17 Large-billed waterbird (7)
  - 19 Graciously wishes of (7)
  - 21 Mock orange shrub (7)
  - 22 Tall wading bird (5)
  - 24 Impale (8)
  - 27 Show to be involved in crime (9)
  - 28 Prevent (5)
  - 29 Sodium chloride (4)
  - 30 Gradually (4,2,4)
- DOWN**
- 1 Fibre used for ropes and sacking (4)
  - 2 Leading force in attack (9)
  - 3 Tagging along (2,3)
  - 4 Vegetable of Brassica family (7)
  - 5 Affectedly superior (5-2)
  - 7 Out of condition (5)
  - 8 Abstemiousness (4-6)
  - 9 Strictly insistent person (8)
  - 14 Make over-subtle distinctions (5,5)
  - 16 An ocean (8)
  - 18 Self-assured (9)
  - 20 Contestant (7)
  - 21 Rouse from apathy (5,2)
  - 23 Be distasteful to (5)
  - 25 Disreputable (5)
  - 26 Close by filling (4)
- Yesterday's solution**
- Across:** 1 Dubious, 5 Tunic, 8 Mussolini, 9 Any, 10 Rake, 12 Implicit, 14 Evenly, 15 Annual, 17 Play safe, 18 Stem, 21 Web, 22 Fractious, 24 Royal, 25 Rapidly..
- Down:** 1 Demur, 2 Bus, 3 Oboc, 4 Stigma, 5 Triplane, 6 No-account, 7 Crystal, 11 Keep at bay, 13 Blissful, 14 Empower, 16 Affair, 19 Messy, 20 Step, 23 Odd.

## SU DO KU



**YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION**

1	6	8	5	4	9	2	3	7
5	9	2	6	3	7	1	8	4
3	4	7	8	1	2	6	5	9
2	7	6	9	8	5	3	4	1
4	1	5	2	6	3	9	7	8
8	3	9	1	7	4	5	2	6
9	2	1	4	5	8	7	6	3
6	8	3	7	2	1	4	9	5
7	5	4	3	9	6	8	1	2

**CALENDAR**

**JULY 31, 2025, THURSDAY**

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Shravan Shaka 9
- Shravan Purnimite 16
- Hijari 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 7, up to 4:59 am
- Sadhya Yoga up to 4:32 am
- Chitra Nakshatra up to 12:42 am
- Moon enters Libra sign 11:15 am
- Goswami Tulsidass Jyanti

## FORECAST

SUNSET:	THURSDAY	19:17 HRS
SUNRISE:	FRIDAY	05:42 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN
Chandigarh	32	28
New Delhi	31	24
Amritsar	31	26
Bathinda	32	24
Jalandhar	31	26
Ludhiana	32	26
Bhivani	30	26
Hisar	30	26
Sirsa	32	26
Dharamsala	27	18
Manali	25	18
Shimla	24	17
Srinagar	28	19
Jammu	32	24
Kargil	28	15
Leh	26	15
Dehradun	33	24
Mussoorie	24	17



### Fragile peace

The sudden ceasefire between Thailand and Cambodia is a welcome relief ~ but it is, at best, a temporary pause in a volatile, deeply rooted border conflict. With over 30 lives lost and nearly 275,000 civilians displaced in under a week, the scale and intensity of the fighting underscored how quickly a dormant territorial grievance can spiral into open war. What began as localised military skirmishes quickly escalated into full-fledged hostilities, involving artillery barrages, drone over-flights and airstrikes. It is a sobering reminder that even in an increasingly interconnected region, 20th-century disputes can still fuel 21st-century crises. At the heart of this renewed conflict lies an unresolved border demarcation that dates back more than a century. The disputed area, rich in nationalist symbolism and strategic value, has often been the flashpoint for periodic clashes. This time, however, the stakes were higher. The use of heavy weaponry by Thai forces and Cambodian retaliatory rocket fire marked a significant military escalation ~ one that blurred the line between deterrence and aggression. For civilians on both sides of the border, particularly those old enough to remember the Cambodian Civil War, the trauma has been all too familiar. The ceasefire, hastily brokered with the help of a neighbouring mediator and spurred on by economic pressure from a global superpower, exposes the uncomfortable truth that peace was not born of mutual understanding but of external compulsion. With both countries heavily reliant on export markets ~ especially in sectors vulnerable to tariffs ~ the threat of economic isolation succeeded where diplomacy alone had stalled. The human cost has been staggering. Families have fled ancestral homes, schools have shut down, and shelters are overwhelmed. Many evacuees ~ especially the elderly ~ describe this as the worst violence they've seen since the last major conflict decades ago.

Yet the circumstances surrounding the ceasefire raise serious concerns about its durability. The Thai government, until recently dismissive of outside mediation, only relented under international pressure. Cambodia, militarily outgunned, had been pushing for a ceasefire since the beginning of the hostilities. These asymmetries in political and military posture have not disappeared with a handshake and a photo opportunity. For peace to hold, more than demilitarisation is required. Trust between the two militaries must be rebuilt, and the nationalist rhetoric dialled down on both sides. Independent monitors ~ preferably under a regional framework ~ need to verify the pullback of troops and prevent further provocations. More crucially, both governments must commit to finally addressing the underlying territorial dispute through legal or diplomatic channels. Otherwise, this ceasefire will be yet another chapter in a decades-long cycle of tension and temporary calm. Southeast Asia prides itself on stability and regional integration. But unless its internal conflicts are resolved with transparency and restraint, external forces will continue to dictate the terms of peace. And peace without ownership is peace without permanence.

### Starved of Truth

The most haunting image of war is often not its violence but its silence ~ the silence of a child's hollow eyes, a mother's outstretched hand, or a truck loaded with food that never arrives. Gaza, today, is not just a war zone. It is the stage of a humanitarian collapse where the denial of suffering is as deafening as the suffering itself. US President Donald Trump's remark that children in Gaza are experiencing "real starvation stuff" pierced through months of evasive political language. While his words are rarely known for nuance, they have a rawness that resonates. In this case, that rawness acts as a mirror reflecting the uncomfortable truth: people are starving, visibly and undeniably. And this truth is no longer confined to the domain of UN reports or human rights bulletins ~ it is visible in grainy footage, in empty bowls, in looted food trucks. What makes this more disturbing is the attempt to sanitise the crisis through rhetoric. The Israeli government's categorical denial of starvation in Gaza, and its accusation that such claims are "bold-faced lies," suggest a deliberate effort to shape global perception while humanitarian agencies beg for uninterrupted access. When aid trucks are looted not by militants but by ordinary civilians ~ desperate, emaciated, and starving ~ it ceases to be a question of logistics or insurgency.

It becomes a moral emergency. Israel's argument that it is enabling aid, and that any shortage is due to Hamas's interference, reflects a common tactic in modern conflict: shifting the blame to the other side while controlling the gates. Even if one assumes bad faith on the part of Hamas, it does not absolve the occupying power from its duty to prevent collective punishment. Starvation is not just a side effect of war; it becomes a weapon when access to food is manipulated, obstructed, or slowed down.

UN officials, faced with impossible constraints, have admitted they cannot deliver at the required scale. Their trucks, laden with flour, have been waylaid by desperate hands before they reach distribution centres. Their drivers face real threats. Their access is choked by bureaucracy and bullets. These are not isolated lapses ~ they are symptoms of a system where hunger has been allowed to fester while the world opts for semantics. Pauses in military action are not solutions. They are breathing spaces that often fail to resuscitate. What Gaza needs is not a pause, but a plan ~ a sustained, verifiable mechanism for aid delivery protected from both military and political sabotage. And more than that, it needs an honest reckoning from all parties involved. You can dispute statistics. You can debate policies. But you cannot look into the sunken eyes of a starving child and call it a lie. Gaza is starving. And the world is running out of excuses.

# Border Threats

The ambiguity surrounding drone attacks poses a significant risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Unlike traditional military engagements, drone strikes can be shrouded in secrecy, making attribution challenging. In volatile contexts like that of India and Pakistan, where mutual suspicion already runs deep, this lack of transparency can easily lead to misinterpretations



On July 25, the Defence Research and Development Organisation successfully conducted flight trials of the UAV-Launched Precision Guided Missile (ULPGM)-V3 at the National Open Area Range (NOAR) in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, in a congratulatory post on X, stated, "Indian industry is now ready to absorb and produce critical defence technologies."

On the other hand, there are concerning reports that state and non-state actors from our neighbourhood are using drones to smuggle drugs and weapons into India.

The surge in cross-border drone activity along the Punjab border highlights a growing threat of narco-terrorism, posing serious risks to national security and public safety.

Just as the machine gun changed the face of warfare in the early 20th century, drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) represent one more tragic turning point ~ this time demanding urgent international action in the form of a comprehensive UN treaty.

If Alexander the Great had drones, he could have aimed his charge precisely at the enemy's weak point, seeing it clearly from above instead of taking a risk. Then he might have lost the very claims to heroism that made him great.

Centuries later, drones ~ initially used for intelligence gathering in the 1990s ~ played a decisive role in the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, tipping the war in favour of the latter.

The ongoing Ukraine-Russia war has taken this to a new level. A recent report on "Operation Spiderweb" reveals how Ukraine's military has deployed so many small, cheap dronesto inflict heavy losses on Russia's high-end fighter jets worth billions.

These low-tech systems, often assembled from commercial components, have emerged

as powerful asymmetric weapons. The India-Pakistan scenario ~ involving two nuclear-armed rivals ~ carries even higher stakes.

Any miscalculation or drone-driven escalation could have catastrophic global consequences. From the alleged deployment of hundreds of drones by Pakistan targeting critical Indian infrastructure, to retaliatory strikes by India on Pakistani air defenses, the skies above the subcontinent are becoming increasingly congested with unexpected actors. The use of sophisticated Israeli- and Turkish-made drones alongside potentially weaponized commercial models highlights both the accessibility and versatility of this technology.

The implications of this drone proliferation are multifaceted. Firstly, drones offer a deceptively low-cost, low-human risk tool for asymmetric warfare. Pakistan's reported large-scale deployment exemplifies this potential ~ attempting to overwhelm Indian defenses with a swarm of flying objects. This could lower the threshold for initiating conflict and trigger a dangerous cycle of retaliation.

Secondly, the ambiguity surrounding drone attacks poses a significant risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Unlike traditional military engagements, drone strikes can be shrouded in secrecy, making attribution challenging.

In volatile contexts like that of India and Pakistan, where mutual suspicion already runs deep, this lack of transparency can easily lead to misinterpretations.

The integration of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning promises greater autonomy,

potentially leading to systems capable of identifying and engaging targets with minimal or no human intervention.

Without clear international norms and prohibitions, we risk allowing machines to dictate the terms of conflict ~ and the human lives involved.

While existing International Humanitarian Law theoretically applies to drone warfare, the unique characteristics of this technology necessitate a more specific and robust legal framework.

In December 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 79/L.77 on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), with support from 166 countries. LAWS-broadly refer to weapons such as advanced drones which select targets and apply force without human instruction.

The resolution decided to convene open informal consultations in 2025 to consider the UN Secretary-General's report on LAWS, following a meeting of the Group of Governmental Experts. These consultations are to be open to all Member States, observer States, international and regional organizations, the Red Cross, and civil society - including the scientific community and industry.

The Secretary-General, António Guterres, has called for a legally binding instrument by 2026, one that prohibits LAWS without human control and regulates others.

The report expressed serious concern that LAWS, by lowering the threshold for the use of force, could increase the frequency and intensity of conflicts, precipitate humanitarian crises, and even lead to an arms race ~ as the risk of military

casualties for the user state is reduced.

The Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW) remains a key forum, but some States argue it is slow, proposing the General Assembly as a more inclusive and responsive platform.

As systems become less expensive to develop, concerns about their proliferation among both state and non-state actors (e.g., terrorists) are increasing. Virtual Planet Africa emphasizes the need for safeguards to prevent such proliferation.

'Stop Killer Robots' ~ a coalition of approximately 270 civil society organizations ~ emphasizes urgency, citing the risks of automated killing and digital dehumanization.

'The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom' warns that LAWS could also enable gender-based violence, including programmed sexual violence or the targeting of men as presumed militants.

An informal UN meeting in New York on May 12 considered a "two-tiered" approach with both prohibitions on certain types of LAWS and regulations on others.

Drones are the equivalent of making the soldier invisible, effectively allowing nations to wage war without soldiers on the front lines. The rapid proliferation of drones, as seen in conflicts like Ukraine-Russia and India-Pakistan, underscores their deadly impact on warfare.

The UN's push for a 2026 Treaty on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems is critical, aiming to ban systems without human control and regulate others.

Without swift global action, the unchecked spread of drones ~ accessible to states and non-state actors alike ~ threatens escalated conflicts, humanitarian crises, and even programmed atrocities. However, 2026 may be too late. A robust, inclusive treaty is urgent to govern this lawless sky.

### Navigating challenges in Sino-US trade ties

Head-of-state diplomacy has provided crucial guidance for the development of Sino-US relations. It was the telephone talks between President Xi Jinping and his US counterpart on June 5 that enabled the two countries to keep their trade relations on the right track through their talks in London along with other efforts.

China has been faithfully implementing its part of the outcomes from the framework reached during the London talks. This has laid a foundation for their talks in Stockholm from Sunday to Wednesday.

Nonetheless, optimism should be tempered. After making initial progress in their negotiations in Geneva and London, the talks in the Swedish capital are likely to address some tough nuts. Not to mention the US has threatened to impose so-called "secondary sanctions" on economies trading with Russia citing the Ukraine crisis.

The US also claims to have reached deals with some economies that reportedly contain China-targeted clauses, in an apparent bid to provide itself with more leversages in future trade talks with China.

These issues might not be avoidable in the Stockholm talks,



but they must not be impassable barriers if the two sides are to move forward toward the common goal of straightening out their economic and trade relations.

To create the necessary conditions to ensure the forthcoming talks remain solution-oriented, the two negotiating teams should implement the common understanding the two leaders have reached, which is necessary to guarantee their discussions focus on what really matters in their economic and trade relations.

As President Xi pointed out in his talks with US President Donald Trump last month, for the smooth sailing of China-US relations it is particularly important that the two sides steer clear of disturbances and disruptions.

Since the two countries have made some progress in their previous talks, they should continue to make good use of the economic and trade consultation mechanism already in place, and seek win-win results in the spirit of equality and respect for each other's concerns, as agreed by the two leaders.

China has always focused on doing its own things well in its quest for high-quality development, high-standard opening-up and innovation-driven growth.

That also provides new opportunities for foreign companies and investors, including those from the US.

A recent report by the US-China Business Council suggests that 82 percent of US companies in China reported making a profit last year, underscoring the common interests and potential for cooperation that exist between the two countries.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

### Immature

Sir, It is appalling that senior Congress leader P. Chidambaram, once India's Home Minister, suggested the terrorists behind the Pahalgam attack, which claimed 26 innocent lives, could be "homegrown".

His statement mirrors the tone of Pakistan's Defence Minister Khawaja Asif and reveals a

disturbing lack of political maturity and national responsibility.

At a time when the Indian government has conclusively exposed Pakistan's hand in cross-border terrorism, Chidambaram's remarks risk diluting India's global case.

Such irresponsible comments from a seasoned leader undermine national unity and strengthen enemy narratives.

The Congress party, despite its long governance record, con-

tinues to politicize sensitive national security issues for petty gains.

By echoing Pakistan's line, it shows a shocking disregard for victims and security forces.

This behaviour reflects not just desperation, but a deeper crisis within the Congress ~ a party flailing for relevance, seemingly blind to consequences, and behaving like a fish out of water after losing power.

National interest must rise



#### CRITICAL

Sir, I refer to "Falling Bridges" published today which highlights an issue of grave concern.

The article points out that despite the Bombay High Court's order for a structural audit of all foot overbridges following the Elphinstone Road tragedy, the quality of the audit was questionable.

These are critical issues that require immediate attention. Yours, etc., Otteri Selva Kumar, Chennai, 29 July.

above partisan politics, especially in matters of terrorism and national security. Yours, etc., N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru, 29 July.

#### LAUDABLE

Sir, This refers to the news report, "Recall 22 lakh migrant workers, says CM Mamata to TMC MP", published today.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's instruction to call 22 lakh migrant labourers working in other states back to West Bengal is a commendable and

bold move. When Bengali-speaking migrant labourers are reportedly facing harassment in other states with some labourers being taken to detention camps and even pushed back to Bangladesh, Ms. Banerjee is indeed doing her best to get them back to Bengal, provide them jobs under the Karmashree Scheme, Swasthya Sathi cards as well as ration cards.

I feel it is the only way that the pride, dignity, self-esteem and self-respect of those labourers will be restored.

Yours, etc., Anupam Neogi, Kolkata, 29 July.





# Gender-responsiveness gets a boost in India-UK FTA

SANJANA JOSHI AND  
NIRLIPTA RATH

With the recently signed Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) between India and the United Kingdom, India has for the first time signed up to a detailed chapter on trade and gender equality, besides a clear assertion in the preamble to “increasing women’s access to and ability to fully benefit from the opportunities created by this Agreement.” And gender experts are cheering.

Prior to this, only the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022 had a mention in the chapter on micro, small and medium-sized enterprises about strengthening bilateral collaboration on activities to promote SMEs owned by women and youth, as well as start-ups; promote partnerships among these SMEs and their participation in international trade, and exchange of information on entrepreneurship education and awareness programmes for youth and women to promote the entrepreneurial environment.

India has been an active supporter of gender equality at the international level – it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1979; it is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted in 1995 in support of women’s empowerment; and is also strongly committed to the achievement of Goal 5 of the UN’s 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) that aims to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Further, India supports the Addis Ababa Action Agenda (2015) which recognises the importance of international trade as an engine for inclusive economic growth and poverty reduc-

tion and specifically underlines the role it can play in promoting women’s empowerment.

However, traditionally India has been cautious about linking so-called ‘non-trade/progressive issues’ such as human rights, labour standards, gender, and environment with international trade, both bilaterally and multilaterally, by and large regarding them as ‘veiled protectionism’. For example, India voted against the “Joint Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic Empowerment” issued at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires in December 2017. The Buenos Aires declaration is currently supported by 127 WTO members and observers.

India has also opted to stay out of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (IWG) established at the WTO in 2020 with the objective to advance gender-responsive trade policies and increase women’s participation in global trade in keeping with its general resistance to plurilateral deals within the WTO. The IWG currently has 130 members and five observers.

On the other hand, globally, the idea that international trade can play an important role in women’s economic empowerment and advancing gender equality has guided the marked increase in the number of trade agreements incorporating gender-related provisions in the last ten years. Indeed, over one-quarter of the free trade agreements notified to the WTO include at least one gender related provision.

Chile has included gender chapters in ten of its FTAs, and notably the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) that became operational in 2021 includes a Protocol on Women and Youth in Trade and has a binding legal instrument on issues of women traders. Another important initiative has been the Global Trade and Gender Arrangement (GTAGA) founded in 2020 that encourages action toward mutu-

ally supportive trade and gender policies with a focus on increasing the number of women entrepreneurs in trade. The initiative currently has eleven members including Australia, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand, and Brazil.

The narrative of women-led development has no doubt enhanced the focus on women’s entrepreneurship within the policy establishment in India in recent years. However, the multitude of schemes and initiatives supporting entrepreneurship among women are primarily focussed on handholding early-stage development. The focus is on capacity building, mentoring, and small-value collateral-free starting loans. But support for internationalization of women-owned enterprises through targeted measures to boost women’s participation in international trade has lagged.

Just as lack of financial resources, time and mobility constraints, poor access to information and societal gender bias inhibit women from starting businesses - these impediments also hinder women from successfully accessing export markets to trade products and services globally. In relation to their male counterparts, women entrepreneurs pursuing foreign markets have difficulty in becoming a part of established distribution networks, face more obstacles with regard to logistics, regulatory and procedural compliance, and are at a higher risk of abuse, including corruption and harassment.

In this context the inclusion of gender-responsive provisions in the India-UK trade agreement is a much-needed boost to including women as distinct stakeholders in the enabling ecosystem for trade in India. Along with the chapter on trade and gender equality, the agreement references the terms “gender” and “women” across other key chapters also, including government procurement, trade facilitation, digital trade, innovation, small and medium enterprises (SMEs),



labour, and trade and development cooperation.

The agreement admirably relates the ‘systemic barriers’ to the participation of women in trade; acknowledges the diverse roles women play in trade as workers, business owners and entrepreneurs; and commits to increasing women’s access to and ability to benefit from the opportunities, including with respect to women from rural areas, marginalised communities, and economically vulnerable backgrounds.

Moving forward, the Trade and Gender Equality Working Group (TGEWG) mandated under the India-UK trade agreement should work to identify concrete action points and pathways to increase the participation of women-owned SMEs in trade that can become standards for all future trade agreements by India. Secondly,

just as MSMEs have been explicitly identified for focussed interventions to boost exports in the current foreign trade policy, support for women entrepreneurs should be brought to the forefront of the country’s national trade agenda through the export promotion mission announced in the 2025-26 Union Budget. Finally, gender mainstreaming should become an integral aspect of the execution and implementation of trade facilitation measures and ease of doing business initiatives. Here, collection of gender-disaggregated data and regular consultation and engagement with women business associations are vital for a strong evidence-based foundation.

(The writers are, respectively, Senior Fellow and Research Assistant at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), New Delhi.)

# Disinformation not new to Korea

LEE KYONG-HEE

Within hours of President Yoon Suk Yeol declaring martial law on 3 December 2024, a rabid right-wing YouTuber contended that 99 Chinese spies were apprehended at an election management facility and transported to a US military base in Okinawa, Japan. Thereafter, social networks were rife with rumors that the Chinese accounted for 30 per cent of anti-Yoon protesters demanding his impeachment.

Nonsensical online demagoguery? Of course. But to many supporters of the disgraced YouTube-addicted former president, it rang true. After all, during his turbulent presidency, Yoon often blamed Chinese influence on domestic politics and elections without providing evidence.

Yoon supporters eventually descended on an enclave of lamb skewer restaurants mostly run by ethnic Koreans who left China for their ancestral homeland in search of better opportunities. Screams of “Go back to China!” and “Commies, disappear quickly from the Republic of Korea!” filled the air near Konkuk University, eastern Seoul.

The pathetic scene of violence evoked a sense of déjà vu.

Rewind to July 1931, when Japan hyped a minor dispute between local Chinese farmers and Korean settlers in Manchuria to justify its aggression. The dispute began when a group of Koreans subleased land outside Wanpaoshan village, north of Changchun, Jilin province, and began digging an

irrigation ditch in an area not included in the sublease.

Some 400 Chinese farmers, armed with farming tools, confronted the Koreans, and the Japanese consulate in Changchun dispatched police under the pretext of protecting subjects of their empire. The Chinese security authorities also sent police. The clash ended with several Chinese wounded, but Japanese police officers and Korean farmers unharmed.

To ignite anti-Chinese sentiment, the Japanese colonial authorities had Korean newspapers publish fabricated reports claiming that hundreds of Koreans were killed during the so-called “Wanpaoshan Incident.” Anti-Chinese riots erupted across Korea, causing hundreds of Chinese casualties and major property damage.

Meanwhile, anti-Korean riots in China continued under Japan’s wartime propaganda. Months later, a New York Times dispatch from Changchun dated November 4 said: “Fully 10,000 Korean farmers have been massacred by Chinese or slain while defending their homesteads during the last six weeks in Jilin Province alone, according to an estimate given out here today by a Japanese General commanding a division of 5,500 troops.”

Media manipulation thus turned a minor skirmish between farming groups into a major conflict, devastating an ethnic community and eventually dealing a fatal blow to Korean independence movements in the broader Manchurian region.

Fast forward to chaotic post-liberation Korea in 1945. Freed at last

from four decades of harsh foreign rule, Koreans failed to achieve national unity and fell victim to great power politics. Again, newspapers played a role - significant, if not decisive - in the partition of the peninsula under two contesting regimes.

In the summer of 1945, Koreans expected their country would quickly become free and independent again. They were not aware that the big powers, under an American initiative, were considering a four-power trusteeship that might last as long as 40 to 50 years. The trusteeship issue was resolved by the foreign ministers of the US, the UK and the Soviet Union, who convened in Moscow in December 1945. Their communique, adopting the Soviet draft concerning the Korean question, stipulated a four-power trusteeship for up to five years to supervise a unified provisional Korean government, which would be established by a US-Soviet joint commission.

On Christmas Day, before the announcement of the final decision, United Press reported from Washington that “Secretary of State Byrns went to Russia reportedly with instructions to urge immediately independence as opposed to the Russian thesis of trusteeship.” Korean media carried the story on December 27, each editing and compiling it as they saw fit. The news bombarded the already polarized political scene. The idea of “trusteeship” itself was unacceptable; anti-trusteeship became a strong rallying point for the right.

The rightist Dong-A Ilbo had an inflammatory headline: “Soviet Union Asserts Trusteeship; United States



Asserts Immediate Independence.” The rightists seized upon the opportunity to denounce communists as “country-selling Soviet stooges.” The US Military Government in Korea added to the confusion by deliberately implying that trusteeship was solely a Soviet policy. Amid extreme confrontation between the right and the left, leading politicians from both camps were assassinated. The turmoil deepened. The North-South division perpetuated.

Much about the controversial newspaper reports on the Moscow conference, regarded as among the worst Korean press performances to date, remains a mystery. None of the newspapers offered an apology for false reporting, disregarding the basic principles of fact-checking and verification, nor did they elucidate the background of their reporting.

Most recently, the press coverage of the visit by Morse Tan, a Korean American law professor and former US ambassador-at-large for global criminal justice, raises questions about his identity as well as evidence of his claims about election fraud in South Korea and President Lee Jae-myung’s childhood. The press should focus more on fact-finding to enhance accountability and win back the public’s trust, which has been lost to social media.

Today’s information disorder and consequent conundrum, complicated by the proliferation of new media and ever-present foreign interference, requires unwavering journalistic integrity and professionalism. News consumers also need to improve their information literacy. Ultimately, they get the media they deserve.

The Korea Herald/ANN.

100 YEARS AGO

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

THE suggestion that the bazar at Mohammerah was looted not by desert Arabs but by the Sheikh’s own following is now proved to be based on fact. The followers assert that they were moved to anger by a report that their Sheik had been put to death at Teheran, but that hardly explains why they attacked their own bazar instead of the barracks, where the Persian troops were located. The troops claim to have driven off the Arabs and to have killed fifty, but as the bazar had been thoroughly looted before they advanced it is possible that many of the dead were shopkeepers either murdered by the looters or shot down by indiscriminate fire. That is the kind of thing that may be expected to happen at Mohammerah, which is one of the “towns of strange events.” There are three towns in Iraq to which the Arabs apply this striking epithet. The other two are Ahwaz and Abadan, and the country between them is regarded by Arab sorcerers in the same light as the Rawalpindi plateau is viewed by magicians in India, that is as containing a larger number of djinns and devils amenable to incantations than any other part of the world. We are not aware of any strange events having taken place at Ahwaz recently, but during the War an extraordinary incident did take place at Abadan. One day a man, clad in armour from head to foot and armed with a stout cudgel, appeared amongst the oil-workers, and with shouts and cries beyond the power of any mortal throat drove them from their toil. Many were knocked senseless. By the time the officer commanding the Indian Infantry stationed to protect the wells was summoned, the knight had disappeared. The work-ers could never be induced to believe that he was an emissary of the Turks playing on their superstitious fears. They knew; him to be a djinn.

NEWS ITEMS

## GOVERNMENT ACTION

### EXPLANATION OF DECISION LOOKED FOR

(FROM OUR OWN CORRESPONDENT.) SIMLA, JULY

THE Government of India is now beginning to part with the reports of the Tariff Board on the various industries that applied for protection. Following the publication of the report on the cement industry, the Government is publishing on Saturday the report on the plea of the paper industry for protection against foreign competition. The Government have not yet come to a final decision on it.

While the question of paper stands on a different footing from cement, it is unfortunate that the Government should have summarily dealt with the cement report and declined to take action. It is to be trusted that the pro-mised resolution officially gazetting this decision will give some satisfactory explanation of the adverse decision.

Members of the Assembly are expected to pursue the matter during the coming session through interpellation. But of course they cannot bring forward a Bill to give effect to the Tariff Boards proposals because no money Bill can be brought in by non-official members.

## WAR ON ANTHRAX OPPOSITION TO WOOL DISINFECTION

LONDON, JULY 28.

IN the House of Commons on the Home Office vote, when the subject of stamping out anthrax was raised, Sir W. Joynson-Hicks (Secretary of State for Home Affairs) referred to the efforts made at Geneva to secure a unanimous convention with a view to the disinfection of wool, and mentioned the objection of India and Australia to it.

He declared that it would be futile to call a Dominions’ conference, and it would be impossible to get a convention unless they were prepared to reconsider their decision.

Sir W. Joynson-Hicks mentioned the taking of safeguarding measures to protect workers in the hides and skins trade, as the result of a conference between the Department and the tanning employers and workers, which was the outcome of an outbreak at a tannery in Northamptonshire.

## INDIAN CHURCH MEASURE TO SECURE SELF-GOVERNMENT

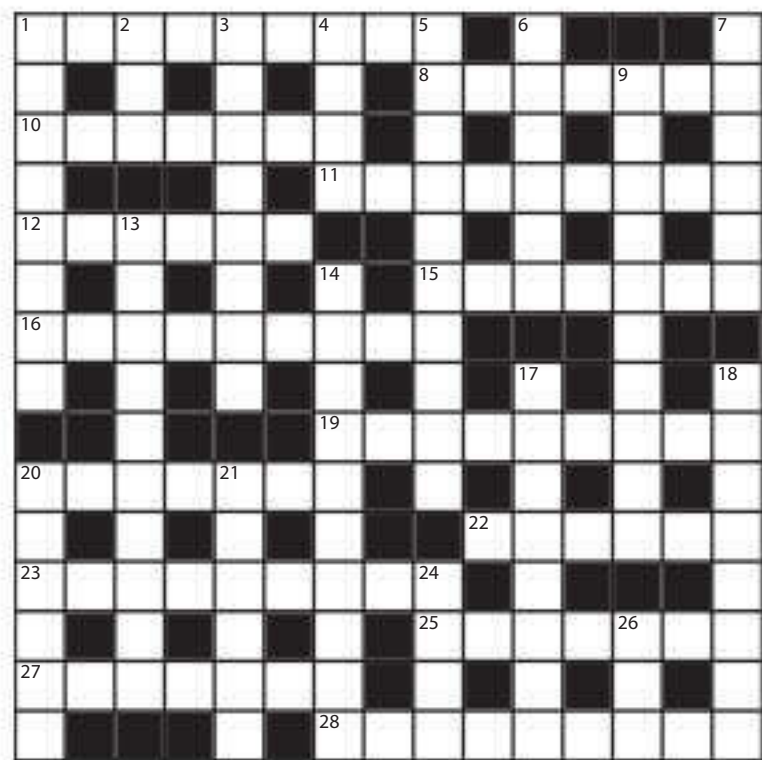
AT this evening’s sessions of the Rangoon Diocesan Council the Rev. Mr. Garrod dealt with the Indian Church measure.

He explained how the elaborated measure was withdrawn for a shorter one. Reading between the lines it appeared that the Bishop of Bombay would have liked a fuller measure, but in the light of advice, the earlier draft would defeat itself, being too elaborate to stand a chance of passing.

The Bill they hoped to pass was that, one year after its passing, the Church in India, Burma and Ceylon would be severed from the Church of England. The Church would become a voluntary association, by its own rules an integral part of the Catholic Church and in closest communion with the Church of England, but legally distinct from the Church of England, and able to manage its own affairs. He proposed the resolution: That this Council has confidence in the Drafting Committee as drawing up the Church Measure in the form best suited to secure the desired end. This was carried.

CROSSWORD

NO-293210



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

AND MEGHAN GLOSS  
O E A A E O P I  
R E B U S C O M P A D R E S  
T U T K E D A Y  
A N T A G O N I S E C H I P  
A E E I P H  
W I N F R E Y S P E C T R E  
H T M L P A S T E R N  
I R E L A N D P A S T E R N  
T N E A I C  
E C H O W I L L I A M A N D  
W A K C E N M R  
A E R I A L I S T C O B R A  
S R T D T A I I  
H O Y L E E Y E S T R A I N

### ACROSS

- Community (and all associated with it) is comfortable with arrest after case's conclusion (9)
- One is inclined to stride after delivery service (7)
- Peter's former partner displays intimacy with Johnny? (4,3)
- Irritation born out of spite (9)
- Infield runs back to catch this shot? Unlikely (6)

### DOWN

- Tirade over measurement of current epidemic (7)
- Marked as having paid to be put in different chair, reportedly (9)
- Comic mostly wanders around trees in tropical regions (9)
- Surprisingly cheap gold headwear (7)
- Regional accent entertains South American treasurer (6)
- One's left poet to acquire round piece of furniture (9)

- Make another picture of French city's unfinished condition (7)
- Racecourse isn't available when source of funding is lost (7)
- McEnroe, say, magnificent on grass (9)
- Senile old bats surrounding rear of Windsor Castle, in which prince broods (8)
- Lout's acre of bottles (3)
- Having shape of Y-fronts in young people's style is leaving oldies in despair (8)
- Perhaps capital gains international transport (4)
- Think about Jack, possibly, at home getting fungal infection (10)
- I'm very upset with university's masculine element (6)
- Small nurses seek at first to care for boxers? (3,3)
- I've a poster to rouse employees (10)
- How to provide danger in alpine feature (4,6)

- Encourages acts to limit term of Parliament (10)
- Throat condition that is beginning to restrict dealer (8)
- Use up nourishing food, apart from nut, being greedy (8)
- About to fight wise man (6)
- Board formed by setter, backing another setter's report (6)
- Doctor's surgery in decline (4)
- Appearance of naked elf (3)

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



## ENACT LAW AGAINST KILLING IN THE NAME OF CASTE HONOUR

T'S a parent's worst nightmare to lose a child. For C Chandrasekar and Tamil Selvi, the waking horror may be beyond description. Their 27-year-old son, Kavin Selva Ganesh, was publicly murdered, his lifeless body left on a street allegedly in reprisal for his years-long relationship with a woman belonging to a caste deemed 'higher' than Kavin's Scheduled Caste community. The software engineer's death is simultaneously emblematic of the progress made by members of Scheduled Caste communities in Tamil Nadu and the oppression they continue to face. With a well-paying job at a software major and a life in Chennai, Kavin had given his parents every reason to be proud. His murder, however, was yet another warning that material success offers no protection from the horrors of casteism, even in a state that has touted social justice for over seven decades.

Such is the twisted nature of caste that the worst nightmare for a parent like Saravanan or Krishnakumari is for their daughter to be in a relationship with someone from a different community. It's considered so terrible a transgression that murder, as allegedly committed by their son Surjith, is not beyond the pale in ensuring caste 'purity'. The state government has suspended the couple, both of them cops, and arrested their son. It has transferred the probe to the crime branch's criminal investigation department and offered a solatium to Kavin's family. Yet, the government has otherwise remained silent, revealing a tension between the storied anti-caste movements of the state and parties' enduring reliance on caste-based votes.

Nonetheless, the time for rhetoric and condemnation has long passed; it is time for meaningful action. The first step in that direction would be to review and ensure compliance with the Supreme Court's guidelines on inter-caste and inter-religious couples. The second would be to draft and enact legislation against killings in the name of caste honour. The existing laws do not account for the reality of violence between intermediate or even Scheduled Caste communities; nor do they protect women of other communities from violence for their marital or romantic choices outside their community or religion. More political parties, including from the ruling alliance, are now making this demand. The time for the state to listen to those voices and act is now.

## NO POLITICS OVER WATER BETWEEN AP & TELANGANA

SHARING of river water between states continues to be contentious even though tribunals and institutional mechanisms are in place. One of the borders across which such difficulties continue to persist is the one between Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, where the concern over water allocation was a powerful catalyst in the rise of the statehood movement. With this backdrop, the AP government's proposal to take up the Polavaram-Banakacherla link project and divert 200 thousand million cubic feet of Godavari floodwaters annually to help Rayalaseema has triggered a controversy in Telangana. The concerns are legitimate and the fears expressed by politicians and farmers' groups about risking Telangana's interests warrant serious attention. AP insists it is making use of floodwaters otherwise lost to the sea. But experts argue the concept of 'floodwaters' is not recognised under the current legal framework. It has to be kept in mind that AP's Rayalaseema region has been woefully short of water for generations.

It is laudable that the Union water ministry brought the chief ministers of the two states together to amicably resolve the contentious issues. Though the July 16 meeting was not for specifically discussing Banakacherla, the four key decisions taken included the constitution of a committee of officials and experts from both states to identify issues related to the sharing of Godavari and Krishna river waters. Progress lies in this direction, not in pitting farmers of the two states against each other. We strongly oppose attempts by some quarters to make it an Andhra Pradesh versus Telangana battle once again by igniting regional sentiments. After all, the issue remains so sensitive that even a decade after Telangana's formation, something as basic as the sharing of river waters have not been finalised yet. It is imperative this is resolved soon.

Whether the project is feasible or not is for the Centre to determine after taking into account the concerns of the riparian states. For themselves, the states are duty-bound to protect their people. But that responsibility should be balanced with compassion for farmers across the border. Parties in both states must desist from politicising this sensitive matter because farmers in both Telangana and Andhra Pradesh deserve all the support and empathy we can muster—in the larger interest of the states as well as the nation.

### QUICK TAKE

#### STRETCHING THE BOARD

WHILE winning the FIDE Women's World Cup in Georgia earlier this week, Divya Deshmukh crossed several milestones. She won the first World Cup final featuring two Indian women. And the 19-year-old joined the defeated compatriot twice her age, Koneru Humpy, as well as Dronavalli Harika and R Vaishali as the fourth Indian woman to become a Grandmaster. Another aspect of note is that the Nagpur-born girl stretched the women's chess map of India beyond Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. We appreciate Chennai's place as an undisputed centre of excellence in chess. But for wider popularity in the land the board game was born, it needs champions in other corners, too.

THE Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) might celebrate its overtures to communities and individuals outside its ideological perimeter—the latest being Sarsanghachalak Mohanrao Bhagwat's session with a congregation of Islamic clerics, ostensibly to mitigate Muslim alienation and antipathy to the Sangh fraternity, especially the BJP. But make no mistake. When it comes to inducting and accommodating heavy-hitters from outside the saffron clan's circumference, the RSS freezes.

The BJP's spectacular success in electoral politics doubtless forced the Sangh to try and assimilate parivar outsiders who came with a cachet that could enhance the BJP's appeal and possibly its votes, like a celebrity from the cinema world or an individual belonging to a caste outside the BJP's purview. The Sangh's—and, by extension, the BJP's—net to snag trophies is spread across a vast expanse.

However, the welcome carries a *quid pro quo*—it is not one-sided, marked with a profusion of garlands and warm words. The red lines drawn by the Sangh are firmly etched beneath the ceremonial trappings. A lateral entrant must adhere to the precepts and practices laid down by the family head, and no dodging is brooked. Insubordination, even from a faithful, is never tolerated. Over time, some lateral entrants stayed the course, willingly or unwillingly; but those who ostensibly felt suffocated by the rigours of school-masterly discipline strayed away, quit and at times disappeared into oblivion.

The exit of Jagdeep Dhankhar, who last week resigned as the Vice President and chairman of the Rajya Sabha, is still riddled with unanswered questions, although his resignation letter maintained the departure was prompted by health concerns. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's belated expression of commiseration with Dhankhar revealed how angry the PM was. Dhankhar was ushered into the BJP in 2003 as a prize catch from the opposition (he had served the Congress and the Janata Dal) and a peasant leader from the powerful Jat community.

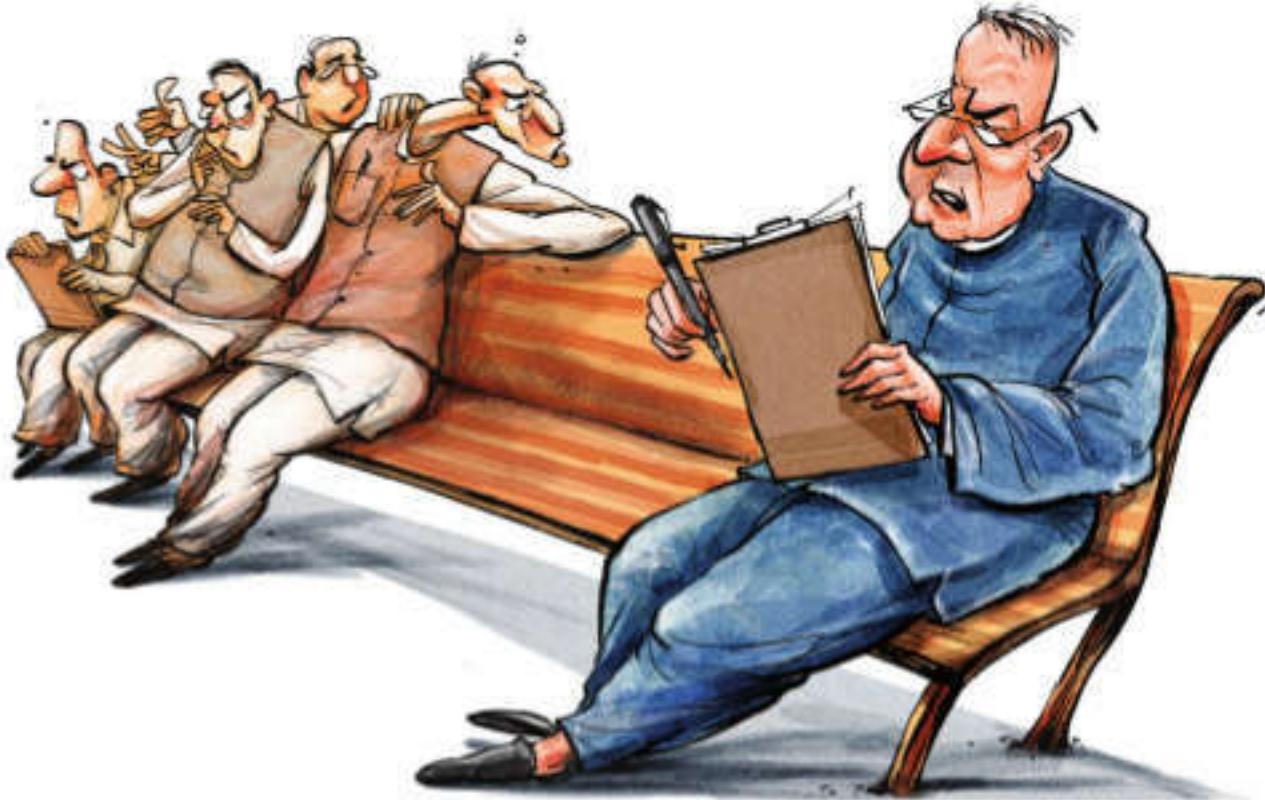
The subsequent events were grist to the rumour mill, but did no favour to Dhankhar. Did he try to upstage the ruling NDA coalition by being nice to the opposition in admitting the Congress's motion and starting the impeachment process against Justice Yashwant Varma in the Upper House before taking cognisance of the treasury bench's motion? Did his mild censure of the government's alleged inability to sort out

Trouble ensues when a lateral entrant to the BJP crosses the red lines etched by the Sangh. Even faithfals can fall out of favour for insubordination

## WARMING UP TO OUTLANDERS, THE SANGH WAY

RADHIKA RAMASESHAN

Columnist and political commentator



SOURAV ROY

farmers' issues anger the high-ups? Did he expect more perks than what are officially sanctioned to a VP?

Unless and until Dhankhar opens up like another fellow Jat discard of the Modi regime, former Governor Satya Pal Malik, or spills all in a memoir, the speculations will swirl. But the BJP and the government couldn't care less. They are sanguine in the belief that such episodes are glitches in the life of a dispensation and will not hurt electorally.

The real test lies in who succeeds Dhankhar: a BJP/Sangh faithful or an outlander. Among the names which surfaced, that of Ram Nath Thakur is being repeated persistently. The son of Karpoori Thakur—the former Bihar chief minister who was reviled by the upper castes in his lifetime and iconised after

death—Thakur junior is from the now-sought-after extremely backward caste of Nayi (barbers). Karpoori Thakur pioneered moves for OBC reservation, but couldn't take them forward because of upper caste pressure in the pre-Mandal era. The NDA government posthumously awarded him the Bharat Ratna when Mandalism became kosher.

While Thakur junior's pedigree sits well with the BJP's goal in Bihar, which votes later this year, he is from the Janata Dal (United), an ally, which doesn't qualify him as a faithful. Dhankhar had to leave despite being a BJP member. The BJP-JD(U) alliance has had as many downs as ups, and CM Nitish Kumar is not wholly trusted by Modi. Can the BJP afford to have a VP who may not do its bidding, or have an in-house nominee who will ask no

## GOING BEYOND BLAME GAME TO ADDRESS FEAR IN THE AIR

G R GOPINATH

Founder, Air Deccan; former Captain, Indian Army

Asia and Vistara, both incurring losses since inception. Now it's saddled with four—Air India, Air India Express, Air Asia and Vistara—and is in the midst of integrating the four boards of management, departments of flight operations, engineering, training, quality control, cabin crew, logistics, inventory management, finance, revenue management, reservation and airport operations.

It also has to work with multiple types of aircraft and differing training standards, HR and promotion policies, salary



The govt must staff the top echelons of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation with technocrats, not IAS officers. If Isro and the Atomic Energy Commission are steered by scientists, why treat the DGCA differently? While upgrading airports, invest beyond terminal buildings—on runways, lighting and landing systems

structures, and, most significantly, varying organisation cultures. It is a Herculean task for the Tatas to get it right and avoid future mishaps. The group, which has an enviable management history and capability, needs to accomplish it by whatever means and win back the trust of the public.

To be fair, the other private airlines—IndiGo, which has a mammoth fleet of 400 aircraft, SpiceJet and Akasa—have a blemishless record of zero fatalities since their founding days, going back 20 years

for Spice, 18 years for IndiGo and 3 years for Akasa. But cracks are showing in their operations, too—there have been several scary incidents over the years, and it will be foolish to be complacent.

On the whole, things have been touch-and-go. It shows that safety cannot be ensured by mere regulatory oversight, but must come from within the airlines themselves through rigorous and continuous training, and adherence to standard operating procedures.

The government must turn its attention to the DGCA. Its cadre must be strengthened and they should undergo continuous refresher courses throughout their careers to upgrade their skills and keep up with ever-changing aerospace technologies. The entire top management must be filled by technocrats and the ubiquitous IAS officers, even if brilliant in administration, must be replaced by highly accomplished employees from among the DGCA. That will motivate them. If the Space Research Organisation and Atomic Energy Commission are steered by scientists, why treat the DGCA differently?

And finally, all airports must be thoroughly upgraded to the highest quality and safety standards. Not just the terminal buildings, where disproportionate investments are diverted vis-à-vis runways, lighting, state-of-the-art instruments, and landing systems that are critical for safety. Most accidents occur globally during landing and takeoff. Land encroachments and dense conurbations with civilian populations along the approach and takeoff funnels must be surveyed and cleared, which would need political will. Had there been no buildings just outside the Ahmedabad airport perimeter, the Dreamliner pilots could have probably landed safely with minimal damage.

Meanwhile, the public must refrain from panic, fretting whether to fly or not, or asking which is the safest seat in the plane. It would be sober of us to remember that more people die while driving to the airport than while flying.

(Views are personal)

questions and expect no answers?

Brajesh Mishra, PM Atal Bihari Vajpayee's principal secretary and India's National Security Advisor, stood out as a lateral entrant who never ever ingratiated himself with the RSS or BJP, and yet survived Vajpayee's tenure with considerable elan. A former diplomat, Mishra was the son of D P Mishra, a former Congressman who was Madhya Pradesh CM. He effectively straddled the space between diplomacy and real-politik in the Vajpayee regime.

Although a BJP member who went on to head the foreign policy cell, Mishra would tell the few friends he had in the party that he was there because of Vajpayee and not the RSS. Obviously, that riled the Sangh, that pulled out all stops to get rid of Mishra but didn't succeed. To buy peace with the Sangh, Vajpayee appointed L K Advani as the deputy PM. What upset the Sangh was Mishra countered its whisper campaign against him by 'leaking' news of financial irregularities in the allocation of petrol pump licences to Sangh functionaries. The allegation peeled away the veneer of incorruptibility the Sangh wore for decades.

Yashwant Sinha, former finance and external affairs minister, was also an outsider (he was a bureaucrat who resigned and joined Chandra Shekhar's Janata Party) who succeeded in the BJP, but for reasons different from Mishra's. When the BJP won the 1998 election, Vajpayee was set to appoint his confidant Jaswant Singh as his finance minister. By then, Sinha—who was PM Chandra Shekhar's finance minister—worked hard to convince the RSS and its economic wing, the Swadeshi Jagran Manch, that if he was given finance he would fulfil their agenda and keep foreign investors out. The RSS was convinced and a day before the ministers were sworn in, persuaded Vajpayee to drop Singh and induct Sinha. Already vulnerable in a coalition government, Vajpayee acquiesced.

Years later, the story had a happy ending for Singh and an unhappy one for Sinha. In 2002, following a financial scam, Sinha was moved to the foreign ministry and Singh was instated in his place. Singh's moment of glory came when *Organiser*, the Sangh-aligned weekly, praised him for promising to look after the interests of the not-so-well-off and give the ministry a "humane" face. In the end, the issue of lateral entrants versus the faithful is embedded in power politics, of which the RSS is a stakeholder.

(Views are personal)  
(ramaseshan.radhika@gmail.com)

### MAIL BAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

#### Maldives's swing

Ref: *India, Maldives hedge bets pragmatically amid Trumpian uncertainty* (Jul 30). Maldives has long swayed with the geopolitical wind, embracing India in need and flirting with China for comfort. Strategic friendship demands trust, not tactical handshakes that dissolve when the yuan flows freer than the rupee.  
**Avinashiappan Myilsami, email**

#### AI Darwinism

Ref: *TCS layoffs flag AI-induced pain, need for safety net* (Jul 29). AI is slowly emerging everywhere in the world and replacing existing human work forces. It is very remote for the businesses to restrain and redeploy when AI is readily available, allowing only a few to adapt.  
**Kalaimani K, email**

#### Bolstering bridges

Ref: *TCS layoffs flag AI-induced pain, need for safety net* (Jul 29). The author's call for independent technical audits, quality-based contractor appointment, proper maintenance protocols and stronger engineering oversight is both timely and essential. Without adopting these transparent and accountable practices, India will continue to repeat the same costly and dangerous mistakes.  
**M Jeeva, Chennai**

#### Industry's backbone

Ref: *Systemic surgery for small firms* (Jul 30). Small businesses are the backbone of India's economy but face many struggles: lack of financing, poor infrastructure and limited market access. The government must create stronger support systems like smoothed credit lines and digital infrastructure to help them grow.  
**Thameem Yoosaf, Kozhikode**

#### Sindoor distractions

Ref: *Fiery exchanges on Op Sindoor* (Jul 30). Serious concerns like the loss of military jets and resumption of cricket matches with Pakistan were raised in the recent session of parliament, yet instead of giving clear answers, the ruling party again shifted focus of the debate. India needs answers, not distractions.  
**T Kallash Ditya, Hyderabad**

#### Judicial intervention

Ref: *'Complete fraud', SC raps TN in Senthil Balaji case* (Jul 30). It is gratifying that the Supreme Court took cognisance of the fact that there is more to the case than meets the eye. This instils a higher degree of confidence in the judiciary.  
**Venkat Desikan, email**

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

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DECCAN  
Chronicle

31 JULY 2025

Diverse views in Houses  
on Op Sindoor welcome

A lot was said in parliamentary debate on Operation Sindoor launched in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack as the Treasury and Opposition members got an albatross off their backs. What was said was mostly a formal reiteration of things made public already, including about no world leader playing a mediatory role involving India in bringing about the ceasefire, which was entirely Pakistan’s call.

What was left unsaid was plenty too, especially regarding making war losses public, specifically of fighter jets. At the end of two days of legislators standing to deliver speeches, the Indian public may have been left just a bit wiser about what transpired. But little could have been done to dampen the triumphalism of one side and the cynicism of the other.

What should not be in dispute is that proof of the forensic kind was made public on the floor of Parliament about three perpetrators of the Pahalgam violence having been found and gunned down though the coincidence of the timing being too pat may in itself trigger more theories to sow doubts on the closure that should have offered some solace to the victims’ kin.

The tone and tenor of the debate was emotional rather than about data and hard facts. The demand for Donald Trump to be called a liar was an impossible one as no government would do that, even in a world so riven by its geopolitics. The US media does it regularly enough in its fact-checking exposés of a mercurial head of state with a claim to being the world’s most powerful man. Where is the need then for a populous democracy to state something that is public knowledge already?

The Leader of the Opposition challenged interpretations of the core happenings during Operation Sindoor and the subsequent ceasefire agreement. Not without logic did he ask why India grabbed the ceasefire offer when it was on the ascendant in the exchanges. By leaving it too late, as in a 90-day gap between Op Sindoor and a debate in Parliament, plenty of scope was afforded for conspiracy theories to gain salience.

Not even the Prime Minister’s lengthy reply, which was more about historical decisions of Indian politicians that are considered grave mistakes today than the specifics of recent events, helped remove the doubts sown in the idle time in which counterfactual ideas circulated. Had the PM conveyed the message in Parliament of military and weapons superiority soon after the event, the tidings from the border and beyond may have been more warmly received.

What the PM revealed on the over-generous nature of the Indus Waters Treaty is not without logic either. What was done to keep it going while favouring Pakistan in not even desilting dams deserved to be examined and course correction ordered as it has been in the wake of Pakistan’s misadventure in sponsoring terror in the Kashmir Valley.

What Rahul Gandhi said about the Pakistan-China embrace getting tighter — as in China actively assisting Pakistan in a war situation — should be of great import as it is a strategically significant scenario reflecting today’s global reality which India would have to gear up for. The borders of northernmost India are in such a state that eternal vigil is an absolute national security requirement.

The benefit of holding an open debate among people’s representatives on underlying grievances about running of the day-to-day Parliament sessions was also spelt out. India’s version of an electoral democracy may be more refined if the diversity of opinions is allowed to be aired freely and more often. Both the ruling alliance and Opposition must understand this.

IT mantra: Adapt or perish

The recent surge in employee layoffs in the IT sector has sent shockwaves through an industry which is considered synonymous with upward mobility. The decision by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS), India’s largest IT services company, to lay off 12,000 employees, most of them in the mid-level bracket, is particularly alarming. These decisions underscore a larger, unsettling trend — the acceleration of workforce restructuring under the influence of artificial intelligence and changing business models.

AI has begun to reshape the very foundation of IT services, making many traditional roles redundant. Tasks that once required years of experience can now be handled efficiently by algorithms. In this context, companies find themselves compelled to realign staff structure, reduce costs, and invest in leaner talent pools skilled in AI, cloud computing, data science and cybersecurity.

While companies have to evolve to stay competitive, they also carry a moral and social responsibility, especially in a country like India, where the safety nets not available to people like those in Western economies enjoy. Mass layoffs at the mid-level, where professionals often have financial commitments such as home loans and children’s education, can be destabilising for families and society.

However, employees must also come to terms with a new reality: The age of decades-long employment in a single domain is over. They need to re-skill themselves and embrace emerging technologies. Lifelong learning is a necessity for survival.

The Darwinian principle of “survival of the fittest” is more relevant than ever for not just companies but also employees. However, companies must act with empathy by offering re-skilling support and transparent communication. Employees, on the other hand, must become agile, forward-looking and adaptable. This principle applies not just to the IT sector, but to all sectors in the entire global economy.

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Malvika Kaul



The emerging  
realities of  
ageing, and how  
it affects India

India is at the cusp of an unprecedented and irreversible demographic transition. The proportion of elderly citizens is growing steadily. As per the Census of India reports, elderly persons (above 60 years) rose from 24.7 million in 1961 to 103.8 million by 2011, representing more than a four-fold increase in just 50 years. In 2022, the number of people over 60 was close to 149 million, comprising 10.5 per cent of the population.

An increase in life expectancy and a declining fertility rate in recent decades has contributed to this trend. Experts suggest that by 2050, nearly 20 per cent of the Indian population will be over 60, amounting to over 347 million individuals. For policymakers, healthcare professionals and care-giving institutions, this has emerged as a complex challenge involving issues of social security, healthcare, economic dependency, mental health and caregiving. It has forced a rethink on existing insurance and pension systems, health infrastructure and a review of social support models.

Globally, individuals are living longer than ever before. In 2018, for the first time in history, people aged 65 years and above outnumbered children under the age of five. By 2050, the number of people aged 60 and above is expected to more than double. Significantly, in developing countries, ageing is taking place at an exceptional pace. While the doubling of the elderly population took nearly 150-200 years in

developed countries, it has happened in just 50-70 years in developing countries like India.

Addressing such developments requires large-scale studies and multi-level consultations. In 2017, the ministry of health and family welfare launched the nationwide survey, the Longitudinal Ageing Study in India. This population-based survey investigates the health, economic, and social determinants and consequences of population ageing in India. This survey could be considered the world’s largest, offering a database for designing policies and programmes.

Data from LASI indicated that the southern states have the highest proportions of older adults. They also appear to be putting systems in place. States like Kerala have already allocated five per cent of the budget to palliative care and evolved frameworks to safeguard the autonomy of senior citizens. In 2024, Kochi became the first city in India to be a member of WHO’s Global Network for Age-friendly Cities and Communities. Here streets have been redesigned with ramps, handrails, and tactile paving for better mobility. Public parks have exercise zones and senior-friendly seating. The city now offers age-friendly apps and digital literacy workshops.

The scientific surveys have helped us infer certain realities. There is a rise in nuclear families. When young migrate, elderly are left alone. They are more vulnerable to loneliness, depression, abuse and isolation. As the traditional support systems have eroded,

more elderly individuals are victims of ageism.

In 2007, the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act allowed the elderly “unable to maintain themselves” to take legal action against adult children or grandchildren who fail to provide them with basic necessities. This law acknowledged the harsh reality of many old people, including widows. However, enforcement has been difficult. Many senior citizens are not even aware of such a law.

Considering this silent crisis, there is an urgency to overhaul the healthcare systems today. The elderly face heightened risk of various disabilities, cognitive decline and mobility limitations. We need a comprehensive healthcare package for the elderly which includes adult vaccinations, rehabilitative services and mental health care and palliative support.

Some of the concerns for elderly population were elaborated by senior bureaucrats, researchers, thought leaders and care support organisations at a seminar “Ageing in India: Actionable Solutions” in December last year in New Delhi by the Sankala Foundation, a research organisation. Besides the Niti Aayog and the ministry of social justice and empowerment, the seminar was supported by the National Human Rights Commission. In recent years, the NHRC has focused on monitoring and advocating the rights of senior citizens, ensuring all elderly prisoners are also covered by health insurance schemes and in improving the functioning of

old age homes.

Increasingly, experts have recommended for the creation of an integrated National Plan on Elderly Care that would include comprehensive geriatric care. Many quote models followed in places like Hong Kong, where family members are trained to care for elderly relatives. Some advocate for integrating old-age homes within local neighbourhoods (like it is in Shanghai) to enhance inclusion.

Importantly, a large group of experts have called for leveraging the “silver dividend” ensuring that elderly care becomes part of national development. The elderly bring a wealth of experience, knowledge and cultural depth that can be harnessed. This requires building a robust senior care economy focused on specialised healthcare, elder-friendly tourism and recreational activities.

Later this week, on August 1, several of the country’s experts on the issue of ageing will share their vision on how to respond to the current challenges at the national conference on “Ageing in India: Emerging Realities, Evolving Responses”. They will help reimagine systems that not only support care for the aged but promise them a life of dignity, security and purpose.

The writer is a director with the Sankala Foundation, an NGO which works in climate change, wildlife conservation and public health

Subhani



B'desh sees big Islamist  
shift a year after revolt



Jayanta Roy  
Chowdhury

Nearly one year after a student revolt forced Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to flee to India, Bangladesh finds itself at a precarious crossroads — where the call for democratic reform has given way to a nation increasingly dominated by Islamist forces — as mob justice, ideological coercion and brutal silencing of dissenters has become the “new normal” in what was Asia’s most argumentative nation. What began in 2024 as a spontaneous uprising against corruption, youth unemployment and dynastic rule has now opened the door for Islamic hardliners to assert dominance over the country’s polity and society. The interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus has struggled — or, critics argue, declined — to stem this “dark tide”.

The markers came early. Statues of Bangladesh’s founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and of those who fought in the liberation war of 1971 were broken down, while museums celebrating the victory over Pakistan were simply burned down.

Later, Sheikh Mujib’s house at 32 Dhanmondi, representative of the emotions of a new-born Bengali nation, was torn down by a mob assisted by bulldozers sent by the state public works department. Minority villages — where Hindus, Christians and tribal Buddhists, who make up about 10-11 per cent of the nation’s population, live — were attacked and burned down, with the security forces playing second fiddle.

Hundreds of journalists, intellectuals and academics, including well-known figures who are ideologically opposed to Islamist fundamentalism such as Shahriar Kabir, writer and human rights activist, economist Abul Barkat, journalists Mozammel Babu, Shyamal Dutta, Farzana Rupa and Shakil Ahmed, have been

thrown into jail.

As have thousands of leaders and workers of the Awami League, Leftist parties and unions, and minority community leaders. Academics, journalists and civil servants from the minority community and those suspected of being pro-Awami League leanings have been forced to resign, often after public beatings. Women in modern (or Western) attire, or who smoke in public, have had to grapple with public shaming. **Jamaat’s return — and its enforcers:** Behind this attempt to transform Bangladesh is the controversial re-emergence of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the fundamentalist party whose cadre acted as a paramilitary for the Pakistan Army in its nine-month long orgy of mass killings, rape and loot, in the run-up to Bangladesh’s liberation on December 16, 1971.

Once barred from elections for its role in one of the world’s worst genocides, Jamaat has used the post-Hasina vacuum to aggressively reassert itself — backed, observers say, by a street force of hoodlums.

Joining hands with the Jamaat this time are a clutch of Islamist organisations and parties, including Hefazat-i-Islam, an outfit which ironically had been helped by Sheikh Hasina at one stage as a counter to the Jamaat. The political vacuum has also thrown up the National Consolidation Party (NCP), widely seen by analysts as both a “king’s party” owing allegiance to Mr Yunus, which acts as a “B team” to the Jamaat.

More than just ideological allies, the NCP is accused of functioning as storm-troopers of the Islamist movement. Mobs led by Jamaat and NCP leaders have attacked houses, specific people, often with assistance from the security forces. Lists drawn up by them, and circulated by the police, of suspected Awami supporters and liberals

**Traditional centrist players like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the remains of the Awami League, both of which in straw polls still come out as the two most popular parties, are unable to mount a coherent response**

means tens of thousands have had to go into hiding to save their lives.

More recently the party began a reign of terror in Gopalganj district, after it led a “March on Gopalganj”, threatening to desecrate the tomb of Sheikh Mujib, which was disrupted by locals, accused of being Awami League supporters.

The Bangladesh Navy blockaded the rivers around Gopalganj in south-central Bangladesh, while the army, NCP storm-troopers and Jamaat functionaries went on a house-to-house cordon-and-search operation which saw more than 4,000 people arrested and 300 people going missing.

**Calculated campaign of intimidation:** The rise in hooliganism and street violence is not random. It appears designed to create a climate of sustained insecurity — one that could justify postponements of the national elections, originally due in late 2025. Behind the scenes, the Jamaat and its allies are suspected of using the extra time to infiltrate and take over the apparatus of the State.

Already, reports suggest Islamist sympathisers are gaining influence in key bodies — the Bangladesh Border Guard (BBG), the civil police, the “Ansars” (a paramilitary force), and even in segments of the Army. The appointment of Nasimul Gani, with a well-known Islamist past, as home secretary has reinforced concerns that the security establishment is shifting decisively toward religious conservatism.

**Constitutional and cultural re-engineering:** At the same time, sweeping constitutional revisions are under review. The most contentious proposal will replace “secularism” as a foundational value with a framework rooted in

Islamic principles. Jamaat and its affiliates are pressuring the reform commission to enshrine “absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah” into the national charter — an explicit rejection of pluralism and religious neutrality.

Besides attacks on religious minorities, burning down factories owned by Ahmadis and other Islamic sects not favoured by mainstream orthodox Islam have surged in recent months. Sufi shrines and festivals — once vibrant symbols of Bangladesh’s syncretic culture — have come under fire from Islamist groups.

Rallies demanding the imposition of the Sharia, or Islamic legal order, stricter blasphemy laws, and censorship of “un-Islamic” culture have grown in frequency and scale — some drawing crowds in the hundreds of thousands. The media landscape, too, is changing. Independent voices have been silenced or co-opted; several outlets report covert pressure to avoid “anti-Islamic” reporting.

Within universities and youth organisations, Islamist groups have gained ground — filling the leadership vacuum left by the disorganised liberal forces.

**Nation on edge:** Traditional centrist players like the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the remains of the Awami League, both of which in straw polls still come out as the two most popular parties, are unable to mount a coherent response.

Faced with an aggressive Islamist bloc and a rising security apparatus aligned with religious conservatism, Opposition parties are increasingly being marginalised. There are whispers of further purges in the bureaucracy, military and judiciary. Awami League leaders kept in various jails are being shifted to Dhaka Central Jail, and many fear a repeat of the notorious slaughter of the Awami leadership in November 1975, months after Mujib’s killing. The dawn that some saw in the August 2024 student putsch now appears a false shimmer of light engulfed by what looks like the growing darkness of a long, bitter “*Kristallnacht*”.

The writer is a senior journalist and Bangladesh

LETTERS

CAN AI HELP US HEAL?

As mental health needs surge globally, millions are turning to AI chatbots for emotional support — 28 per cent already use them. Available 24x7 and scalable, they are convenient. OpenAI’s Sam Altman cautions: AI is an enabler, not a replacement for human therapists. The doctor-patient bond cannot be mimicked by algorithms. But for India, where access to mental health care is limited, AI offers promise if used ethically. India should invest in hybrid AI-human therapy models and establish regulatory frameworks to protect users. By leading in ethical AI healthcare, India can ease its health-care burden and emerge as a global model.

R.S. Narula  
Patiala

DON’T WASTE FUNDS

HUNDREDS if not thousands of crores are spent every year on religious occasions across the nation. Even if a tiny percentage is spent on maintaining the temples of education, children would not die by the roofs of their schools falling on their heads while studying in their classrooms. Is anybody questioning whether they were Hindus or Muslims? We have become used to spending all our energies over sentimental and emotive issues rather than do the things that would take the nation to a minimum level of well-being and prosperity.

Anthony Henriques  
Mumbai

SYSTEM FAILURE?

THE STORY of Bharat Jain, the so-called richest beggar of Mumbai, is both inspiring and unsettling. It shows how persistence and smart money use can build wealth even through begging. But it also reveals a troubling truth that when begging outpaces skilled work in returns, it signals a flaw in our system. While his success reflects personal discipline, it also reminds us that charity must be thoughtful supporting the truly needy, not fueling easy gain. Rather than praising such paths, society should foster dignified, productive livelihoods and educate the public to give with care and purpose.

Asad Damrubar  
Mumbai

Mail your letters to  
chennaidesk@deccanmail.com



Sad state

States must focus on reducing outstanding debt

The Centre’s fiscal consolidation efforts post Covid have not been matched by most States. Medical expenditure as well as a fillip to a flagging economy necessitated higher deficits in FY21 and FY22. But while the Centre is trying to bring its debt-to-GDP ratio back to pre-Covid levels by 2030 and has discontinued off-budget borrowing since 2022, many States are not exercising similar prudence. Growing debt is accompanied by concerns over the quality of spending, with freebies replacing development expenditure in health and education.



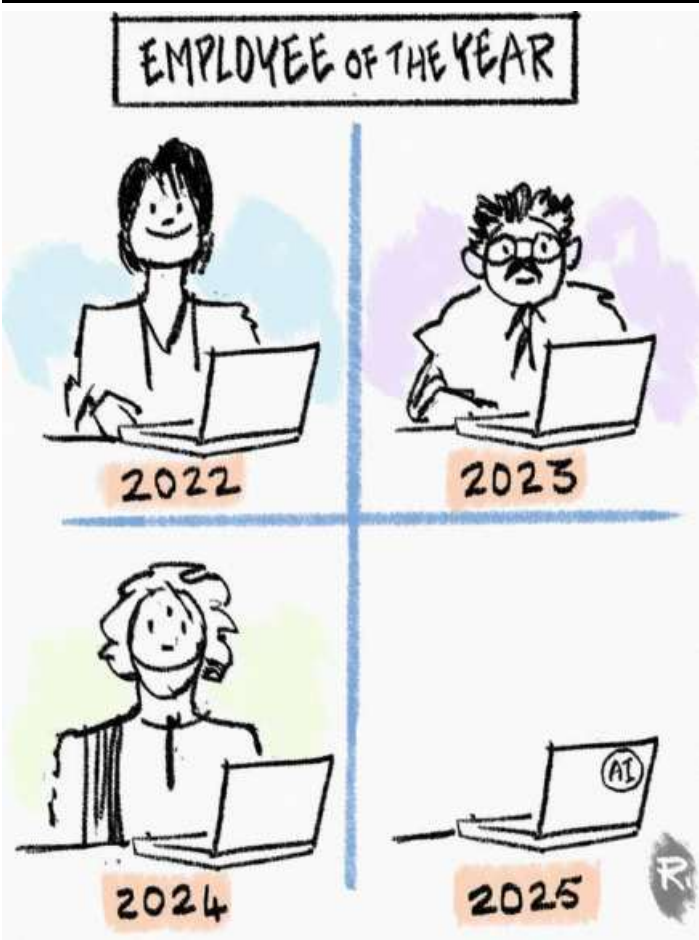
Data presented in the ongoing Parliamentary session reveal that State governments have recorded a 38 per cent increase in off-budget loans (loans taken by government undertakings) in FY25, taking these to ₹29,335 crore. Guarantees given by State governments for loans taken by State public sector undertakings also remain high; most States have budgeted for higher market borrowing in FY26 compared to the previous year. The Centre has been adding off-budget loans of States to the overall State borrowings since FY22. While these off-budget loans have decreased from the Covid high of ₹67,181 crore, the spike last fiscal suggests that States are spending far more than their revenue warrants. Guarantees, which are contingent liabilities, also increase the overall debt burden. Some States such as Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan have given guarantees which are in the range of 8-15 per cent of State GSDP.

Even without accounting for the guarantees, debt-to-GSDP ratio of all States and Union Territories combined stood at 28.8 per cent in FY25, according to RBI’s State finances report. Only five of the States and Union Territories including Maharashtra, Gujarat and Odisha have a debt-to-GSDP ratio below the preferred 25 per cent level. States such as Punjab, Bihar, West Bengal and Kerala have debt at untenably high levels with ratios in the range of 39-52 per cent. With more than three-fourth of the larger States budgeting for higher market borrowings in FY26, it appears that controlling debt is not a priority for most States. With rising interest cost squeezing development expenditure and capex, there is an urgent need to pare the outstanding debt of States. While it is true that States have less flexibility in mobilising tax revenues, they should explore ways to raise non-tax revenues. Subsidies for services of State utilities should be subjected to scrutiny. The same holds true for ₹1 lakh crore or so spent on cash transfer schemes in FY25. Similarly, a move back to the ‘old pension scheme’ will eventually put extra burden on States which have opted for it.

On the revenue side, the possible end of GST compensation cess after FY26 will impact State budgets. However, the Supreme Court decision to uphold the power of States to tax mineral rights and recover retrospective demand from this tax provides relief to some States. In sum, States should focus on the quality of their spending and go slow on pure populism.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



GETTY IMAGES

AI’s power conundrum

**POWER POINT.** The data centres needed to sustain AI and ML need massive power. Energy storage solutions along with green power are viable options



SUTIRTHA BHATTACHARYA  
DN PRASAD

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is one of the most discussed technological advancements today. It has a strong social, political and economic consequences. Nevertheless, AI’s origins date far back. The quest for machine-capable activities that involve human intelligence has been going on since mid-20th century.

Although the field witnessed sporadic spurts of growth in the past, now it has come to be one of the most disruptive and economically transformative technologies of our time. And it is only the beginning. AI is advancing like an avalanche, unstoppable, with immense potential and profound risks.

AI and Machine Learning (ML) are inseparable twins. In the last few years, ML and High-Performance Computing have driven the pursuit of next-generation data centres based on Graphic Processing Units (GPUs).

POWER DEMANDS

Data centres are required to execute massive workloads of AI applications today. Their size and volume of activity concurrently demand record-breaking amounts of electricity. Much of the increased power utilisation is due to the parallel processing power of GPUs to manage enormous volumes of information in parallel. The effects of this phenomenon are widespread.

In the near future, fossil fuels are

expected to generate bulk of the energy, despite the onrush of renewables. The fallout of this is rise in greenhouse gas emissions.

This is aided by the ecological cost of operating large quantities of equipment and the huge thermal emissions generated by such facilities, which therefore demand sophisticated water-based cooling systems.

As artificial intelligence models continue to grow in size and complexity, their power and water requirements will rise in tandem, exacerbating further the challenges related to sustainability, resource accessibility, and operational expense. The requirement for more efficient hardware, along with the accelerated adoption of green energy sources, cannot be emphasised enough.

The experience of other energy-intensive sectors may provide a helpful perspective. Aluminium, steel and iron related industries are the examples of sectors which have always struggled for access to cheap and stable power supply. Many of them were thus compelled to produce their own power to ensure operational stability.

There are studies that suggest that data centres may face delays in acquiring the power load capacity required to sustain optimal performance. In such scenarios, a transition to High Efficiency Low Emissions (HELE) models is a

A transition to High Efficiency Low Emissions (HELE) models is a prerequisite for continued development of AI infrastructure

prerequisite for continued development of AI infrastructure.

STORAGE SOLUTIONS

One possible pathway is to pair AI infrastructure with energy storage solutions in addition to the green energy. AI does indeed have a place in the smart grid and micro-grid operations in the sense of improved forecasting and distribution of energy. But the technology itself guzzles too much power. In the absence of strong regulation, wrong people with AI systems can cause mayhem to power infrastructure in acutely damaging ways.

There are further cautionary observations that are worth considering. In countries like Ireland and parts of Virginia (USA) AI-driven development has stretched out electricity networks requiring rapid power infrastructure augmentation. It is imperative to have green technology specialists, environmental economists, AI experts and lifecycle analysts weighing in their expertise in the policy formulation process to prevent the risk of stranded assets in either sectors and facilitate responsible eco-compatible infrastructure growth.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Ethical reservations are increasing about the use of artificial intelligence, particularly in terms of privacy, data management, and algorithmic bias. These must be incorporated into regulatory frameworks that will seek transparency, factor accountability, and limit usage of personal data. AI companies should be required to publicly reveal the environmental impact of their products, implement best practices in energy-efficient design.

India may be a late entrant to the global AI sprint, but it has the advantages of hindsight.

The central and state governments have started establishing policy guidelines to direct AI development across various sectors. These policies may thus incorporate the concerns stated above and also draw from the guidelines of international organisations like UNEP and WEF.

India can be the leader and ensure that ethics, sustainability, and the public interest take precedence to ensure that AI emerges as a force for inclusive growth rather than elite innovation alone.

We are at a turning point in the field of AI. The challenge ahead is to balance the rapid expansion of AI with no-less-pressing clean energy access. We need careful environmental and ethical considerations to ensure that technology is for humans — not the other way around. AI, as it now exists, is a double-edged sword. If we are not careful and take actual steps toward sustainability and global equity, we could be bringing on unintended and adverse consequences.

Just Transition measures have to be integral part of the policy of development of AI taking into account the real risk of job losses across sectors in race for so called efficiency. It would be appropriate to remember the prophetic lines on AI from the best seller book *The Age of AI* — ‘Humans still control it. We must shape it with our values’.

Bhattacharya is Chairman, West Bengal Electronics Industry Development Corporation Ltd., (WEBEL), and a former Chairman, Coal India Ltd; Prasad is former Adviser, Union Ministry of Coal

New telecom policy lacks ambition, inclusiveness

NTP 2025 focuses more on expanding 4G/5G mobile networks than fixed, fibre, WiFi or other technologies

TV Ramachandran

India’s telecom policies, from NTP 1994 through NTP 1999 to NDCP (National Digital Communications Policy) 2018, have historically served as a mirror to the nation’s growing telecom and digital aspirations.

The NDCP 2018 was the first to make a bold and ambitious blueprint for plain old telecom’s vital linkages with digital and also one that placed the citizen at the centre of a transformative vision — universal broadband, inclusive growth, and global leadership in emerging technologies.

Fast forward to 2025, and we are staring at a disquieting backward shift in tone and ambition. The draft National Telecom Policy (NTP) 2025 — currently under discussion — seems to have forsaken the synergistic connection with digital and appears to have lost the spirit that made NDCP 2018 so path-breaking.

DILUTED VISION

The most glaring dilution lies in the policy vision statement itself. NDCP 2018 declared its intent “to unlock the transformative power of digital communications networks — to achieve the goal of digital empowerment and

improve well being of the people of India...”, whereas the draft NTP 2025 merely makes the bland offer of transforming “India as a telecom product nation”.

Of course, it goes on to state “that is driven by innovation and that universally connects its citizens meaningfully, securely, and sustainably” and that it would “build upon... NDCP 2018” but the strategies and goals outlined do not appear to support this claim.

NDCP 2018’s strengths were its concrete, time-bound praiseworthy targets: to achieve by 2022, universal broadband access at 50 Mbps, 10 Gbps connectivity for all Gram Panchayats, and the creation of four million jobs and many other specific goals. These were bold, measurable, and offered a roadmap to accountability. Yes, we have failed to achieve some of them but, where has accountability gone? Are the mission and the targets to be downgraded?

The draft NTP 2025 offers no numerical commitment to rural broadband, no mention of affordability, and no plan to bridge the digital divide. The omission does not seem accidental — it signals a worrying execution fatigue.

Communications Minister Jyotiraditya Scindia declared on June 24



TELECOM POLICY. Need for review

/JSTOCKPHOTO

that WiFi is the ‘invisible power creating visible change’ and that “WiFi should stand for Widespread Inclusion for Future India”. In contrast, Draft NTP slashes Public WiFi Hotspots (PWH) goal to one million by 2030 from 10 million in 2022 (NDCP 2018) and 50 million in 2030 (Prime Minister’s 6G Vision). How can true inclusivity and universal connectivity happen?

Again, from the goal of 50 per cent households to have fixed broadband by 2022, draft NTP’25 seeks fixed broadband in only 10 crore households (less than 30 per cent) and, that too only by 2030!

NDCP 2018 had a clear thrust on marginalised communities, women and

persons with disabilities. All these people have lost out in draft NTP 2025. On affordability, there is mention of ensuring that telecom/broadband services cost at less than 2 per cent of monthly Gross National Income per capita, overlooking the large disparity between rural and urban incomes.

FIBRE GOALS

Adequate fibre is an accepted top priority for any advanced digital economy. India lags heavily on this front. Rightly therefore, NDCP stressed a Fibre First Initiative and the goal of laying 50 lakh OFC by 2022. Sadly however, there is no mention of this crucial aspect in draft NTP 2025.

The draft NTP 2025 treats telecom as an end in itself, rather than as a catalyst for national transformation. Moreover, it seems to focus only on expanding 4G/5G mobile networks, not fixed or fiber or WiFi or other technologies.

India’s telecom sector doesn’t need regulatory housekeeping masquerading as policy. The government must take this opportunity to review its draft NTP 2025 and reclaim the spirit of NDCP 2018 — with proper accountability and corrective steps.

The writer is President of Broadband India Forum. Views expressed are personal

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Measuring skill gaps

This is with reference to the article ‘Measuring Skill gaps’ (July 30). Skilling the young is the need of the hour. One of the reasons we could not create jobs for millions of unemployed people in India is due to our faulty education system based on rote learning. There must be greater focus on R&D and starting skill development centres. Research and innovative ideas should be encouraged at the school level. At the school level itself, children should be segregated on the basis of their interests and should be trained accordingly. More Skill Development Institutes should be started on the lines of IIMs. Secondly, the the school syllabus

should include skill development lessons wherestudents at the primary and middle class level itself should be taught carpentry, electrical, plumbing, modern ways of agriculture, etc.  
**Veena Shenoy**  
Thane

Unfair deals

This refers to the Editorial ‘Trade deals: It’s advantage America’ (July 30). According to Trump, the US has long been a victim of unfair trade practices by most of its trading partners, who have been charging excessively high tariffs on American imports under the guise of protecting their national interests. He now seems to be turning the

tables on them, citing his own national interest. Looking at the deals struck by the US with Japan and the European Union (EU), the US President has determined to play a match-fixing game where the result is set up in his favour. Countries engaged in international trade should not use (unfair) tariff as a weapon to subdue other countries but must recognise them as a barrier to mutual benefits. For India, unyielding to Trump’s pressure may have adverse effects on its trade with the US but finding an equilibrium point — where both countries can benefit — is crucial.  
**S Lakshminarayanan**  
Cuddalore District (TN)

AI vs HI

This refers to the self-revealing Pocket Cartoon “What is this? A Piece Of Paper!/A Billion Dollar Cheque! (July 30). Hats off to its creator for such a wonderful cartoon which exemplifies the underlying difference between AI and HI (Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence). It also signifies the supremacy of natural/God gifted brilliance of the ‘human mind’ over every thing else.

**SK Gupta**  
New Delhi

Welcome monsoon break

With reference to the news report “Monsoon weakens, heavy rains

shift to North, East India” (July 30). Considering the commencement of monsoon earlier than normal and continuous heavy rains that has not helped farming activity much, this break need not be considered as alarming. However, if the spread of monsoon till the usual withdrawal time of September is uniform, it is likely to affect Kharif crops, as major paddy sowing starts only during the second half of monsoon and the main plantation crops, coffee and arecanut, have already suffered irreversible crop damage due to droppings.  
**Rajiv Magal**  
Halekere Village (Karnataka)



# Gaza’s misery boiling over

Even Israel’s staunch supporters are concerned now

Sridhar Krishnaswami

It does not take a rocket scientist to figure out what is happening in the Gaza. Even a hardened mind is simply shell shocked at the goings-on where the worst form of a humanitarian catastrophe has been unfolding in the last few months.

And all those who are pretending that it is nothing more than a test of will between Israel and the terror outfit Hamas must certainly be living in a world of their own. And the same goes for all those nations, especially in the West, who are shedding crocodile tears, issuing statements of support to the Palestinian people or a future Palestinian state and still carrying on business with Tel Aviv. The double standards have not gone unnoticed.

**STARVATION SITUATION**  
That the Gaza is a hell-hole is for the world to see. Since the Hamas terror attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing response of the Jewish state, it is estimated that some 60,000 people have died in that small sliver of land, a good percentage of them being women and children.

What is more heart rending are almost daily media reports of a starvation situation, little kids rushing for a loaf or slice of bread only to be met with a hail of gunfire under the pretext of controlling a mob-like situation.

If it may be a relief of sorts in some quarters that the United Nations has not formally classified Gaza as being in a state of famine. But all thresholds to that effect are being reached. According to the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), the “worst case scenario of famine” is currently taking place. “Conflict and displacement have intensified, and access to food and other essential items and services has plummeted to unprecedented levels”, the United Nations-backed initiative has said. “... mounting evidence shows that widespread starvation, malnutrition, and disease are driving a rise in hunger-related deaths”, the IPC has maintained, calling for immediate action to end the hostilities so as to allow for “unimpeded, large scale, life saving humanitarian response”.

It is not just a question of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu getting on the wrong side of France and more recently Britain.

The Israeli leader cannot continue to harp that the “wrong” message is sent to the Hamas



**HARSH REALITY.** Many children and women have lost their lives

every time a call for humanitarianism goes out. In fact, for long time Prime Minister Netanyahu was taking cover behind President Donald Trump and the US. But it appears that President Trump too has had enough.

Rejecting the Israeli contention that there is no real famine in the Gaza and that photographs to this effect were misleading, President Trump asserted there was “real starvation” adding “You can’t fake that”.

Against the backdrop of stepped up global condemnation, Washington will also be setting up food centres in the Gaza Strip.

President Trump is also a smart politician who is quite aware of the fact that domestic sentiment is also slowly moving away, especially in the hallways of Congress — something that Prime Minister Netanyahu will also have to take note of. Politicians on both sides of the aisle traditionally known for their staunch support for the Jewish state are voicing reservations on the scale of violence in the Gaza. For instance, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia became the first Republican in Congress to refer to the war in Gaza as “genocide”.

And within Israel that is known to have its own taboo for the use of that word, two high profile rights groups, B’Tselem and Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, have said that their country is committing “genocide” in Gaza.

“Perhaps human rights groups based in Israel... coming to this conclusion is a way to confront that accusation and get people to acknowledge the reality”, Guy Shalev, Director of Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, has been quoted. Perhaps time for Prime Minister Netanyahu to really wake up and smell the coffee.

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



RAO INDERJIT SINGH

In a country as vast and varied as India, the true measure of progress lies not merely in GDP figures or infrastructure milestones but in how well a nation nurtures its people. Human capital — our education, skills, health, and productivity — is not just an economic asset but a moral imperative. Over the last ten years, a quiet yet formidable revolution has taken shape under the stewardship of India’s premier policy think tank, NITI Aayog, reshaping how the country invests in its most valuable resource: its citizens.

In a nation where over 65 per cent of the population is below the age of 35, the demographic dividend presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity. But the sheer scale of this young population brings enormous responsibility. The challenge lies in converting youthful energy into a force for economic growth and national development. This is where NITI Aayog has emerged as a visionary catalyst — charting a roadmap not just for today’s progress but for tomorrow’s prosperity. Over the last decade, NITI Aayog has evolved from a think tank into a reformist engine and an execution partner, known for bold ideas backed by data, collaboration, and human-centered design. It has transformed policymaking from a top-down exercise to a dynamic process of co-creation with States, private players, global institutions, and civil society. Its strength lies not just in planning, but in listening — and turning those insights into action.

**PUSH FOR QUALITY EDUCATION**  
Education, the bedrock of human capital, has witnessed a complete re-imagining under its guidance. Recognising that access alone isn’t enough, NITI Aayog pushed for quality and equity. The National Education Policy 2020, where it played a pivotal role, ushered in a new era — shifting from rote learning to critical thinking, flexibility, and vocational integration. It emphasised early childhood education, mother-tongue instruction, and seamless transitions between disciplines. Through initiatives like the Atal Innovation Mission, it ensured both accountability and imagination — embedding innovation in over 10,000 Atal Tinkering Labs that now dot the country.

Skilling India’s youth for the 21st century has been another cornerstone of its mission. From backing the Skill India Mission to ensuring that vocational programmes reach the heart of underserved districts via the Aspirational Districts Programme, NITI Aayog has helped bridge the gap between classroom and career. Under Skill India Mission, more than 1.5 crore youth have been trained through initiatives that blend technology, industry linkages, and demand-driven



RAJU V

# NITI Aayog’s human capital revolution

**REFORMIST ENGINE.** NITI Aayog has elevated the discourse around development to reflect the strength, health, and dignity of the people

curricula. It didn’t just train for training’s sake — it mapped sectoral needs and designed programmes that opened real economic doors for India’s rural and urban youth alike.

**INCLUSIVE LABOUR MARKET**  
In parallel, it championed a dynamic, inclusive labour market. It supported the rationalisation of 44 central labour laws into four simplified codes — on wages, social security, industrial relations, and occupational safety. These reforms balanced employer flexibility with worker protection, particularly benefiting informal sector workers who make up the majority of India’s workforce. By simplifying compliance and encouraging formalisation, the workplace became not only more productive but also more humane.

Healthcare, often seen as a cost, was reframed as an investment. NITI Aayog helped architect the shift from reactive treatment to proactive wellness. The flagship Ayushman Bharat scheme, backed and monitored by NITI Aayog, provided over 50 crore Indians with health insurance, while more than 1.5 lakh Health and Wellness Centres took primary care to the grassroots. Programmes targeted nutrition, maternal and child health, mental well-being, and non-communicable diseases — aiming not just to heal the sick, but to keep people healthy.

Over the last decade, NITI Aayog has evolved from a think tank into a reformist engine and an execution partner

The Covid-19 pandemic tested the resilience of India’s health system like never before. In this crisis, NITI Aayog stood tall — partnering with the Ministry of Health and ICMR to model infection patterns, ensure equitable medical resource allocation, and roll out platforms like eSanjeevani for telemedicine. Its post-pandemic vision emphasized not just recovery, but readiness — pushing for public health management cadres and modern digital health infrastructure.

**PROMOTING ENTREPRENEURSHIP**  
Beyond these domains, NITI Aayog has been a lighthouse for entrepreneurship and innovation. Programs like Start-Up India, Stand-Up India, and the Atal Innovation Mission created a fertile ecosystem for ideas to flourish. Thousands of start-ups in fintech, EdTech, aggro-tech, health-tech, and clean energy are thriving today because they had policy support, incubation, and mentorship at crucial stages. These are not just businesses; they are job creators and problem solvers, contributing to a resilient and self-reliant India.

But perhaps its greatest achievement lies in how it has institutionalised a culture of evidence-based policymaking. By leveraging big data, artificial intelligence, real-time dashboards, and rigorous monitoring frameworks, it ensured policies remain adaptive, accountable, and aligned with ground realities. Whether it was launching India’s first SDG Index, guiding States on performance metrics, or using behavioural insights for policy design, NITI Aayog brought scientific thinking to the heart of governance.

Its ability to convene and coordinate

across ministries and sectors made it more than an advisory body — it became the conscience-keeper of development. It encouraged healthy competition among States through performance-based rankings, worked with civil society to amplify voices from the margins, and engaged global partners to bring the best practices home. India’s rising position in the Global Innovation Index and the praise from institutions like the UN, World Bank, and UNESCO reflect the world’s recognition of this effort.

More than just achieving targets, NITI Aayog has focused on creating systems that are sustainable, inclusive, and future-ready. Its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals is evident in every initiative — from clean energy transitions to green mobility, from digital public infrastructure to gender equity in workspaces.

India’s rise as a knowledge economy is no longer a distant dream — it is a work in progress, propelled by policies that see people as the nation’s greatest asset. What NITI Aayog has done is elevate the discourse around development, reminding us that true progress is measured not by the tallest buildings or biggest factories, but by the strength, health, and dignity of its people. In doing so, it has become more than a think tank. It has become the pulse of a young, aspiring India — an India that dreams, dares, and does. And at the heart of this story is the quiet confidence that when you invest in people, you build not just a better economy, but a better nation.

The writer is Minister of State (Independent Charge) Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation; Planning and Minister of State, Culture

## thehindubusinessline. TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

July 31, 2005

### India Inc sustains pace of profit growth

The aggregate profit growth of a set of 420 Indian companies stayed above the 30 per cent mark for the quarter. Buoyant sales growth and subdued growth in depreciation and taxes have helped these companies maintain the growth rate. These 420 companies are part of the various BSE indices and account for a significant proportion of sales and profits of the listed universe.

### Ministry revives coal to oil conversion plan

With international crude oil prices touching \$60 per barrel, the Government has pulled out an old report on converting coal into synthetic oil. The report was submitted to the Coal Ministry after an official delegation’s visit to Sasol Mining Company in South Africa, which converts coal into crude oil. The Coal Ministry had sent an eight-member expert team to Sasol in 2000.

### Tatas, Birlas to buy out New Cingular’s stake in IDEA

The Tata and A.V. Birla groups have agreed to jointly buy out New Cingular Wireless’ 32.91 per cent stake in IDEA Cellular for \$300 million (about ₹1,300 crore). IDEA is an equal joint venture between New Cingular and the Tata and A.V. Birla groups, and is the fifth largest wireless operator in the country.

## ‘US has shown a lot of good faith in talks with China’

Josh Xiao

The US is undertaking trade negotiations with Beijing in “good faith,” China’s top diplomat in Singapore said, as President Donald Trump weighs whether to extend a tariff truce between the world’s two largest economies past an August 12 deadline.

“The US has shown a lot of good faith and patience in its negotiations with China,” Ambassador Cao Zhongming told reporters. “I believe in three months’ time, we can do a lot of things together.”

The positive remarks came about a day after US and Chinese officials meeting in Stockholm concluded a third round of trade talks in less than

three months. Trump is expected to be briefed by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent before making a final call about whether to extend that truce.

**TRUCE MAY BE EXTENDED**  
Chinese officials ended the meeting by saying they believed the truce would be extended. Bessent later emphasised that Trump, not him or US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, would be making that decision.

Beyond China, most countries are eyeing the August 1 deadline Trump set for negotiating the “reciprocal tariffs” he first announced in early April. Some nations or blocs, including the European Union and Japan, have concluded at least partial

agreements setting out tariff rates. But a wider range of nations, from India to South Korea, are still looking to make a deal.

Singapore, an ethnic Chinese-majority financial hub, has traditionally enjoyed cordial ties with both Beijing and Washington. But a growing diaspora of both blue-collar and wealthy mainland Chinese there has led to greater scrutiny of money flows between the two nations.

Hundreds of remittances from its nationals working in Singapore were frozen by Singapore’s police. The move came in the wake of a record money laundering case involving China-born individuals. Cao said the freeze was due to the use of illegal agencies and that it has since been lifted for most remittances. BLOOMBERG

## On businessline.in

### India is not creating meaningful employment



https://tinyurl.com/yyrde2pa

Recent employment figures conceal the precarity, informality and invisibilised realities of India’s struggling workforce, points out **Deepanshu Mohan**

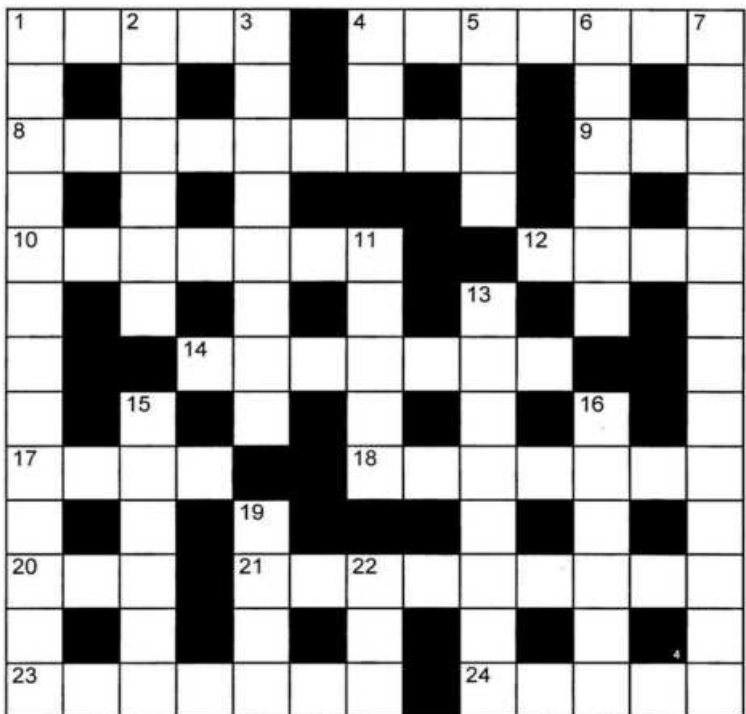
### Bank credit: A panacea to address inter-State economic disparity



https://tinyurl.com/39k5mn34

Channelisation of savings into productive investment is a major instrument for achieving economic prosperity, says **Amaresh Samantaraya**

## BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2751



### EASY

#### ACROSS

- Chest ailment (5)
- Large mug-like drinking-vessel (7)
- Substances from which things are made (9)
- In deterioration (3)
- Remove clothing (7)
- At one time; as soon as (4)
- Principal city (7)
- Female relative (4)
- Urgent, pressing (7)
- Unwell (3)
- Madness confined to one subject (9)
- Nullified (7)
- Prod with elbow (5)

#### DOWN

- Correspondence (13)
- Not neat (6)
- Rider (8)
- Two (Scot) (3)
- Proboscis (4)
- Be in great plenty (6)
- Distinguish between (13)
- Sharp metal projection (5)
- Amulet, charm (8)
- Free something from obstruction (6)
- Accustomed to solid food (6)
- Leave out (4)
- Dip the head (3)

### NOT SO EASY

#### ACROSS

- Chest trouble caught Hugo out (5)
- Perhaps drank from it at getting back first (7)
- Liar’s team put out things for making up (9)
- Is not on at the start (3)
- Become unsuited to red sun’s responsible for (7)
- Formerly there were a hundred in the unit (4)
- First city to attract interest? (7)
- She’s related how a nut carne undone (4)
- Pressing to get in somehow after previous spouse (7)
- Misfortune starts in loveless liaison (3)
- Obsession with one thing in a moon am upset about (9)
- Have to hold a gun to be made ineffective (7)
- A reminder from first girl in the altogether (5)

#### DOWN

- Connecting channel with a piece of correspondence (13)
- In a mess with account, I’d yielded a part of it (6)
- An equestrian centaur? (8)
- Airline for two in Scotland (3)
- Is acquainted, one is told, with the bouquet of wine (4)
- Be plentiful as a spring (6)
- One can tell one from another at tee, if friend makes it (13)
- How editor would reject a bit of corn (5)
- Charm is the last main change made to it (8)
- Remove obstruction from pawnbroker, almost, and go up (6)
- Reconciled to doing without dean we put out (6)
- Don’t put it in if I’m to change it (4)
- Show one agrees to giving fellow up (3)

### SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2750

**ACROSS** 2. Admit 5. Sofa 7. Bolt 8. Travesty 9. Startles 11. Hale 12. Procrastinate 15. Fair 17. Carrying 19. Conclude 21. Bail 22. Verb 23. Tweed

**DOWN** 1. Bloater 2. Art 3. Metal 4. Transit 5. She 6. Fatal 10. Recur 11. Honey 13. Account 14. Tending 16. Alone 18. Reeve 20. Cab 21. Bid



# Op Sindoor debate: More heat and dust than light

The parliamentary debate over Operation Sindoor, launched in response to the Pahalgam terror attack, was marked less by genuine deliberation and more by a disheartening display of petty politicking. Both the treasury benches and the Opposition were more interested in promoting political narratives that aligned with their interests than in confronting the complex realities surrounding the operation, its military dimensions, and its broader national implications.

The attack in Pahalgam was a grim reminder of the persistent threat India faces from cross-border terrorism. It demanded a thoughtful and unified political response. Instead, what unfolded in Parliament was a spectacle in which politicians from all

sides sought to score points.

The ruling party, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appeared more focused on defending its decisions than on explaining them. When questioned about the sudden cessation of military action, government representatives offered ambiguous and unconvincing replies.

A significant point of contention was whether the ceasefire—announced shortly after Indian forces appeared to have gained the upper hand—was influenced by external pressure, particularly from then-US President Donald Trump. The government categorically denied this, yet failed to provide a clear and credible rationale for the abrupt halt in operations.

This lack of transparency has left a lingering sense of confusion and mistrust. Why stop military ac-

tion when momentum was on our side? If the ceasefire was a strategic choice, what were the broader diplomatic or security calculations behind it? These are valid questions that need to be answered, especially by the Prime Minister, who has consistently positioned himself as a strong leader in matters of national security. Yet, the response from the ruling party was defensive and evasive—an opportunity for meaningful engagement was lost.

On the other side of the aisle, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi offered a scathing critique of the Modi government's handling of the situation, focusing on lapses in intelligence, decision-making, and communication. While some of these criticisms were substantive, his refusal to acknowledge the commendable military response

mounted during the later stages of the 88-hour conflict was deeply disappointing.

By refusing to accept the Modi government's role in ensuring military preparedness, Gandhi missed a crucial opportunity to rise above partisan politics and demonstrate statesmanship.

In moments of national crisis, political unity—at least on matters of defence and security—is not only desirable but a *sine qua non*. The inability of key Opposition figures to offer even measured praise to military preparedness reflects a troubling trend in Indian politics, where partisanship routinely trumps patriotism.

What the debate over Operation Sindoor ultimately reveals is that India's political leadership is still struggling to strike a balance

between partisan gains and the national interest. Criticism of the government is entirely valid—indeed, necessary in a vibrant democracy.

But such criticism must be grounded in facts, aimed at improvement, and free from the corrosive influence of electoral compulsions. Similarly, those in power must learn to engage with uncomfortable questions, not deflect them through rhetorical flourishes or indulge in whataboutery.

India deserves better from its elected representatives—leaders who are not only politically astute but also morally courageous, willing to put the national interest above party lines, especially during times of crisis. If Operation Sindoor taught us anything, it is that unity and clarity in purpose must accompany strength in action.

## MEDLEY



## LETTERS

### Laudable move by CM

I applaud Chief Minister Revanth Reddy's initiative to make Hyderabad an eco-friendly and pollution-free city. The plan to relocate pollution-causing industries from the core city to the Outer Ring Road limits is a step in the right direction. With Hyderabad's current Air Quality Index (AQI) at 67 (Moderate) and PM2.5 levels at 18 µg/m³, it's essential to take proactive measures. I urge citizens to support this initiative and work together to reduce pollution. Let's make Hyderabad a cleaner, greener city for future generations.

K Sridevi Tejaswani, Hyderabad

### Cong cuts a sorry figure in Parliament

Oddly enough, the Congress Party's Lok Sabha member, Shashi Tharoor, maintaining a studied silence on the matter of debate on the subject of Operation Sindoor in Lok Sabha, speaks louder. It is a sorry state that a national party like Congress is finding itself difficult to emerge out of its worn out political exigencies and thereby unwittingly indulging in platitudes tending towards playing into the hands of our hostile neighbour, otherwise internationally acclaimed as the only country exporting terrorism. Opposition should not be for mere opposition sake, especially when it is a matter of national integrity and affects internal maintenance of law and order.

Seshagiri Row Karry, Hyderabad

### Operation Mahadev affirms operational excellence

The successful culmination of Operation Mahadev marks a defining moment for India's counter-terror operations. This outcome affirms both the operational excellence of India's security forces and the persistent threat posed by Pakistan-backed terror outfits. Islamabad's routine denials stand exposed, as India now possesses actionable evidence to rally global diplomatic pressure. Operation Mahadev delivers long-awaited justice for the 26 innocent lives lost and sends a strong signal to adversaries: India's pursuit of justice is unwavering. Terrorists may run, but they cannot hide forever. Sovereignty will be defended—and accountability enforced, regardless of timelines or terrain.

N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

### Is SIR a threat to Indian democracy?

Continuing the "futile" special intensive revision (SIR) of the voter rolls in Bihar and extending the exercise to the rest of the country "poses one of the biggest threats Indian democracy has faced", a group of former civil servants has said in an open letter. Joined under the banner of the 'Constitutional Conduct Group', 93 retired officers from the three all-India and various Union government services warned on Tuesday (July 29) that the Election Commission (EC)'s SIR may disenfranchise "a very large segment" of Bihar's voting population and the manner of its conduct is bringing the poll body into "grave disrepute". The ex-civil servants said the EC has inverted long-standing precedent by putting the onus on the elector to prove their citizenship, effectively given itself the authority to confer or take away citizenship rights without a constitutional mandate to do so, and conferred "extraordinary discretionary powers" to officials "to indulge in rent seeking to remove or add voters". The evidence of such fraud in the very first stage of the SIR vitiates the entire SIR process and undermines those very constitutional processes that the EC claims to be following.

The continuation of this futile exercise and its proposed extension to the rest of the country, especially when all that is required is routine updation of existing data in the regular course of the EC's scheduled activities, poses one of the biggest threats Indian democracy has faced, from the very institution that is meant to uphold the system of universal suffrage.

Bhagwan Thadani, Mumbai

thehansreader@gmail.com

## BENGALURU ONLINE

### BJP predicts 'Diwali dhamaka' amid 'vertical split' in ruling Congress

BENGALURU: Karnataka BJP President B Y Vijayendra on Wednesday claimed a "vertical split" within the ruling Congress over the Chief Minister change issue and predicted "Diwali dhamaka" as all is not seeming well in the grand old party.

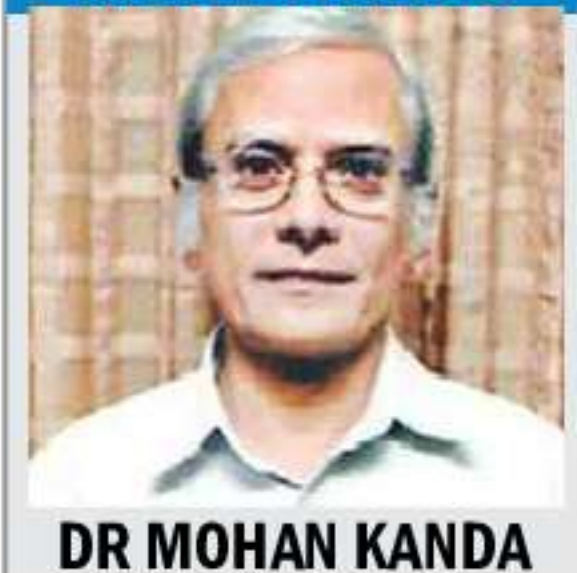
He alleged that the CM is struggling to retain the confidence of the legislators, who have lost faith in him.

The BJP leader's remarks come amid speculation in the state's political circles about a leadership change later this year, fuelled by a power-sharing agreement between incumbent CM Siddaramaiah and Deputy CM D K Shivakumar.

"There is a completely vertical split between Congress MLAs in Karnataka. Most of the legislators who are unhappy with CM Siddaramaiah due to lack of developmental activities are not being taken into confidence. MLAs are upset and publicly attacking the Chief Minister on various issues," Vijayendra said in response to a question.

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

## TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

"An idea that is not dangerous is unworthy of being called an idea at all."

— Oscar Wilde

One often hears it said that it is ideas that make the world go round. A pile of rocks, for instance, ceases to be a rock pile, when one contemplates it with the idea of a cathedral in mind.

Ideas, when they resonate with a particular moment, can be more potent than any physical force. They are the bedrock of progress sparking new approaches innovative solutions to existing problems. Innovation, driven by ideas, leads to advancements in such diverse fields as technology, science, art, medicine and engineering.

Ideas also spur creativity and can drive changes, in the ways of thinking, that address existing challenges and shape the future. Sharing ideas can break down barriers, spark conversations, and inspire others to think differently, leading to collective growth. An ambience that promotes the nurturing and valuing of ideas helps foster a culture of innovation and progress that benefits individuals and society as a whole.

In business, original ideas can differentiate a product or service in a competitive market, helping them stand out and build a unique identity. Historical examples, such as the French Revolu-

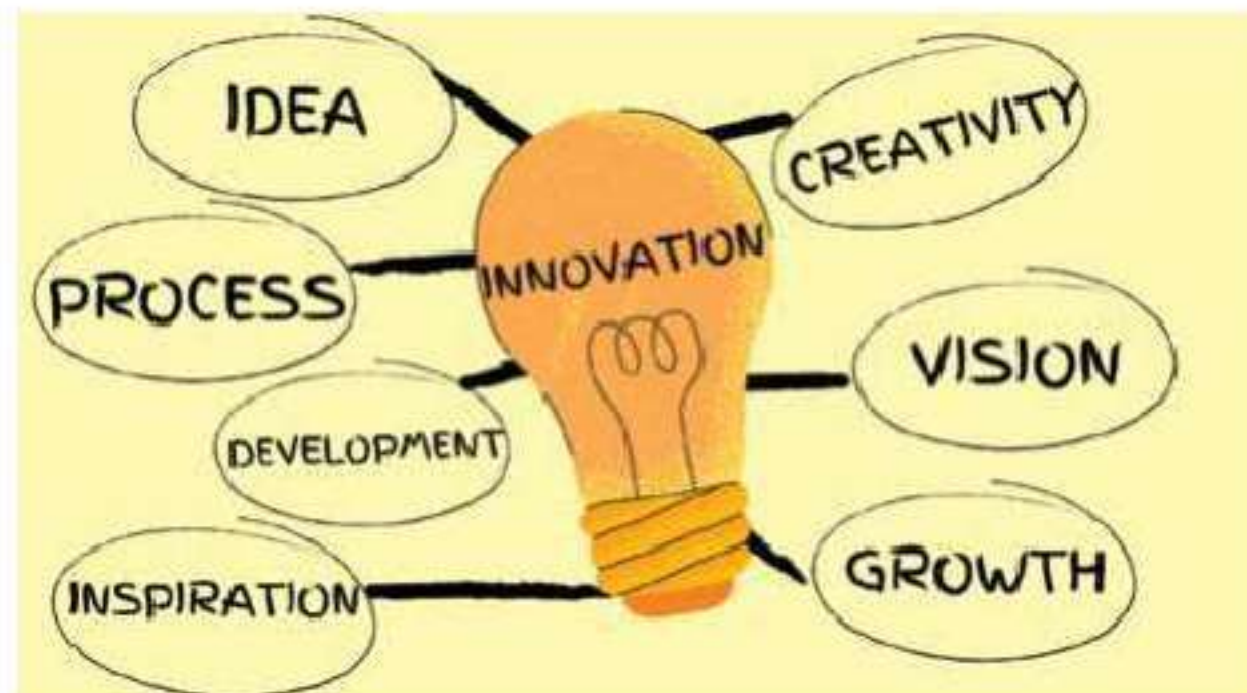
tion, a movement inspired by the spirit of the slogan, "liberty, equality, and fraternity," or the anti-slavery Abolitionist Movement in America, demonstrated how ideas, once they gain traction, can reshape societies, even when having to overcome stiff opposition.

Mahatma Gandhi's concept of Ahimsa, meaning non-violence, was, similarly, a pivotal force in India's struggle for independence and profoundly impacted global movements for social justice. By advocating peaceful resistance and civil disobedience, Gandhi mobilized millions to challenge British rule, ultimately leading to India's freedom. His philosophy of Ahimsa, coupled with Satyagraha (truth force), demonstrated that non-violent resistance could be a powerful weapon against oppression.

Similarly, the legendary scientist Albert Einstein famously used 'thought experiments', also called 'Gedanken' experiments, to explore complex scientific ideas and develop his theories. One of his most well-known thought experiments involved imagining himself inside a falling elevator, an experiment which led him to develop the 'Principle of Equivalence', which states that the effects of gravity are indistinguishable from the effects of acceleration.

Several ideas in military history have also proved exceptionally successful. For example, the 'Trojan Horse' story narrates of how the Greeks constructed a large wooden horse, concealing Greek soldiers, as a ruse to infiltrate Troy, an ancient city located in modern-day Turkey. They then left it outside the gates of Troy, and pretended to sail away.

Mistaking the wooden horse for a peace offering, the Trojans brought it into



'Idea' is a versatile word, widely used as an idiom in different contexts. For example, "Get the idea," stands for understanding the basic concept or meaning, "Get the wrong idea," for misunderstanding something, "Have no idea," for not knowing something or to be completely uninformed and "Not have the faintest idea," for lacking knowledge in a particular context. Likewise, "What's the big idea," is used to express annoyance or ask for an explanation of some one's actions, "Run with the idea" means to take a suggestion or idea and develop it further, "Flight of fancy," refers to an imaginative but impractical idea, Harebrained idea, means a silly or foolish idea, "All in your head" stands for something that is imagined and not real and "Capital idea" means a brilliant or excellent idea

the city. And at night, the soldiers emerged from it, opened the city gates and allowed the rest of their army inside, to conquer Troy.

Likewise, the German army, during World War II, employed a strategy known as 'blitzkrieg', or a rapid concentrated attack, using combined arms, aiming to overwhelm and disorient the enemy, through speed and surprise.

Both were examples of strategic and tactical brilliance. As were the development of gunpowder and its application to weaponry. Innovations such as the radar and the atomic bomb also significantly altered the course of warfare.

Likewise, in the of realm of medical science, Germ Theory, which revolutionised our understanding of disease by establishing that many illnesses are caused by micro organisms, was arguably one of the most revolutionary ideas in medical

history.

The idea, developed primarily by Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch in the late 19th century, shifted the focus, from 'miasma' or 'bad air', to the microscopic world of bacteria and other pathogens. That understanding led to the development of crucial medical practices, such as sanitation, pasteurization, and vaccination, transforming public health regimes and drastically reducing the impact of infectious diseases.

'Idea' is a versatile word, widely used as an idiom in different contexts. For example, "Get the idea," stands for understanding the basic concept or meaning, "Get the wrong idea," for misunderstanding something, "Have no idea," for not knowing something or to be completely uninformed and "Not have the faintest idea," for lacking knowledge in a particular context.

Likewise, "What's the big

## 80-year history of plastic chair

# From futuristic design icon to environmental villain

GEOFF ISAAC

What springs to mind when you're asked to think of plastic chairs? Do you picture the ubiquitous lightweight, stackable polypropylene chair sold cheaply in hardware stores worldwide? Or perhaps you picture something more glamorous, such as Shiro Kuramata's Miss Blanche (1988). This limited-edition artwork, featuring imitation roses suspended in acrylic resin, now sells for more than USD 500,000 at auction.

I research industrial design, exploring the symbiotic relationship between technology, commercial design and sustainability. The 80-year history of the plastic chair was the focus of my PhD. This humble, ubiquitous object offers unique insights into society's shifting attitudes to plastic, and the changes to come.

### An 80-year history

The story of the plastic chair began in the United States in the 1930s, when petrochemical manufacturers DuPont and Röhm & Haas started mass-producing acrylic glass. The material, available in rods and sheets, enabled industrial designers to produce a wide range of consumer products using traditional manufacturing techniques.

Widespread shortages of traditional materials during World War II drove further development of plastics. After the war, designers and manufacturers quickly embraced plastics. They were seen as the foundation of a new, plentiful future, allowing the masses to access products previously reserved for the elite.

Many household items such as televisions, toys and upholstery became cheaper, thanks to plastics. Fibreglass manufacturing advanced



The story of the plastic chair began in the United States in the 1930s, when petrochemical manufacturers started mass-producing acrylic glass

during WWII to support the US Navy. This involves weaving strands of glass into a loose mat, which is then placed into a mould. Polyester resin is poured in to bind the fibres together before it hardens into a solid shape. Fibreglass is strong, lightweight, corrosion-resistant and can be moulded into

complex shapes.

The first fibreglass chair designs were Charles and Ray Eames' Plastic Armchair and Eero Saarinen's Tulip Chair. Then the Space Age (1957–69) inspired enthusiastic experiments with technicolour-saturated glossy surfaces and futuristic curved shapes, all

made possible by fibreglass. Designers could handcraft prototypes, perfecting comfort and form. Many designs from this era are still in production and often feature in science fiction films.

### A shift in public sentiment

Looking back at Earth from space was a turning point for humanity. The famous Earthrise photo captured the precarious nature of our existence and dependence on finite resources, such as fossil fuels. Oil was used to make most plastic at that time. In the 1970s, the price of oil shot up tenfold when Arab nations banned petroleum exports and cut oil production during the Arab-Israeli War. The Iraq-Iran war followed.

In 1981, oil reached USD 31 per barrel. Suddenly, plastics were expensive. Early plastics also had drawbacks. Colours faded and surfaces scratched, eroding

consumer confidence. Disillusioned consumers began to favour traditional materials such as metal and timber. Few noteworthy plastic chair designs appeared during the next two decades.

In response, the plastics industry changed tactics. If consumers favoured wooden furniture, then woodchips and veneer – held together by polymer adhesives and varnished with polyurethane – offered a cost-effective solution. Plastics were simply camouflaged within an ever-increasing range of products.

As the environmental impacts of plastics became evident, the industry recognised it had an image problem and launched a major public relations effort around recycling. It worked. By the end of the century, plastics were fashionable again.

(The Conversation)  
(The writer is with University of Technology, Sydney)









A thought for today

The difference between a dream and a goal is a deadline

GINA RAIMONDO

# Door’s Still Open

India should have done the US trade deal before deadline. But quick resolution is still possible

In the end, six months of sweet-talking didn’t cut it with Trump. Starting tomorrow, most Indian exports to US will be tariffed at 25%. On his Truth Social megaphone, Trump also announced a “penalty” on India for being the largest buyer of Russian energy. It’s not clear how much this would amount to, but if he enforces his threat of 100% secondary tariff on Russian energy buyers, Indian goods could become prohibitively expensive in America. That’s the worst case scenario, but the best isn’t rosy either.

Consider the numbers. Last year, India exported goods worth \$87.4bn to US – its biggest market. Pharmaceuticals, pearls and precious stones, phones and readymade garments were the major products. Indian manufacturers in these categories earn up to 30% of their turnover from US. But with 25% import duty, either they or their clients will need to take a haircut. Or, pass on the extra cost to US customers. But the latter two aren’t options when a rival like



Vietnam is tariffed at 20%, and does not face secondary tariffs for buying Russian energy.

Pharmaceuticals are India’s biggest export to US, worth over \$12.5bn last year. Trump kept pharma imports out of his original ‘Liberation Day’ tariffs in April, but is now talking about imposing

up to 200% tariff on meds to incentivise production at home. So, there’s a cloud of uncertainty over this sector already. Electronics – phones mainly – became a leading product category in the last couple of years, and India now supplies more than a third of phones to US. In fact, exports trebled in Jan-May, over the corresponding period last year. But Trump’s tariffs could change that.

A tariff-induced slump in demand for Indian goods would hurt the job market. The gems and jewellery sector, for instance, employs 5mn people and accounts for \$11bn of exports to US. It almost ground to a halt when Trump announced his ‘reciprocal’ tariffs in April. Last month, India’s overall exports to US grew by 23.5% when industrial output growth slowed to 1.5%. It shows the importance of US demand for Indian manufacturing. So, a timely deal would have served India well, even on Trump’s terms. That’s the reason why other major economies like Japan and EU chose not to start a tariff war with him, settling for 15% tariff now to stay in the game. The door isn’t closed for India either. A US team is visiting in late Aug, and a deal then would quickly put business back on track. A longer delay, however, would send the wrong signal to foreign firms looking at India for their China-plus strategy.

## Tsunami Lessons

Why world was far better prepared for ocean quakes this time than in 2004

The world breathed easy as Japan and Hawaii downgraded, and Russia lifted its tsunami warnings. No casualties were reported till late evening although damage was extensive in Russia’s coastal town of Severo-Kurilsk, battered by waves 10-13ft high. The town’s 2,000-odd population lives at a higher ground and is safe. The world was on tenterhooks because tsunamis spell devastation – almost 2.5L died in 2004, over 20,000 in Japan in 2011. One reason casualties are so far nil, and damage limited, is science, forecasting and international collaboration. Scientists can predict not only *when* a tsunami will hit but also *how much flooding* there’ll be, unthinkable in 2004. Both the tech and coverage of Pacific Ocean



– where over 75% of tsunamis form – with sensors, early warning systems and deep-ocean assessment (US NOAA’s DART buoys) have improved many times the last two decades.


Ocean quakes trigger waves *on the ocean floor* – the difference between a tsunami wave and a surface one. These push out with force that sensors deep in the Pacific

now record via sonics and other indicators. If in 2004, there were only six such buoys, there are over 40 now scattered across seismically active regions in Pacific Ocean. What makes a difference in impact on coastlines is the incline from ocean floor to the coast. Sharper the incline, higher the body of water pushed up, bigger the wave. This makes Japan among the most vulnerable because its incline is steep. But Japan also has among the most sophisticated warning systems. An earthquake still can’t be predicted but its epicentre can be quickly calculated and warnings issued within seconds and minutes through seismographs nationwide. Authorities have time to respond and swiftly evacuate people in the line of a brute wall of water. There’s no being pacific about that.

## Justice Seema Aunty

Patch-making, Supreme Court style

Bachi Karkaria



The *mandap* too often turns into a fractious *mandi*. Unsavoury, but not unexpected because ‘market’ usually comes after ‘marriage’. Big Fat Desi Shaadi is often followed by Big Fat Messy Sequel, which is why both are staple of big and small screens. Which may not be the ‘Kyunki’ behind feisty Smriti returning to the avatar that had made her the role model of both *saas* and *bahu*.

So it was only a matter of time before lofty Supreme Court began functioning like lowly family court. It happened thrice last Friday, the honourable judges sounding more like life-honed Chandrika *Chachi*, or standard-issue Agony Aunt. In one, they ticked off an Indian envoy who had carelessly acquired two wives. The second involved a decorated IAF pilot – veteran of Balakot bombing – and his spouse who were straying each other; the Bench soothingly told them to reconcile, saying, ‘You are not enemies.’ The third hit a target more obdurate than cross-border terrorism.

It dealt with major cause of joint-family fracture: monster-in-law. In my *Mumbai Mirror* ‘Giving Gyan’ column, I constantly mollified desperate wives for whom ‘The Other Woman’ was not some sassy siren, but scheming *saas*. Most Indian men being Mama’s boys – and mamas ensuring they stay so – the son chooses to maintain the peace by siding with her. He says: ‘After all, so much Ma has suffered for me! Besides, she won’t be among us for long, no?’ The first reasoning is so unmindful of the *bahu*’s suffering that – finally fed up – *she’s* the one who fulfils the second. Justices BV Nagarathna and KV Viswanathan admirably counselled this ‘dutiful son’ to hear out his wife’s POV, and respect her feelings as well.

Honourable SC judges won’t have to return home to face the hellish fury of a mother-in-law scorned. But Justice Nagarathna repeated the sensitivity she advised last Feb while reinstating two callously dismissed women judicial officers in MP. Such a desirable change from patriarchal bilge spewed from more backward benches.

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Alec Smart said: “14K males among 26,234L *illegit* recipients of Ladki Bahin funds. Vote a way to disburse welfare!”

# THE ART OF THE NO DEAL

That India didn’t blink on a trade pact with US is (1) good for core interests like protecting farmers and (2) not as bad as it sounds given what countries that have buckled have had to concede to Trump

Ajay Srivastava



Months of speculation over the India-US trade deal ended last evening with a blunt announcement from Trump on Truth Social. Starting Aug 1, all Indian goods entering US will face a 25% import tariff, plus an additional penalty. This new tariff regime will apply even to goods already in transit.

An apparel item that previously attracted a 12% tariff will now face 12% + 25% + a yet-to-be-disclosed penalty.

Trump gave four main reasons for the new tariffs on India: high Indian tariffs, trade barriers, and India’s continued buying of oil and military equipment from Russia. His justification does not fully hold up to scrutiny.

● First, Trump claims that US does little business with India because Indian tariffs are too high. While it’s true that India’s average tariff rate is around 17%, which is higher than the US average, Indian tariffs are fully within the limits India committed to at WTO. In contrast, the new US tariffs violate its own WTO obligations.

Moreover, India’s high tariffs alone do not explain trade imbalances. If that were the case, China wouldn’t be exporting over \$120bn worth of goods to India. The real issue is competitiveness. US simply does not produce many globally competitive goods outside of a few sectors like agriculture, petroleum, coal, and high-end tech products.

A closer look at US exports to India proves the point. Of the \$45bn worth of goods US exported to India last year, nearly \$20bn came from just a few items – petroleum, coal, petroleum coke, diamonds, gold and scrap materials. These are commodities, not high-value manufactured products.

US runs trade deficits with most countries because it imports more and doesn’t need to balance trade in the traditional way. It can print dollars, a luxury no other countries have.

● Second, Trump claims that India has the most “strenuous and obnoxious” non-tariff trade barriers. Non-tariff barriers (such as food safety rules, environmental standards and data regulations) are used by every country, including US. These are rarely deal-breakers. Countries engage in discussions to under-

stand each other’s regulatory concerns.

But Washington often dismisses India’s concerns as protectionist, even as it demands wide-ranging concessions. Such as access to India’s govt procurement market, weaker patent protections, relaxed e-commerce rules, free cross-border data flows for US tech firms, and permission for firms like Starlink to operate in India’s satellite internet space.

It objects to India’s ban on butter made from cows fed with the meat of other cows, calling it unscientific



and ignoring our sensitivities.

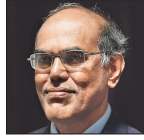
● Trump says India purchases most of its defence equipment from Russia. As a large and sovereign country, India reserves the right to decide its defence partnerships. Over the past 60 years, Russia has remained a consistent and trusted defence partner for India, while US has often aligned with India’s rivals, especially Pakistan. US may be fast losing a trusted friend in Asia-Pacific and an important Quad member.

● Fourth, Trump criticises India (and China) for buying large quantities of oil from Russia at a time

## The Central Thing About Our Central Bank

What US gov’t’s doing to Fed boss is way worse than usual GOI-RBI tensions. But GOI’s got to prize RBI autonomy more. Our financial system is weaker and fiscal constraints greater

Duvvuri Subbarao



Former governor, RBI

Last week, Trump did something that was unusual even by his standards – he paid a visit to US Federal Reserve, just four blocks from the White House, ostensibly to inspect what he called an overly extravagant renovation of its office building. Coming on the heels of his public pressure on the Fed to cut interest rates, and veiled threats to fire Fed chair Jerome Powell, the visit crossed lines that were once deemed sacrosanct.

It’s hard to imagine something similar happening in India. Picture Modi showing up at Reserve Bank of India’s headquarters in Mumbai to check if the office is too lavish. The rupee would likely tank, and investor confidence would be rattled.

Even in America, with deep financial markets and resilient institutions, Trump’s confrontational stance towards the Fed has unsettled investors. Central bank independence (once considered non-negotiable) is now increasingly up for debate. This has serious implications for countries like India, where a credible and trusted monetary authority is foundational to macroeconomic stability.

At its core, central bank independence rests on a simple but vital idea: monetary policy must be guided by long-term economic goals. You cannot rely on a democratically elected govt behaving responsibly if it’s given control of the currency printing press.

It will run the press overtime, especially in the run-up to elections, to stimulate the economy – no matter that the action will debase money and impair long-term sustainability. An independent central bank acts as a crucial institutional guardrail against such temptations.

That independence, however, comes with responsibility. Central banks need to be accountable for their results. This means engaging transparently with elected representatives and explaining their actions. Govts, on their part, must respect boundaries and should not seek to reduce central banks to instruments of the executive.

It’s worth remembering that RBI, established in 1935, was not born independent. For decades, it functioned as an extension of the finance ministry,

with govt deciding interest rates and dictating how much money should be printed.

Only after the 1991 economic reforms did RBI begin to gain real autonomy. This was further institutionalised with the adoption of an inflation-targeting framework in 2016, giving the central bank a formal mandate and greater policy credibility.

Across the world, no matter how the autonomy of the central bank is written into the rulebook, tensions with govts have not gone away. Here in India, we have had our share.

YV Reddy, the governor before me, was cautious on capital flows and complex derivatives, which was at odds with finance ministry’s stance of more rapid financial liberalisation. We now know in hindsight that his prudence helped shield India from the worst of the 2008 global financial crisis.

During my tenure as governor from 2008 to 2013, I had several skirmishes with finance ministers Chidambaram and Pranab Mukherjee on interest rate setting. While GOI pushed for rate cuts to support growth, we at RBI had to prioritise inflation control. In my book *Who Moved My Interest Rate*, I wrote about the pressures I faced and the challenge of navigating between autonomy and accountability.

Raghuram Rajan’s tenure (2013–2016) is widely seen as a high point in central banking because he was instrumental in ushering in the inflation targeting framework. However, his term was marked by friction because his views on inflation, banking reform, and even tolerance in society were not always welcomed politically.

The most public confrontation came during Urjit Patel’s term. Disagreements over the size of RBI’s reserves, regulatory control over non-bank finance companies and oversight of public sector banks eventually led to his abrupt resignation in Dec 2018. This resignation rattled markets and ignited legitimate concerns about institutional independence.

These episodes underscore a important point:



spats between RBI and GOI are not new, nor are they necessarily unhealthy. Constructive tension is part of a functioning democracy. But when these tensions degenerate into pressure tactics or public confrontations, they can erode trust, spook investors and weaken RBI’s credibility.

If independence is to be protected, it must be coupled with structured accountability. One reform worth considering is for RBI governor to appear regularly before a parliamentary committee, possibly the standing committee on finance, to testify on inflation, monetary policy and the economic outlook.

These sessions should be openly televised, just like the Fed chair’s half-yearly testimony before US Congress. This would enhance transparency, build public trust and, crucially, protect RBI from informal or behind-the-scenes pressure. It would allow the governor to defend decisions in a forum of democratic legitimacy.

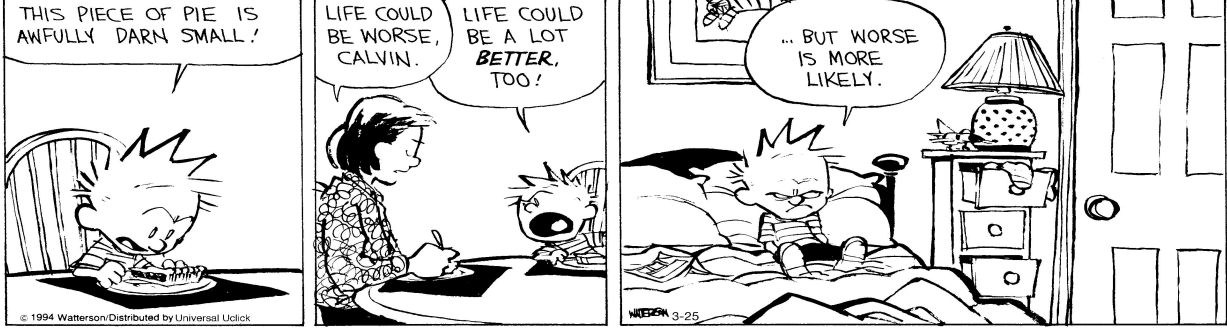
India’s macroeconomic context makes central bank independence especially critical. Inflation targeting is still new. Public sector banks are not yet robust. Fiscal pressures persist. RBI must be able to take tough, sometimes unpopular decisions to ensure long-term stability.

Furthermore, India’s credibility with global investors rests in part on the perceived independence of its institutions. Political interference into RBI could trigger capital outflows, currency depreciation, and investor flight. Importantly, RBI is one of the few checks in a system with not many counterweights to the executive. It thus plays a stabilising role not just in markets, but in governance.

Trump is obviously setting new standards of political interference into central banking. It will be tempting for govts elsewhere to follow his example. That will be a costly mistake.

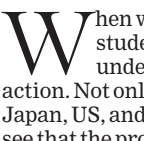
For India, still grappling with inflation, fiscal constraints, and a maturing financial system, preserving Reserve Bank’s independence is not just important. It is imperative.

### Calvin & Hobbes



## Beyond Test Scores: Helping Students Find Meaning

Nayaswami Nitai



When we read about yet another student suicide, it calls for understanding and some action. Not only in India, but also in Japan, US, and countries worldwide, we see that the problem is severe.

A friend of mine shares the story that during her teens, she concluded that life had no meaning and that for her the best way out was to commit suicide. While waiting for the right moment to act, she was drawn to an article by Paramhansa Yogananda. He mentioned that suicide, like other major decisions, creates a pattern, and that over a few incarnations, it can become habitual. In this cycle, a soul will continue to incarnate until it can overcome the same life lessons that it has encountered previously. She had never heard anyone present suicide as a ‘bad’ habit, some-

thing she would need to break. She always thought of it as an alternative to the endless ups and downs that come from looking for happiness outside oneself. With this new perspective, she was able to accept life’s challenges and move forward in facing them.

While studies point to a wide variety of causes for student suicide, academic pressure is one of the most common and one of the most preventable. The intense focus on high test scores creates tremendous stress for students, as evidenced by the fact that children as young as seven and eight are subjected to hours of after-school tutoring.

The root cause of this pressure is the widespread belief among parents and teachers that high test scores will significantly enhance a student’s chances of

securing a good job. This perspective is outdated. Guy Halfteck, CEO, Knack, reports: “Cognitive ability is a small fraction of what we measure. We measure everything from creative abilities to emotional and social intelligence, to how you think and make decisions.”

It is time for us to defuse the frenzy around test scores, not only for those who might take their lives, but for all those students who are burdened by these unnecessary and harmful pressures. A more balanced approach is presented in India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Making space for critical thinking and more holistic, inquiry-based, discovery-based, discussion-based, and analysis-based learning.

To shift from student stress to student enthusiasm, we need



THE SPEAKING TREE

Sacred space



Be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway, just be a trail. If you can't be a sun, be a star. For it isn't by size that you win or fail. Be the best of whatever you are.

Martin Luther King Jr