



Too good to last

The headwinds facing the economy are not going away soon

India's relatively strong industrial performance in November 2025, especially driven by the manufacturing sector as it was, was more likely a flash in the pan than the start of a consistent trend. The Index of Industrial Production (IIP) grew 6.7% in November, the fastest growth rate in 25 months. Within this, the manufacturing sector grew 8%, which also was the fastest in 25 months. On the face of it, this would look remarkable and heartening, especially since October 2025 had seen growth slow to a 14-month low. However, this surge in growth was more likely due to seasonal and one-off factors. According to economists, the strongest push for growth came from sellers re-stocking their supplies following the festive season. The second factor is that the government timed the Goods and Services Tax (GST) rate reductions to coincide with the festive season. This temporary bump in demand would have further eroded stock levels, which then need to be replenished. In fact, the consumer durables and non-durables sectors saw growth in November rebounding to 10.3% and 7.3%, a 12-month and 25-month high, respectively. The third factor that seems to have worked in November is the bounce back of the mining sector following two months of contractions due to an unseasonably long monsoon. The mining sector saw growth come in at a reasonably strong 5.4% in November 2025. All of these are legitimate reasons for growth to pick up, but are not sustainable ones. The electricity and mining sectors will be bound by the vagaries of the weather. Overall consumer demand has been sluggish and industry players are talking of the GST-related boost already ebbing. And the festive season will not come back around until October-November 2026.

In fact, the IIP grew just 3.3% in the longer April-November period, the lowest for these eight months in any of the post-COVID-19 pandemic years. The consumer non-durables sector contracted 1% during this period, showing that the boost in November is not indicative. That the strong growth in November is more an anomaly than a sign of things to come should not come as a surprise. The Reserve Bank of India, earlier this month, predicted that growth in Q3 would slow to 7% from an average of 8% in the first two quarters. The fourth quarter is predicted to slow even further, to 6.5%. All of the previous headwinds still exist. The 50% tariffs by the U.S. are still in place, private investment remains sluggish, foreign capital is pulling out of the country, the weakening rupee is making imports more expensive for an import-dependent economy, real wages are not growing fast enough, and consumer demand remains tepid. Ironically, November's positive industrial data bring into focus the headwinds the economy is really facing.

Track record

The Indian Railways must spare no expense in installing safety features

The Tatanagar-Ernakulam Express fire accident in Andhra Pradesh was a major one, in terms of severity if not the extent of casualties. Chance, quick thinking and timely action by railway staff and other agencies as well as enhanced safety measures adopted by the railways over time likely contributed to a low toll – one passenger. That the accident happened in the train's air-conditioned (a/c) coaches, however, points to the need for increased requirements in these coaches in terms of fire safety and response. At around 12.40 a.m. on Monday, as the train approached Yelamanchili station, a passenger sounded the alarm after apparently noticing a fire. The use of the emergency chain alerted the train crew who took the train to the loop line which had a platform. The train was not scheduled to stop at Yelamanchili. This helped passengers alight safely. The insides of two a/c coaches were gutted in the fire that agencies put out in about two hours.

Over the years, the safety record of the Indian Railways has improved. The total number of accidents in 2024-25 was down by more than 70% compared to 10 years ago. Major accidents have, however, seen ups and downs year on year without an appreciable fall. Fire accidents account for some 10% to 20% of accidents in a typical year. Fires are triggered by rolling stock defects and errors on the part of the railways as well as by passengers who carry inflammable, even explosive articles. The cause of the Tatanagar-Ernakulam Express fire is not decisively known as yet and an inquiry has been ordered. Fire in a/c coaches has been a cause of concern and the railways has focused on them for fitment of fire warning and fighting systems such as portable extinguishers. The *Indian Railways Annual Report & Accounts 2023-24* notes that fire and smoke detection systems have been fitted in some 20,000 a/c coaches; the goal is to fit all a/c coaches, including new ones, with such systems. The report says that all a/c as well as non-a/c coaches in passenger trains have fire extinguishers. Railway authorities say that the fire alarm system in the Tatanagar-Ernakulam Express coach activated upon detection of smoke/fire, adding that the coach mechanic, bedroll staff and the travelling ticket examiner alerted the passengers and used the fire extinguishers, which helped control the fire. Perhaps fixed fire extinguishing systems, which can also be used in electrical fires, can be considered for a/c coaches in all trains. These activate automatically in case a fire is detected and douse it completely. No safety feature is too expensive.

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s 2025 draws to a close, a highlight is that the United States has undertaken its largest troop mobilisation in the Caribbean in decades. Its Navy has deployed its most advanced aircraft carrier, along with fighter jets, amphibious vessels, attack submarines and tens of thousands of troops, as it intensifies its pressure on Venezuela in an effort to force President Nicolás Maduro from power.

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy (NSS), released in early December 2025, identifies Latin America and the Caribbean as a strategic priority. Reviving the 19th century Monroe Doctrine, the document asserts that the U.S. must deny influence or control by outside powers (read China) in Latin America and ensure that the Western Hemisphere remains under American political, economic and military influence.

The push to reinforce American primacy in Latin America coincides with U.S. President Donald Trump's waning interest in Europe, another long-standing U.S. sphere of influence.

Since the end of the Second World War, the U.S. has served as Europe's primary security

guarantor. If Washington kept western Europe together through a tightly knit alliance during the Cold War, it expanded this security umbrella to eastern Europe after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, creating a large transatlantic bloc.

Under Mr. Trump, however, the U.S. is no longer interested in shouldering the burden of European security – a position explicitly articulated in the NSS. Why is America, at a moment when Russia and China are seeking to overturn the U.S.-built and U.S.-led security and economic order,

stepping back from Europe while moving to consolidate its influence in the Western Hemisphere?

It is difficult to discern a cohesive doctrine in Mr. Trump's foreign policy, marked by the President's impulses and unpredictability. Yet, even these impulses, this unpredictability and his ideological orientation rooted in Christian nationalism and America's might cannot ignore the structural shifts reshaping the international order. Mr. Trump is not the 'President of peace' that he claims to be – he has already bombed six countries, even if he has stopped short of a full-scale war.

At the same time, Mr. Trump, despite his rhetoric about American military and economic dominance, recognises that he no longer lives in a unipolar world. His reluctant aggression and strategic recalibration are reflections of the changes now taking shape in the global balance of power.

Three great powers

When the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991, a new order emerged with the U.S. at its centre. There was no other great power positioned to challenge American primacy. The unipolar moment, however, has since passed. While future historians may better identify the precise point of



Stanley Johny

rupture, one such moment was Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. The ensuing conflict in eastern Ukraine, the rapid western response, and Russia's ability to endure despite sanctions reinforced the limits of the 'rules-based order'.

The end of unipolarity, however, does not mean the end of American dominance. The U.S. remains, and will remain, for the foreseeable future, the world's pre-eminent military and economic power. What has changed is that Washington is no longer the sole great power shaping geopolitical outcomes. China and Russia now occupy that space as well, deepening what Realists think describes as the inherently anarchic nature of the international system.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was America's principal rival, and in the 1970s, Washington reached out to China to exploit fissures within the communist bloc. Today, the U.S. identifies China as its principal and systemic challenger. This, in turn, leaves open the possibility of a reset in ties with Russia – an idea embraced by Mr. Trump's MAGA (Make America Great Again) ideologues, who frame Russia as part of a shared 'Christian civilisation'.

The reigning power versus the rising power
The U.S. faces a unique challenge in China. The Soviet economy, in its prime in the early 1970s, reached about 57% of the U.S. GDP, before it began slowing down. China's economy, now the world's second largest, already amounts to about 66% of the U.S. economy. China continues to grow at a faster pace, steadily narrowing the gap.

As China's economic power expands, it is being converted into military capability (it has already built the world's largest Navy, by number of ships). Like other great powers, Beijing is seeking to establish regional hegemony and global dominance. So, a prolonged contest between the U.S., the reigning power, and China, the rising power, appears unavoidable. The situation is comparable to 19th century Europe, when a rising imperial Germany threatened to upstage Britain during Pax Britannica, unsettling the 'Concert of Europe'.

Russia is the weakest link among the three powers. It is a relatively smaller economy with a shrinking sphere of influence. But Russia's nuclear arsenals, expansive geography, abundant energy and mineral resources and its demonstrated willingness to use force to achieve its strategic objectives keep it in the great power constellation. From Moscow's perspective, the country drifted into the wilderness in the 1990s before announcing its return in 2008 with the war in Georgia. Since then, it has sought to rewrite the post-Soviet security architecture in Europe. As the West, having expanded the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into the Russian sphere of influence, responded to Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine with sweeping sanctions on Russia and military support for Kyiv, Moscow moved even closer to China. Russia and China

have found common ground in opposing the western 'rules-based order' – Russia thinks that the order denies it its rightful place in the world and seeks to revise it accordingly, while China, by contrast, as Rush Doshi argues in *The Long Game*, wants to replace it with a China-centric order.

Fluid multipolarity

All three great powers today understand that the world is no longer organised around a single centre of authority. In that sense, the world is already multipolar. But unlike the post-Second World War and post-Cold War transitions, the structures of the new order have yet to fully emerge. During the Cold War, the world was divided into two ideological blocs and two largely separate economic systems. Today, China lacks the kind of satellite state networks that characterised the 20th century superpowers, while the U.S. is reassessing the sustainability of its alliance frameworks, including its commitment to Europe.

Russia, with its own great power ambitions, is wary of being seen as a Chinese ally irrespective of its close strategic partnership with Beijing. This opens a window for a Washington-Moscow reset. But the war in Ukraine remains a stumbling block. Russia may not want to challenge America's global leadership, but it certainly wants to re-establish its primacy in its sphere of influence.

Thus, there are three great powers with divergent interests that are pulling the global order in different directions, rendering the emerging multipolarity fluid rather than a structured system akin to the post-Second World War order. This also means that middle powers, including superpower allies such as Japan and Germany, and autonomous actors such as India and Brazil, would continue to hedge their bets.

Mr. Trump wants Europe to shoulder greater responsibility for its own security, reset relations with Russia, and reassert American primacy in its immediate neighbourhood even as Washington prepares for a prolonged great power competition with China. The idea is to return to the classic offshore balancing. Even if Mr. Trump fails in executing it, future American Presidents may not be able to ignore the shifts that he has initiated. Russia, for its part, seeks to carve out a sphere of influence. China aims to preserve its close strategic partnership with Russia to keep the Eurasian landmass within its orbit, while establishing regional hegemony in East and Southeast Asia – moves that would cement its status as a long-term superpower, much as the U.S. did by asserting its hegemony in the Western Hemisphere in the 19th century, and across the Atlantic in the 20th century. In this fluid landscape, Russia has emerged as the new 'swing great power' between the two superpowers, paradoxically lending the emerging multipolar order a distinctly bipolar character.

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A multipolar world with bipolar characteristics

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The three great powers understand that the world is no longer organised around a single centre of authority.



Chidanand Banerjee
is Director General, Confederation of Indian Industry (CII)

skilled mobility, they offer alternatives and stability for India's youth and knowledge workers.

New Zealand has agreed to eliminate duties on 100% of its tariff lines, giving duty-free access to all Indian exports, while India has offered market access on 70% of its tariff lines. Benefits could accrue to India in labour-intensive sectors: textiles, apparel, leather, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals and farm products. Also, duty-free intermediate inputs such as wooden logs, coal, metal waste and scrap would lower manufacturing costs for final products, especially in steel, engineering goods and construction.

Inclusion of an annex on health and traditional medicine services creates new opportunities for India's pharmaceutical and health care sectors, giving them an edge over competitors such as China and the European Union. It would also reinforce India's growing role as a global health partner.

Agriculture, often a sensitive area in trade negotiations, has been handled with balance. The FTA envisages value chain development through knowledge transfers and agri-technology collaboration on apples, kiwifruit, and honey. The livelihood of farmers, however, will not stand compromised since no duty concessions have been made in dairy, sugar, spices and edible oils.

Challenges in optimal utilisation

Overall bilateral trade, which was approximately \$2.4 billion in 2024-25, is projected to double by 2030, post implementation of the FTA. However, it must be heeded that the success of any FTA lies in how it is utilised. In the past, India has exhibited a low utilisation rate of only about 25%, as contrast with developed economies touching 70%-80%. FTAs often remain underused due to awareness gaps, compliance challenges, and non-tariff barriers (NTBs). However, the India-New Zealand FTA has provisions to address technical barriers to trade through enhanced

regulatory cooperation, streamlined customs procedures and transparency.

Once implemented, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) recommends optimally leveraging the trade pact, with business associations, large enterprises and policymakers sharing responsibility to build awareness and developing capabilities to translate the negotiated benefits into effective market access. They should also look beyond tariffs and expand services trade, deepen skills and education linkages, and leverage mobility and diaspora networks.

A strong foundation exists

The FTA can build on the strong foundations of a growing middle class, a skilled workforce, and a reform-driven, innovation-based Indian economy. It carries elements of global integrated production and service export growth (India already ranks among the top five globally), both of which can propel Indian firms up global value chains and towards the \$7 trillion economy goal by 2030. Notably, with the India-New Zealand FTA deal, India has now concluded economic partnership agreements with all Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) members, except China.

Notwithstanding the modest quantum of bilateral trade, the significance of the India-New Zealand FTA lies not just in trade data. Rather, it marks a coming of age in the way India is viewed on the world stage. The kind of access in terms of labour mobility and services that New Zealand is willing to extend to India, reflects growing strategic trust from developed economies in bilateral economic engagements. This is a particularly welcome development amid India's trade talks with other partners, including the European Union, lending credence to India as a country with a stable trade policy, and capable of establishing norms of effective cooperation through balanced, high-quality agreements that protect domestic interests while promoting openness and growth.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Save the Aravalli ranges

Reducing an ancient mountain system to a metric definition threatened to destroy a vital ecological system (Front page, 'SC pauses judgment on Aravalli, moots new panel', December 30). Mining permissions, once granted, are rarely reversible. The fresh look at the Aravalli ranges must begin from the basics – ecosystems function as connected gradients, not isolated hillocks. 'Sustainable mining' exists only on

paper. Precaution must guide outcomes.

K. Chidanand Kumar,
Bengaluru

Wheels of justice

The top court did well to stay the suspension of the sentence of former MLA and

expelled BJP leader Kuldeep Singh Sengar in the Unnao rape case (Front page, December 30). The case highlights the blatant disregard for law and authority. It serves as a powerful symbol of the struggle for gender justice. Unfortunately, it also

and accountability, particularly when crimes are perpetrated against women by those who are powerful. One should appreciate the survivor's perseverance to draw attention to her plight. Unfortunately, it also

highlights the measures survivors must sometimes take to initiate action against powerful people.

R. Sivakumar,
Chennai

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

Prioritising cleft care as a health issue

More than 7,50,000 cleft surgeries were performed in India in the last 25 years by the international NGO Smile Train. This amounts to 30,000 surgeries annually. It is the highest by any organisation in the private or public sector. But the figures don't shine in India where one in 700 children are born with lip and/or palate deformity every year and there is a backlog of 7,000 corrective surgeries annually.

Smile Train India is among the NGOs that support and partner with skilled surgeons to provide free cleft surgeries and related care. While its contribution has benefited 7.5 lakh children so far, others, including Mission Smile, Operation Smile, Transforming Cleft and Healing Smile Foundation, have collectively benefited another 15 lakh children in the last 20 years. Their efforts deserve appreciation. However, they still fall short in India, which, despite recording the highest number of cleft births globally, has no national epidemiological data on cleft lip/palate.

Cleft lip/palate is a facial birth defect that occurs when certain tissues and structures do not fuse during pregnancy due to genetic factor or maternal nutrition deficiencies. It leaves newborns with a gap in the upper lip and the roof of the mouth. Independent surveys estimate that 36,000 babies are born with cleft abnormalities in India every year. About 68% of them rely on government hospitals for initial diagnosis, yet there are 17.5 lakh children with unrepairable clefts.

The situation in India
The situation is complex: there is lack of documentation of birth anomalies, and parental counselling on care and treatment is woefully inadequate. Also, the high cost of surgery deters families from seeking help. A decade ago, the Lancet Surgery Commission estimated a burden of 18.7% un-treated Orofacial Clefts (OFC) in India. A 2022 report of the



Soma Basu

Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington's School of Medicine, stated that children with OFCs in India were 1.5 times more vulnerable to severe malnutrition compared to other children under five. It also says one-third of the cleft lip and palate-related malnutrition deaths can be prevented with timely surgical treatment and proper nutrition.

Free or subsidised surgery and follow-up treatment are provided by NGOs in collaboration with mostly city-based private hospitals because government hospitals lack specialised infrastructure and trained personnel. The fragmented cleft care offered by government hospitals are not aggregated in public databases, maybe because India is yet to nationally recognise craniofacial anomalies as a notifiable disease.

The World Health Organization has formally recognised craniofacial anomaly in the Global Burden of Disease initiative. This is what perhaps led the NITI Aayog to initiate conversations around birth defects. The National Birth Defect Awareness Month launched in August 2024 on the theme 'Breaking Barriers: inclusive support for children with birth defects including clefts' helped discuss prevention, early identification, and timely management of common congenital malformations.

Surgeons play a key role in minimising birth defects. While people think of cleft lip and/or palate as a cosmetic deformity, it impacts a child's ability to speak, swallow, hear, and breathe. If not surgically corrected, babies with a cleft lip have difficulty nursing and require special feeding techniques. Children with a cleft lip get bullied and struggle with school and with communication. Employment and marriage become challenging. All this leads to psychological trauma and affects confidence. Ignorance and superstitions strengthen the stigma surrounding the disfigurement, and treatment is

marked by a rural-urban divide.

Every health challenge requires collaboration. Smile Train India and others address the gaps in cleft services with a sustainable and scalable global health model. This empowers local doctors as equal partners by providing support in training and covering surgical costs. As per the 2011 Census, 68.8% of the population in rural areas need to be covered aggressively. Bal Swasthya Karyakram and ASHA for clear communication on early screening of birth defects and deficiencies is a way forward. In the absence of hospital partners in interior areas, timely medical intervention, with incentives that cover travel cost, surgery and hospital stay, and post-operative support including speech therapy, is imperative.

The way forward
UNICEF estimates that about 2.5 crore children are born in India annually. The 2022 National Family Health Survey states that 1.35 crore children are born in government hospitals, where cleft care in detected cases can ideally start at birth and life-transforming surgery can be done after three months of birth. It is time for policymakers to recognise cleft deformity as a health issue and opt for better management at the grassroots level, where there is limited awareness and access. The government can devise a multi-level approach to address under served communities. NGOs are trying to expand the footprint but government hospitals, where almost 50% of India's children are born, need to upgrade.

Health experts say cleft missions help strengthen government healthcare systems by improving surgical infrastructure, increasing access to affordable care, training the local workforce, and breaking social taboos. The success of cleft surgeries is measured by improved functionality, which depends on the age at which the child is brought for treatment.

Deaths most dishonourable

Laws alone may not be enough as long as notions of caste superiority exist

STATE OF PLAY

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Karnataka

In one of the most sinister crimes in the year drawing to a close, a 19-year-old Manya Vivekananda Doddamani was lethally attacked by her father and his supporters at Inam Veerapur village in Dharwad district in north Karnataka on December 21. The grievously injured woman, married a few months ago and pregnant, died in the hospital.

What provoked the attack was the marriage of an "upper" caste woman to a "lower" caste man, thereby bringing "dishonour" to her family and clan. Manya (née Manya Patil) was a Lingayat, and her decision to marry a Madiga (Scheduled Caste) man had incurred the family's wrath.

The couple had married in May despite strong opposition. The talukadar and the police had intervened, calling both families for a truce. The police registered a case as a precautionary measure. Perceiving threat, the couple had shifted to neighbouring Havare. However, assuming that tempers had cooled, a pregnant Manya and her husband had returned to her native village in December only to learn in the most tragic way that they were wrong.

Manya's father, Prakashgouda Patil, and five co-accused are now in custody, while the police are on the lookout for the others among the 15 accused. Two police personnel and a panchayat development officer have been suspended for dereliction of duty. Manya's husband and in-laws also sustained injuries in the attack and are now recovering.

Though there is no segre-

gated data on "honour" killings for 2025 in Karnataka, there were some widely reported cases. In August, 52-year-old Shankar Kolur was arrested from Melakunda village in Kalaburagi district for allegedly murdering his 18-year-old daughter, Kavita. A nursing student from the Lingayat community, she was in love with a Kuruba boy.

In February, the death of a 21-year-old woman, from the Kuruba caste, by drowning in Harohalli on the outskirts of Bengaluru was flagged by her boyfriend, a Naidu, as "honour" killing, though the police recorded it as an accident.

In January, a district court in Gadag in north Karnataka sentenced four men to death for murdering an inter-caste couple – Gangamma Rathod from the Lambani community ("touchable" SC) and her husband Ramesh Madar, from the Madiga community ("SC Left") – in 2019. The circumstances leading to the death were similar to Manya's. The couple had married in 2017 despite the family's opposition and left their native village Lakkalakatti in Gadag district. They had returned under the false notion that old wounds had healed.

Even though northern States such as Haryana, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh typically hit headlines for "honour" killings, "progressive" States such as Karnataka are

clearly not above such crimes. In a paper titled, "In the name of 'Honour'" published in 2024, the People's Union for Civil Liberties-Karnataka recorded 13 cases of "honour" attacks from January-2022 to December-2023 where 12 people were murdered. "These killings have taken place in seven districts across Karnataka. Each case is a shocking reminder of the brutal lengths that people have gone to oppose inter-caste and inter-faith fraternising," read the paper. "In most of the killings in 2022-23, the victim was a woman belonging to the more dominant community. The perpetrators were men in her family."

Since the incident in Veerapur village earlier this month, there have been protests by Dalit and other progressive organisations. One of their principal demands is a separate law to tackle "honour" crimes and name it after Manya. In the recent winter session of the Legislature, Karnataka passed the Karnataka Protection of People from Social Boycott (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Bill, 2025, for preventing social boycott and discrimination by caste or community panchayats.

While there are provisions in existing laws to prevent caste-related violence, it could be argued that special laws add another layer of fortification. But such fortifications are not hard to breach as long as caste hierarchies and notions of caste superiority have social acceptance. One of the arguments against the caste survey in Karnataka (and elsewhere in India as well) by the "upper" castes has been that such an exercise resurrects archaic practices that have no currency in Viksits Bharat. Manya's death is a tragically eloquent testimony to the fallacy of this argument.

Why programming is losing its 'gold standard' status to GenAI

AI proficiency is outpacing traditional coding in both demand and dollar value

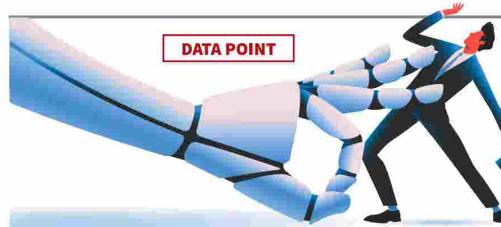


CHART 1: While skills like programming, mathematics, and teaching are receding in importance, AI & Big Data and 'Creative Thinking' are taking centre stage as core requirements for the future. Amid this change, technology literacy – defined as the ability to adapt digital tools to solve real-world problems – remains a critical asset for the modern workforce

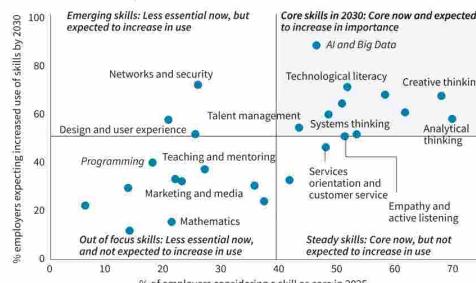


CHART 2: With AI and Big Data requiring fewer than half the learning hours of programming to reach beginner proficiency, the tech landscape is shifting rapidly. This transition is being driven by young challengers who are entering the field fast and fast, leveraging their ability to master new tools far more quickly than the established workforce. The chart shows the **average learning hours needed** to achieve various proficiency levels

	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced
AI and Big Data	30.4	83.8	136.8
Design and user experience	32.0	72.4	107.9
Networks and cybersecurity	57.3	107.8	155.3
Programming	67.3	116.3	144.0
Technological literacy	61.2	116.2	143.5

CHART 5: The chart shows the capacity of GenAI to transform a given skill as a share of all granular skills within each skill group

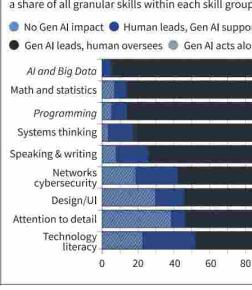


CHART 3: While AI and Big Data skills can be acquired in half the time it takes to learn programming, Coursera's 2025 data reveals that the total hours spent on AI-related learning is six times higher than for programming. This signals that millions are pivoting toward AI to future-proof their careers



CHART 4: Within the broader field of AI, Gen AI-specific learning has seen explosive growth. Following an initial surge during the pandemic, interest in AI competencies accelerated sharply in 2022. While core AI skills continued their expansion, demand for Gen AI skyrocketed following the release of ChatGPT

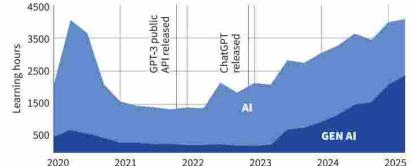


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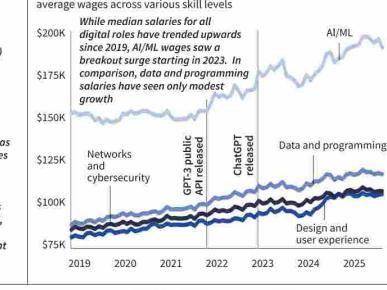
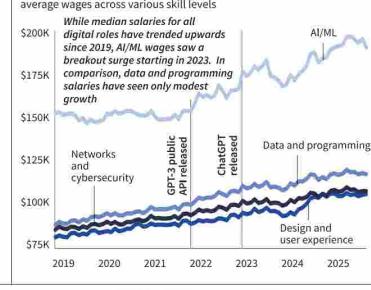


CHART 6: The chart shows the seven-month moving average of average wages across various skill levels



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO DECEMBER 31, 1975

Declarations cross Rs. 600 crore mark: Big rush

New Delhi, Dec. 30: Declarations under the voluntary disclosure scheme had crossed the Rs. 600 crore mark in the country by this evening, official sources said.

With just 24 hours to go, there had been heavy declarations all over the country, the sources added.

Declarations in Delhi alone amounted to Rs. 83 crores.

In Rourkela police had to intervene to pacify the declarants when the State Bank of India staff, unable to cope with the rush, refused to accept their payments after 2 p.m. according to information reaching the Income-Tax headquarters in Bhubaneswar.

There was an unusually long queue of persons waiting at receiving counter of the bank since the morning. When the staff refused to accept payments after 2 p.m., the crowd stormed the counters.

The Rourkela Income-Tax officers sought police help to control the situation and persuaded the bank official to accept the payments.

Tamil Nadu As many as 1,420 persons in Tamil Nadu to-day, disclosed concealed wealth and income amounting to Rs. 15 crores.

An official spokesman said the disclosures had so far amounted to Rs. 57 crores in the State.

Kerala: A sum of over Rs. 13.6 crores of concealed income and wealth has been disclosed so far in Kerala under the voluntary disclosure scheme.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO DECEMBER 31, 1925

Philadelphia exhibition

London, Dec. 29: Plans are being rapidly completed for Indian representation at the Sesquicentennial Exposition at Philadelphia, for which an area of 132,000 square feet has been allotted. The pavilion, which covers an area of 52,000 square feet, will have a handsome facade reminiscent of the best type of Moghul architecture with a stately space for the exhibitions of 120,000 sq. feet, half of which has been provisionally booked. Stalls have been fixed at two pounds sterling per square foot which covers the cost of erection of the pavilion and overhead charges. The features will include a tourist section, an Indian restaurant and a theatre in which Indian conjurers, acrobats and Burnese dancers will give displays.

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

Amount pledged by United States for UN humanitarian aid

2 in \$ billion instead of handing funds to individual agencies, the U.S. will funnel its contributions through the UN aid agency OCHA, headed by Tom Fletcher, which earlier this year launched a so-called Humanitarian Reset to improve efficiency and accountability. The U.S. funds — welcomed by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres — will then be distributed to 17 selected countries. *AP*

Suspects detained by Turkiye police in raids against Islamic State

357 The raids came a day after a deadly clash in the northwestern province of Yalova, where three police officers and six IS militants were killed. Eight other officers and a night guard were wounded when police stormed a house used as a hideout. Turkiye has launched a series of operations against suspected IS cells in the past week. *AP*

Telangana sees a downward trend in crime rate in 2025

2.33% Crime rates in Telangana saw a slight downward trend in 2025, with total cases dropping to 2.29 lakh — a 2.33% decrease — from the 2.34 lakh cases reported last year. According to police data released on Tuesday, over 500 underground CPI (Maoist) cadre, surrendered in the outgoing year. *PTI*

Dip in registration of residential properties in Indian cities in 2025

5% Registration of residential properties declined 5% to 5.45 lakh units till December 25 this year across nine cities, while value rose 11% to ₹4.46 crore, according to Square Yards. The real estate consultant released the data of properties registered in Pune, Thane, Mumbai, Navi Mumbai, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Noida, Greater Noida and Ghaziabad. *PTI*

Number of flights cancelled due to fog conditions in Delhi

118 About 16 flights diverted and 130 services delayed at the Delhi airport on Tuesday as dense fog disrupted operations. The Indira Gandhi International Airport handles around 1,300 flights daily. An official said 60 arrivals and 58 departures were cancelled while 16 flights were diverted at the airport. *PTI*

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Law on 'suspension of sentence'

In life imprisonment cases like Kuldeep Singh Sengar's, what factors must appellate courts weigh before suspending a sentence? Does the Delhi High Court's view that an MLA is not a 'public servant' under the POCSO framework expose a gap that weakens protection against aggravated abuses by elected representatives?

LETTER & SPIRIT

Kartik Singh

In December 29, a three-judge vacation bench of the Supreme Court, comprising CJI Surya Kant, Justice J.K. Maheshwari and Justice A.G. Masih, issued notice and stayed the Delhi High Court's judgment suspending the life sentence of a former four-time MLA, Kuldeep Singh Sengar and granting him bail pending appeal in the 2017 infamous Unnao rape case. The intervention came just six days after the High Court, on December 23, suspended Sengar's life sentence, which triggered intense public debate.

The case stems from allegations that in June 2017, the survivor, then a minor, was raped by the convict, the then-sitting MLA, at his residence. Amid allegations of police inaction and intimidation, the probe was transferred to the CBI in April 2018, and the trial shifted to Delhi pursuant to the SC's directions. On December 16, 2019, the trial court in Delhi convicted Sengar, and by a separate order on December 20, 2019, sentenced him to imprisonment for the remainder of his natural life.

Once a trial concludes, an accused is either acquitted or convicted. A conviction displaces the "presumption of innocence" and renders the sentence operative, requiring the convict to undergo the awarded punishment. However, the conviction remains appealable, and during the pendency of appellate scrutiny, the convict may, under Section 389 of the CrPC, 1973 (now Section 430 of the BNS, 2023), seek suspension of the execution of the sentence and consequential bail if in custody, keeping its enforcement in abeyance. Importantly, "suspension of sentence", which is a discretionary judicial power, halts only the punishment and not the finding of guilt.

When do courts suspend a sentence? The law draws a clear distinction between 'suspension of sentence' in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, where it is the norm, and in serious offences, often punishable with life imprisonment, where it is an exception. In *Bhagwan Rama Shinde Gosai vs. State of Gujarat* (1999), the SC held that when a fixed-term sentence is under appeal, appellate courts must liberally exercise their discretion to suspend the sentence, barring exceptional circumstances. Conversely, in serious offences of those punishable with life imprisonment, such as Sengar's case, 'suspension of sentence' under Section 389 CrPC is rare and must follow an objective assessment of factors including the nature and gravity of the offence, the manner of its commission, and the desirability of releasing the convict on bail, as reiterated by the top court in *Shivani Tyagi vs. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2024) in an acid attack case.

In allowing Sengar's suspension of sentence, the High Court focused primarily on his conviction under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act, which criminalises "aggravated" penetrative sexual assault by a "public servant" on a child and attracts punishment under Section 6. Under the criminal law framework, offences committed by persons in positions of trust or authority, such as police or armed force personnel, public servants, and staff of educational institutions, including hospitals, jails, or educational



Public voices: Women stage a protest demanding justice for the Unnao gangrape victim outside Delhi High Court in New Delhi. *ANI*

establishments, are treated as "aggravated" and subjected to enhanced punishment, reflecting legislative recognition of abuse of power and heightened victim vulnerability.

Definition of public servant Importantly, the POCSO Act does not define the term "public servant." Under Section 2(2) of the POCSO Act, undefined expressions shall draw their meaning from the IPC (1860), CrPC (1973), the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, or the Information Technology Act, 2000. Among these, only the IPC defines "public servant" under Section 21, encompassing categories such as judges, military officers, and arbitrators, etc., but not elected legislators. Relying on this statutory scheme and the top court's ruling in *R.S. Nayak vs. A.R. Antilay* (1984), the HC held that an MLA does not qualify as a "public servant" under the IPC and, consequently, the POCSO Act. This is a departure from the trial court's approach, which had sustained Sengar's conviction under Section 5(c) by importing the broader definition of "public servant" from Section 2(vii) of the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988, which includes any person holding an office to perform a public duty.

Consequently, the HC held, prima facie, that Sengar's case did not fall within the category of rape committed by a "public servant" under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act or Section 376(2)(b) IPC. This finding formed the central basis for suspending his sentence and granting regular bail. The HC also noted that Sengar had undergone over seven years of imprisonment, and, relying on *Kashmira Singh vs. State of Punjab* (1977), observed that prolonged incarceration could cause injustice if the conviction or sentence were ultimately modified.

Addressing the survivor's apprehension of threat, rooted in a documented history of systemic intimidation, the custodial death of her father (for which Sengar stands convicted under Section 30(4)(i) IPC), police callousness, and the 2019 truck-car accident that critically injured her and her lawyer and killed her two aunts, the HC noted that the SC had granted her CRPF protection in August 2019. Nevertheless, the HC held that "suspension of sentence" could not be denied solely on the apprehension that

police or paramilitary forces might fail in their protective duties, as such a premise would undermine their role.

In a case that laid bare a prolonged struggle for justice, structural barriers and deep institutional failures in confronting entrenched power, the suspension of a life sentence raises serious concerns.

First, while the HC is legally correct in holding that it could not expand the statutory definition of "public servant" by amending the legislation to import the broader meaning under the PCA, its interpretation could have been more purposive. The resulting anomaly is troubling: while a *patwari* (village accountant) or police constable qualifies as a "public servant" and attracts punishment under the POCSO Act, an elected MLA does not. This ambiguity in the POCSO framework was also flagged by the SC bench. By narrowing the scope of the POCSO Act, a special, victim-centric statute designed to protect children, the HC accorded insufficient weight to its object and intent. Offences under Section 5(c) are undoubtedly graver than corruption offences by MPs or MLAs: while corruption undermines governance, offences under the POCSO Act involve the direct abuse of children, causing severe physical and psychological trauma with lasting social consequences.

The apex court has repeatedly cautioned against interpretive literalism that weakens POCSO's protective core. In *Attorney General for India vs. Satish* (2021), it rejected the Bombay HC's untenable narrow interpretation that groping a minor through clothing, without direct "skin-to-skin" contact, did not amount to "touch" or "physical contact" so as to attract the offence of "sexual assault" under Section 7 of the POCSO Act. Similarly, in *Independent Thought vs. Union of India* (2017), the SC harmoniously and purposively interpreted child-protection law by reading down Exception 2 to Section 375 IPC, which had exempted non-consensual sexual intercourse with one's wife aged between 15 and 18, from the offence of rape. Together, these rulings affirm that when child protection is at stake, statutory interpretation must advance, not dilute, the law's protective purpose.

Second, the HC's decision rests primarily on the prima facie inapplicability of Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act and the period of

incarceration already undergone. However, the SC has held that in cases involving life imprisonment, "suspension of sentence" under Section 389 CrPC requires the appellate court to assess whether the convict has a fair chance of acquittal. Recently, in *Chhotelal Yadav vs. State of Jharkhand* (2025), the apex court set aside a "suspension of sentence", holding that in life imprisonment cases, suspension is warranted only where the convict demonstrates a palpable or gross error in the trial court's judgment sufficient to show that the appeal may succeed and result in acquittal. In Sengar's case, the HC ought to have examined whether the non-applicability of Section 5(c) would lead to his complete acquittal. Further, in *Shivani Tyagi vs. State of Uttar Pradesh* (2024), the SC clarified that long incarceration alone cannot justify "suspension of sentence" in life imprisonment cases.

In the same vein, in *Jamna Lal vs. State of Rajasthan* (2025), involving a POCSO conviction carrying a 20-year sentence, the SC set aside an order suspending sentence, holding that once the trial court has found the victim to be a minor, such a finding cannot be lightly unsettled on the suspension stage.

Third, the HC should have accorded greater weight to the undisputed record of intimidation and violence, including the survivor's father's death, alleged witness tampering, and the exceptional security measures required during trial.

What is next? The HC's literal interpretation highlights a statutory framework that recognises authority only when formally mentioned, not when exercised through entrenched political power, as seen in the definition of "public servant." This limitation is legislatively inherited, not judicially created. While legality and justice often align, they do not always converge.

Beyond legal questions, the case also exposes how the criminal justice system operates for survivors of sexual violence. It lays bare the fact that, in reality, the fundamental right of equality before law and equal protection of laws under Article 14 of our Constitution is not truly treated as equal for every individual. Yet, these courageous survivors bear the cost not to vindicate the system, but to reveal its limits and expand justice for all.

Kartik Singh is a lawyer based in New Delhi. Views expressed are personal.

THE GIST

▼ The law draws a distinction between 'suspension of sentence' in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, where it is the norm, and in serious offences, where it is an exception.

▼ 'Suspension of sentence', which is a discretionary judicial power, halts only the punishment and not the finding of guilt.

▼ The POCSO Act does not define the term "public servant." The Act says undefined expressions shall draw their meaning from the IPC, CrPC, the Juvenile Justice Act, 2015, or the IT Act, 2000.

FISCALS AND FACTS



Between the lines: Tamil Nadu is far more urbanised, which matters because it correlates with higher tax capacity, better service delivery, and more diversified employment. RAGHUNATHAN SR

The curious case of Tamil Nadu where big debt numbers tell the wrong story

Why the State's borrowing looks less 'alarming', once growth, per capita income and human development are taken into account; moreover, when 75% of revenue comes from the State's own resources, how should debates on outstanding debt factor in tax capacity and cooperative federalism?

Salman Soz

A Congress party colleague's recent post has stirred up quite a debate. The claim is stark, the language urgent, and the conclusion dramatic: Tamil Nadu's debt situation is "alarming".

The comparison is eye-catching too. In 2010, Uttar Pradesh had more than double the debt of Tamil Nadu. Today, Tamil Nadu's outstanding debt is higher than Uttar Pradesh's. On the face of it, that sounds damning. A single indicator, a clean before-and-after. A tidy verdict.

But public finance is rarely tidy and single-indicator stories, however viral, often hide more than they reveal. I am not about to dismiss concerns on debt. Debt shapes fiscal space, future budgets, and policy choices. However, debt, by itself, is not a moral failing, nor is it a sufficient summary of a State's economic health. To understand what Tamil Nadu's numbers actually mean, we need to step back, widen the lens, and place that one indicator inside a larger economic story.

Let us begin where the criticism begins. As of 2025-26, Tamil Nadu's outstanding debt is estimated at 26.1% of gross state domestic product (GSDP), down from 26.4% in 2024-25 and 26.6% in 2023-24. The State's debt ratio has been on a gradual downward path since its COVID-19 peak, though it remains above pre-Covid levels.

Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, is estimated to end 2025-26 with outstanding liabilities of 29.4% of GSDP, also declining from 30.8% in 2024-25. U.P. remains more indebted than Tamil Nadu relative to the size of its economy, even though Tamil Nadu's absolute debt stock is now higher. Tamil Nadu's economy, at ₹35.7 lakh crore

GSDP in 2025-26, is significantly larger per capita than Uttar Pradesh's ₹30.8 lakh crore economy, despite U.P. having nearly three times the population. Absolute comparisons without denominators make for good headlines, but weak analysis.

What about the interest burden, another charge raised in the post? Tamil Nadu does spend a high share of its revenue receipts on interest payments, about 21% in 2025-26. That places it among the higher-interest-burden States. Yes, interest costs constrain budgets. But no, the numbers do not indicate a debt spiral. In fact, Tamil Nadu's fiscal deficit is projected at 3% of GSDP in 2025-26, lower than the 3.3% revised estimate for 2024-25, and fully within the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) framework. The direction of travel matters as much as the level.

A more meaningful way to assess debt sustainability over the last decade is to step away from headline stock numbers and look instead at the mechanics of debt accumulation. Over the ten-year period from 2012-13 to 2021-22, Tamil Nadu's average real GDP growth has exceeded its average real effective interest rate by about 2.1 percentage points, while even in the more recent five-year window, which includes the pandemic shock, the growth-interest differential remains positive at 1.3 percentage points. This matters because when growth persistently exceeds the effective cost of borrowing, debt ratios stabilise or decline unless primary deficits are very large, which in Tamil Nadu's case have been below 2% of GSDP.

So, what distinguishes Tamil Nadu is not that its debt rose, but what happened alongside that rise. Notably between 2020-21 and 2023-24, Tamil Nadu

A meaningful way to assess debt sustainability is to step away from headline stock numbers and look instead at the mechanics of debt accumulation

maintained real GSDP growth averaging above 7%, with services and manufacturing consistently expanding. The economy did not stagnate under debt. It expanded through it.

Tamil Nadu's per capita GSDP in 2023-24 stood at ₹3.53 lakh, more than three times Uttar Pradesh's ₹1.07 lakh.

This reflects decades of higher productivity, industrialisation, and human capital formation. Tamil Nadu is far more urbanised, which matters because it correlates with higher tax capacity, better service delivery, and more diversified employment. Human development indicators reinforce this picture. Tamil Nadu consistently outperforms most States on literacy, health access, and demographic transition. These outcomes reduce long-term fiscal pressures by lowering dependency ratios and improving labour productivity.

Where Tamil Nadu's story becomes most forward-looking is in investment and economic composition. In 2025-26, Tamil Nadu planned a 22% increase in capital outlays, with especially sharp increases in transport, urban development, and energy. The State has also committed resources to the Tamil Nadu Semiconductor Mission, fintech hubs, R&D ecosystems, and advanced manufacturing. Debt that finances future productivity is not the same as debt that merely fills revenue gaps. The

composition of expenditure matters, and Tamil Nadu's capital-heavy budget tilt suggests an economy still investing its way forward.

There is a deeper political economy question hiding behind the debt debate. Tamil Nadu raises 75% of its revenue receipts from its own resources. 25% comes from its share in central taxes and via grants. Uttar Pradesh, by contrast, depends on the Centre for over half of its revenue receipts. This reflects stronger tax bases, higher compliance, and denser economic activity in Tamil Nadu.

Yet fiscal debates cannot ignore past performance, present capacity, and fiscal transfers. States that industrialised early, invested in human development, and controlled population growth, now face tighter borrowing constraints and lower transfers, even as they continue to contribute disproportionately to national growth and tax collections. If debt alone becomes the yardstick, the incentive structure gets inverted. Good performance gets punished, and catch-up States get permanent support with little accountability. That is not cooperative federalism. It is a recipe for discord.

One indicator can spark a debate. It cannot settle it. The real story is not about who overtook whom on a debt chart. It is about what States did with their borrowing, what economies they built, and what futures they are financing. On that score, Tamil Nadu's story remains far more resilient, and far more relevant, than a single line on a graph would have us believe.

Salman Soz is a member of the Indian National Congress and co-author of 'Unshackling India: Hard Truths and Clear Choices for Economic Revival'. Views expressed are personal.

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

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on popular traditions seen around the world to usher in the New Year

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

QUESTION #1

In which country can one normally see people throwing dishes against the door and banging pots to scare away 'bad spirits'?

QUESTION #2

In this Spanish tradition that has recently become popular around the world, what fruit do people eat 12 of for good luck in the New Year?

QUESTION #3

In which country is New Year's eve called 'Hogmanay' and celebrated with customs such as 'first-footing'?

QUESTION #4

Name the spiced apple drink served in parts of England to toast good health for the New Year?

QUESTION #5

What do the Greeks hang on their doors on New Year's eve to symbolise rebirth?

QUESTION #6

Name the country where one could see people observing 12 seconds of silence at midnight as a tribute to the year gone by?



Visual Question:

Name this effigy and the place in Kerala where it is burned at the stroke of midnight on New Year's eve. THULASI KAKKAR

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

1. Where did the summit between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin take place? **Ans: Anchorage, Alaska**

2. The Prime Minister of this Western European country resigned after less than a month in office, only to be reinstated.

Ans: France

3. The Preah Vihear Temple remains a point of contention between which two Southeast Asian countries. **Ans: Cambodia and Thailand**

4. Where did the mass shooting attack on tourists occur that led to a military escalation between India and Pakistan?

Ans: Pahalgam, Jammu and Kashmir

5. Which African city hosted this year's G20 Summit? **Ans: Johannesburg, South Africa**

6. Which country enforced the world's first social media ban for children under 16?

Ans: Australia

7. Where was the year's deadliest earthquake recorded? **Ans: Sagaing**

Region, Myanmar

8. The United Nations Security Council supported an autonomy plan for the disputed Western Sahara territory under the sovereignty of which country? **Ans: Morocco**

9. The 2025 Nobel Peace Prize winner was from this South American country. **Ans: Venezuela**

10. This sparsely populated Arctic region was referenced in global discourse after a major power assigned it a special envoy.

Ans: Greenland

Visual: This narrow water body bordering the Arabian Peninsula appeared frequently in the news this year in connection with drone and missile attacks on commercial shipping. Can you name the strait? **Ans: Bab el-Mandeb**

Early Birds

Piyali Tuli | Tito Shiladitya | Sunil Madhavan | Diya Goyal | Pranab Biswas



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know your English

S. Upendran

What are you doing here? Why aren't you in school?"

"We have a holiday today. The staff is on strike."

"I see. What are you planning to do?"

"...why didn't you correct me?" I said.

the staff is on strike. Shouldn't I have said, the staff are on strike?"

"Both the sentences are grammatically correct. You see, some nouns can be followed by either a singular verb or a plural verb. It all depends on how you look at them and..."

"...how I look at them? What do you mean?"

"Well, take for example, the noun, staff. If you look upon all the members of the staff as coming together and forming a single unit, then you use a singular verb. For example, the staff is going on a picnic tomorrow."

"The staff wants coffee to be provided during the lunch hour."

"That's a good example. If, on the other hand, you look upon the staff as consisting of individual members and..."

"...and not as forming a single unit?"

"Right! If your focus is on individual members, then you use a plural verb. For example, the staff want coffee to be provided during the lunch hour."

"The staff have decided to reject the Principal's proposal. Does that sound OK?"

"Sounds good to me. Let me give you another example. The family was of the opinion that no loan should be given to Mohan. The family were of the opinion that no loan should be given to Mohan. What's the difference between these two sentences?"

"When you say, the family was of the opinion..., what you're implying is that you are thinking of all the members of the family coming together and forming a single unit. The family is a single entity."

"That's right! You're not looking at them as separate individuals, but as a single group."

"If, on the other hand, I say, 'the family were of the opinion...'; then I guess I am focussing on the individual members of the family. I am not..."

"...right again! You're not looking at them as a single unit. Here are a few more examples. The jury has asked for more time. The jury have asked for more time. Now then, can you think of any more examples?"

"How about this example? East Bengal is at the top of the table. East Bengal are winning the game. They have just scored another goal."

"Tell me, if there is no school, why are you all dressed up? Going somewhere?"

"My father, along with his four friends, are taking me to the planetarium."

"Is..."

"What?"

"My father, along with his four friends, is taking me to the planetarium. What you are saying is, my father is taking me to the planetarium along with his four friends."

"I see. The former Chief Minister of Bihar, along with the Ministers, is sitting in the President's office."

"By the way, you said that your father was taking you to the planetarium today. Doesn't he have to go to the office?"

"No!"

"Not Why not?"

"The management is on strike!"

Published in *The Hindu* on February 23, 1999

Word of the day

Panoply:

a complete and impressive array

Synonyms:

display, exhibit

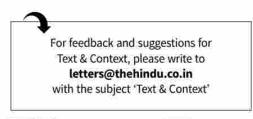
Usage: The government has promised a whole panoply of social and economic improvements.

Pronunciation:

newsthrive/panoplypro

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/pənəpli/



Deceptive sheen

Bullion rally alongside financial assets, a warning sign

Rarely do precious metals rally to new highs at a time when economic growth is strong and there's a bull run in stocks. But 2025 proved an exception. The world economy is expected to close the year with a healthy 2.7 per cent growth despite US tariff uncertainty. Q3 GDP growth from the US (4.3 per cent growth), China (4.8 per cent), Eurozone (0.4 per cent) and India (8.2 per cent), all exceeded forecasts.

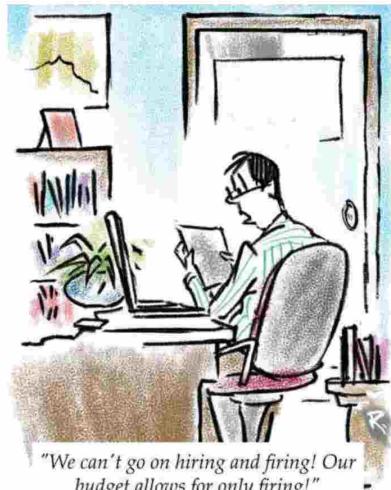
The global stock market rally acquired new legs with the US S&P 500 gaining nearly 18 per cent, Nikkei 225 26 per cent, Hang Seng 28 per cent, FTSE100 20 per cent and the Nifty50 over 9 per cent in 2025. Still, gold and silver handily outperformed stocks with dollar returns of 66 per cent and 158 per cent respectively, till date. Precious metals attracted safe haven buying despite healthy growth and upbeat markets for four reasons. One, with Trump's volatile trade and diplomatic policies, the usually resilient US dollar depreciated this year, with the Dollar Index slumping 9.6 per cent. Worries mounted about unsustainable sovereign debt levels at the US and other advanced economies, prompting central banks to diversify away from US treasuries into gold. Two, policy rate cuts trimmed returns on treasury bills and bonds making gold more attractive. Three, by end of 2025, extreme concentration of stock market gains in AI-themed stocks fanned fears of a bubble burst, prompting investors to seek refuge in precious metals. Four, advanced economies oblivious to the loss of confidence in gilts, were preparing for another bout of Quantitative Easing in 2026. Currency debasement fears are propelling gains in hard assets such as gold, silver and industrial metals.

The rally in precious metals may very well continue into 2026. This can have a mixed impact on the domestic economy. On the positive side, gains in precious metals translate into a significant wealth effect for Indian households because of their large hoard of bullion. While they do not sell bullion except when in distress, households are increasingly pledging it for loans, enabling monetisation of idle bullion holdings. This is evident from the gold loan books of Indian banks expanding 128 per cent the past year. Other official attempts at monetising household gold have either failed or backfired on the government, with Sovereign Gold Bonds proving a costly form of borrowings. Therefore, monetisation through loans needs to be encouraged — with prudent lending norms in place.

On the flip side, policymakers need to worry about the rising flows into gold and silver ETFs (Exchange Traded Funds). Traditionally, Indian jewellery buyers cut back on their purchases when prices soar, but the emerging class of ETF investors chase returns. This calls for vigilance over a surge in imports as gold and silver prices soar. The rally in precious metals is also a warning to retail investors that they need to lower their return expectations and derisk portfolios in 2026.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



2025: The year of trade tumult

TOTAL CHURN. Trump tariffs have led to geo-political shifts. This includes a subtle improvement in India-China ties



BISWAJIT DHAR

The year 2025 will long be remembered as the most consequential one in the post-War era, thanks to the disruptive policies US President Donald Trump began adopting from the day he assumed charge of the Oval Office for the second time.

Trump started by withdrawing the US from the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and also from the World Health Organization, effectively ending the possibility of reaching global consensus to address global warming and global health emergencies.

His third and more consequential action, one that has already altered geopolitics and politics through significant shifts in alliances, was the adoption of the America First Trade Policy.

This policy was presented as "a foundation and resource for trade policy actions that will Make America Great Again by putting America First". More importantly, Trump's policy argued that US' future prosperity and national security required a coordinated and strategic approach, one that fully utilised the authorities and expertise of the Federal government to ensure the enduring economic, technological, and military dominance of the country.

TARIFF TOOL

In terms of its implementation, the America First Trade Policy is almost entirely anchored on the use of tariff, which Trump often "described as the most beautiful word in the dictionary". Steep "reciprocal tariff" was announced in April on 57 countries, but actual imposition was deferred by three months, with the expectation that the Trump Administration would be able to extract suitable concessions from each target country.

The immediate impact on most major economies, dependent as they were on the US, was through the escalating costs of doing business, not only because of the impact of "Trump tariffs" on their export earnings, but also on account of the uncertainties caused by consistent shifts in Trump's policies.

The more enduring impact of the America First Trade Policy is being felt through the global value chains (GVCs),



US President Donald Trump's tariff assault has resulted in many unanticipated geopolitical re-alignments. REUTERS

which formed the basis of global production and trade during the past three decades. Trump's trade policy was not the first instance of US' offensive against the GVCs dominated by China. His predecessor had tried to promote "friendshoring" through the 14-country Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity initiative, to create America-centric GVCs. But while Biden did not challenge the GVCs *per se*, Trump's America First Trade Policy created a protectionist wall that could enable the US to restore manufacturing in the world's largest economy. It was an inward-looking policy package bordering on promoting isolationism.

Trump's decision to give powers onto himself to shape the future of US trade policy dealt a crippling blow to the multilateral trading system. For eight decades since the adoption of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), global trade rules were framed through consensus among the GATT and then the member states of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

The recent thaw in ties also saw China committing to import more from India. Latest available data show India's exports to China increasing by over 90 per cent in November

which formed the basis of global production and trade during the past three decades. Trump's trade policy was not the first instance of US' offensive against the GVCs dominated by China. His predecessor had tried to promote "friendshoring" through the 14-country Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity initiative, to create America-centric GVCs. But while Biden did not challenge the GVCs *per se*, Trump's America First Trade Policy created a protectionist wall that could enable the US to restore manufacturing in the world's largest economy. It was an inward-looking policy package bordering on promoting isolationism.

Trump had begun dismantling the WTO during his first term and with his decision to embrace unilateralism, the WTO now faces an existential crisis.

CHINA, INDIA HOLD OUT

After imposing "reciprocal tariff" on 57 countries, Trump could close deals with only 17 countries. Deals could not be closed with either China or India, the former using repeated threats of using retaliatory tariffs, the latter refusing to yield ground despite paying 50 per cent on its exports.

Not only was Trump's strategy of extracting concessions from these larger economies unsuccessful, but it triggered a development American President could never have anticipated when he had announced his disruptive trade policy — the bringing together of the Indian Prime Minister and the Chinese President in a meeting in Tianjin at the end of August. Though largely symbolic, this development was an important signal that the two neighbours were willing to work towards improving their bilateral relations, ending more than five years of stand-off. Before the end of the 2025, resumption of direct flights between the two countries and improvements in the visa granting facilities by both China and India, were signs of normalisation of relations.

The most vexed issue in India-China trade relations has been India's declining exports to China. In 2024-25, India's exports were just above \$14 billion, the lowest since 2017-18. During

the years of frosty relations since 2020, India's exports to China had declined by almost a third, reducing it to the fifth largest export destination as against the second largest at the turn of the decade.

The recent thaw in ties also saw China committing to import more from India. Latest available data show India's exports to China increasing by over 90 per cent in November, and by over 33 per cent in the first eight months of this financial year, both on a year-on-year basis.

Trump's policies have had their adverse effects on the exports of both China and India to the US. While China has consistently decreased its exposure to the US market since Trump began targeting it during his first term, India started doing this since June.

In 2017, China's export share to the US was almost 22 per cent, it was 10 per cent in November 2025. India, too, has reduced its export dependence on the US from a high of almost 23 per cent in June to 20 per cent in November.

A more visible trend for India is its emphasis on expanding its export destinations. A flurry of FTAs concluded in 2025 and the decision to engage with the Eurasian Economic Union during Russian President Putin's visit to New Delhi in early December are signs of belated efforts to reduce dependence on a single large economy. An indication of "strategic autonomy"?

The writer is former Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

IMEC's relevance to India and its chokepoints

This corridor will connect Indian manufacturing and services with European markets via West Asian logistics

Nilanjana Ghosh

The announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) in 2023 was interpreted as a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, for India, it is less about rivalry and more about connectivity and economic security, as diversifying trade routes connecting India and the EU can help mitigate the traditional Red Sea-Suez Canal route's susceptibility to geopolitical and logistic problems.

Despite the EU being among India's top three trading partners, accounting for over 12 per cent of merchandise trade, the trade movement relies overwhelmingly on the Red Sea-Suez Canal route.

In March 2021, a massive container ship blocked the narrow Suez stretch, keeping hundreds of vessels stranded, disrupting around 12 per cent of global trade. More recently, Houthi attacks on commercial shipping led to the Red Sea crisis of 2023-24, forcing major carriers to reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope. This led to an additional distance of 3,500 nautical miles, extending transit times by a week, increasing fuel costs and insurance premiums, creating uncertainty in delivery schedules, and forcing Indian exporters to hold back a significant share of shipments.

Given this, IMEC, for India, can emerge as a risk-management strategy through maritime artery diversification.

The IMEC



Fundamentally, IMEC's value lies not in replacing the Suez or the North-South corridor (through Russia), but in bringing about diversification in the portfolio of India-EU trade route connectivity by combining maritime transport, high-speed rail, and integrated port networks linking India to the Gulf and onward to Europe.

TRANSIT TIMES REDUCED

An associated estimated reduction in transit times by up to 40 per cent and of logistics costs by around 30 per cent implies faster turnaround and lower working capital cycles for Indian exporters. For India's West coast ports, this promises higher throughput, deeper integration with Gulf and Mediterranean logistics ecosystems, and alignment with the government's policies with Gati Shakti, Sagarmala, and

bringing down logistics costs to global benchmarks.

Thus, the Indian ambition to move up the global value chain from low-margin assembly to higher-value manufacturing and services is supported through a triangular economic structure: India as a manufacturing and services base, the Gulf as a logistics and capital hub, and Europe as a source of technology, standards, and demand. The IMEC, thus, envisages an interlinked value chain, where the factor market in India gets connected to the product market in the EU through logistic intermediation in the Middle East.

Yet, the chokepoints emerge from geopolitical tensions, logistical constraints and financing gaps. The conflict in the Gaza Strip created impediments for quite some time, despite the present ceasefire.

Logistical chokepoints emerge from infrastructure deficits and port capacity mismatches. While IMEC envisages cargo movement from Indian ports such as Mumbai or Mundra to Jebel Ali in the UAE, and onward by rail through the UAE and Saudi Arabia to Israel's Haifa port, key railway links along this route are still incomplete.

Again, while Jebel Ali can handle around 90 million tonnes annually, Haifa's capacity is limited to about 30 million tonnes, creating a significant bottleneck. Unless Haifa's port capacity is substantially expanded, IMEC cannot realistically serve as a large-scale alternative to the Red Sea-Suez Canal corridor, where Egyptian ports together handle nearly 180 million tonnes of cargo annually.

The real test of IMEC lies in its financing. Large cross-border corridors often falter when financing structures fail to account for political risk, regulatory diversity, and long gestation periods. IMEC spans regions with uneven fiscal capacities and credit profiles, making traditional public funding or stand-alone public-private partnerships insufficient. IMEC requires a portfolio approach to financing — combining public investment, multilateral guarantees, sovereign wealth capital, and private investment — that can lower the capital cost and attract long-term institutional investments.

The writer is Vice President - Development Studies, Observer Research Foundation

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Combating fraud

This refers to 'Banks report frauds totalling \$21,515 crore in first-half of FY26' (December 30). This indicates that many precautions, checks, and balances are still needed to curb such incidents. Since this amount is a potential loss, banks might have created 100 per cent provision which is adversely affecting the profitability and credibility of those entities. Out of the total, fraud of ₹17,501 in 4,235 cases on the loans and

advances denotes that the governance aspect needs to improve. Fund diversion for unspecified purposes is adversely affecting capital formation. The human capital employed in the area needs to be trained to make prudent decisions.

VSK Pillai

Changannacherry (Kerala)

Safeguard UCB depositors
Apropos 'Banks report frauds totalling ₹21,215 Cr first half of

FY26' (December 30). With loan write-off by PSBs in the last nine years crossing ₹12 lakh crore, uncertainty of their recovery prolonging with no tangible result, the frauds may double by the close of FY26. Contrasting fact is that the frauds in UCBs, which is solely attributed to regulatory lapses, are passed on to the depositors since DICGC limit risk coverage to only ₹5 lakh.

It is time the judiciary takes suo-motu cognizance of this bias and ensures safeguarding the welfare of UCB customers by treating them at

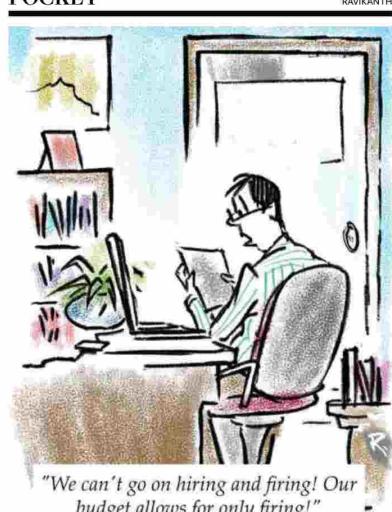
par with PSB depositors.
Rajiv Magal
Holkere Village (Karnataka)

Premiumise rail travel

Apropos the Editorial 'Wrong track' (December 30), the Indian Railways need to segregate their offerings so as to meet the needs of the common man by keeping fares of ordinary trains affordable with basic services, while at the same time meeting the needs of higher-end travellers, i.e., Rajdhani, Shatabdi, and Vande Bharat.

By providing better services, greater speeds, and overall better travel experience, and charge higher fares. This could enable the carrier earn better revenues while not burdening the common man. In any case the Railways must be seen as the largest, most efficient, and sustainable (lower emissions per passenger km) long distance travel option and enable remove traffic from roads (buses and cars).

V Vijaykumar
Pune



Renewed challenges

Risks of energy transition must be fairly shared

Alok Kumar

India is making rapid strides in renewable energy but decarbonisation is not progressing well. India adding close to 50 GW of renewable based capacity in 2025. Yet its grid emission factor is hovering between 0.75 and 0.70 kg CO2 per unit in the last five years.

Our National Electricity Plan had targeted it to be 0.55 in 2026-27 and 0.43 in 2031-32. Renewable based generation is being curtailed for want of grid scale storage. On the other hand the emissions are not declining fast enough as non-solar power demand is being met by fossil fuels.

We need to accelerate decarbonisation further and add renewably based capacity at a much faster rate to achieve cost reduction, energy security and green growth through manufacturing of clean energy goods.

India should have planned the build up of energy storage, mainstreaming of renewables based energy in dispatch rules and introduction of market cleared procurement methods while announcing the target of 500 GW non-fossil capacity. It is only now that we are making serious efforts to add electricity storage, tightening deviation settlement penalties for renewables and introducing contract for difference (CFD) route.

At least now for the next 10-year period up to 2035, we should plan necessary policy and regulatory interventions based on system studies with multiple scenarios of technology costs in future, demand patterns and available generation technologies such as nuclear SMRs.

China was able to absorb large quantities of renewable electricity by simultaneous efforts at expanding the electrification of energy services — mainly electric mobility. Increasing the share of renewable electricity without simultaneous increase in solar hour demand will increase the costs due to larger storage needs and stranded costs of legacy baseload stations.

Network pricing reform is another crucial area. In Western Australia Market area, new large loads have to make capital contributions for grid connectivity and in a similar manner generators receive capacity payments depending upon their share of installed capacity that can be despatched



POWER. Green options

by the system operator. Here, generators pay only pooled average transmission charges while connecting their power plants to the grid may entail adding very expensive new lines.

Our total RE capacity is around 200 GW. But we have 172 GW under construction inter-state lines and 152 GW intra-state lines. This build-up of transmission lines will sharply push up the total pool of costs to be paid by every grid user. Therefore, India needs to tweak its grid charges pricing regime to signal the need of optimisation of generation siting decisions.

Presently, a new solar plus storage facility can claim very competitive tariffs even when causing a huge burden on system costs due to new long transmission lines needed to connect it.

The next common pattern emerging in the countries making efforts to decarbonise fast is asking the large commercial and industrial loads to procure electricity directly from the market. Expecting the utilities to enter into long-term power purchase contracts for such large loads exposes them to demand risk. If demand does not grow as planned, the utilities will be saddled with huge offtake commitments whereas the generators stand completely insulated from the 'need of the system'. A similar proposal of taking out large loads from the purview of the incumbent distribution utility has been included in draft of the Bill to amend the Electricity Act, 2003.

This will not only increase the liquidity in our electricity markets but also promote instruments like double sided CFDs (a variant of PPVA in CERC guidelines) which align generators to the needs of the power system by avoiding curtailments and adding storage capacities.

The writer is former Union Power Secretary and currently DG AIDA

THE WIDER ANGLE
PARAN BALAKRISHNAN

Could self-made Indian-American billionaire Baiju Bhatt be the next space-age Elon Musk? His hugely ambitious energy start-up, Aetherflux, aims to produce solar power in space and beam it down to tiny Earth-based power stations using highly focused lasers. Bhatt, who made his money from his commission-free financial services firm Robinhood, is not the first visionary to imagine powering the world with electricity from space. The idea of space-based solar power has been kicking around for decades.

But Bhatt's technology will not need to be the size of a small city, and that's what makes it especially promising. He aims to bolt a spacecraft onto a SpaceX rocket by mid-year for a demonstration of how space-harvested energy can be delivered to Earth. He admits the risks are enormous. "It detaches, and then the thing better work. You can't go up there and tighten the bolt," Bhatt told potential investors.

All this is unfolding as we stand on the threshold of 2026, with the possibility of limitless technological breakthroughs on multiple fronts. Artificial intelligence is a force that's rapidly becoming embedded in daily life, reshaping everything from office work to healthcare and education. Quantum computing, meanwhile, hovers on the horizon, threatening to make today's machines look positively primitive.

TRUMP'S SHADOW
Yet looming over these potential breakthroughs is the dark shadow of US President Donald Trump. In barely 11 months, he's destabilised Europe, forced Japan to fast-forward military spending and left India in the cold, encumbered with 50-per-cent tariffs on its US exports.

After 20 years of growing American ties, India's been forced to feel warmth towards China, despite a long-festering border dispute in the high-altitude wastes of Ladakh, where Indian soldiers ended bone-chilling temperatures. India's also renewing an old friendship with Russia, but it's only as no longer the globe-straddling power it was and is now deeply dependent on Chinese

India at a crossroads

A solar energy start-up's space age ambition, AI disruption and Trump's trade war set the stage for a pivotal year



investment. Trump's malign impact is already rippling through Indian industry. Gems and jewellery, textiles and leather products, long-time export pillars, cannot compete when burdened with gigantic tariffs.

The software-services sector, the backbone of India's white-collar employment boom, has also been hit hard. On top of shrinking demand, companies must now contend with H-1B visas that have become prohibitively expensive. Industry giant TCS says only 500 employees are travelling on H-1B visas this year after \$100,000 visa charges came into force.

AI IMPACT
For India's software services industry, 2026 could prove a make-or-break year. At one level, it must radically alter its

operating methods because H-1B visas have become too costly to be an option. More fundamentally, the entire business model is under pressure from AI, which can complete in minutes tasks that once required teams of engineers working for weeks. TCS has already reacted to these changes by laying off around 12,000 employees.

Consultant Pareekh Jain of Pareekh Consulting believes the industry is confronting an unprecedented double shock. For the first time, software-services companies must cope not only with rapid technological change, something they've survived before, but also reinvent their business models from the ground up. TCS, for example, is preparing to transform the way it functions by building a \$7-billion, 1-gigawatt data centre in Visakhapatnam. Jain notes TCS is unusually well-placed to make this transition, being both cash-rich and backed by the Tata Group.

Then, there's Accenture, which is spending \$1 billion on a training programme for almost its entire staff. The company is ambigious in its message that it will have to part ways with employees who cannot be retrained.

The brutal reality is that

software-service sector has been the main employment generator for university graduates. In 2022 to 2023, Infosys alone hired 50,000 recruits. Across the industry, 290,000 recruits were hired, and total employment stood at 5.4 million.

"The big concern is jobs," says Jain. "AI will reduce bulk hiring in the Indian software services industry. Fresh graduates will have fewer mass-employment options. The GCCs (global capability centres) may still hire, but traditional IT services will not." He adds: "This means graduates may have to look elsewhere, manufacturing, construction, government jobs, start-ups or entrepreneurship."

There are glimmers of hope. A growing number of ambitious start-ups are scaling rapidly and may offer prospects for younger Indians. In 2025, 18 Indian start-ups made their IPO market debuts, and startups raised some \$11 billion during the year.

As India hurtles into 2026, caught between unprecedented technological promise and acute geopolitical and economic stress, its choices will determine whether the moment becomes a springboard to a new future or a reckoning that reshapes an entire generation's hopes and expectations.

STATISTALK.

How different asset classes have performed over the long run

The grid illustrates the relative long-term performance of the most liquid financial asset classes available to Indian investors, whether accessed directly or through mutual funds and ETFs. By using five-year trailing returns, it filters out short-term noise, highlights persistence across market cycles, and reduces reentry bias. The grid also guides portfolio rebalancing — trimming exposure to overheat assets and adding those with improving trends — while keeping risk aligned with long-term goals.

Asset class long-term performance grid



For Large, Nifty 50 Index; for Mid, Nifty Midcap 150; for Small, Nifty Smallcap 250; for US, S&P 500 (INR); for China, Hang Seng (INR) For Long-Term Debt, average of Long duration, Medium to Long duration and Gilt MF schemes (schemes that were hit by distressed assets excluded), for Short-Term Debt, average of Low duration, Ultra short duration and Money market funds. For Gold, MCX India gold spot index and for Silver, MCX India silver spot index were considered.

Source: Niftyindices.com, Bloomberg and ACEMF. Total Return variant was considered for all equity indices. 2025 was as of December 29, 2025.

Compiled by Dhuravel Gunasekaran | Graphic Visveswaran V

On businessline.in

VB-G-RAM-G: State finances may come under stress

States are expected to fund 40% of the scheme. This will hit States that rely on this scheme harder, say Kiran Kumar Kakarlapudi and Aswathy Rachel Varughese

<https://tinyurl.com/yc5kjeida>

How currency volatility is straining Indian trade

A falling rupee has helped only select exports sectors. Those that rely heavily on imports have been badly hit, argues Ganesh Vallachi

<https://tinyurl.com/5n765xzv>

SEBI's digital mandate: Regulating unlawful market content

The market regulator now has the legal tool to combat online financial misconduct, point out P Saravanan and A Paul Williams

<https://tinyurl.com/4jhwswp7>

thehindu businessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

December 31, 2005

SEBI allows MFs to launch gold exchange-traded funds

The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) on Friday announced key decisions, including introduction of optional grading of IPOs to provide "additional comfort" to investors and allowing mutual funds to launch gold exchange-traded funds, which would aid small investors to own gold through mutual fund units.

Maxis of Malaysia, Apollo Hospitals promoters buy out Aircel
Maxis Communications Berhad of Malaysia, a leading telecommunications company, and the Chennai-based Reddy family, the businesses founded by them include the Apollo Hospitals group and Indo-National, have together bought out Aircel, the cellular operations of the C. Sivasankaran-promoted Sterling group.

BSNL cuts fixed line rental by 28%

State-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd has announced a drop in monthly rental for fixed line telephones by 28 per cent. Bharti Tele-Ventures and Tata Teleservices have announced a cut in airtime charges for international long-distance calls and prepaid local calls respectively for mobile users.

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EASY

ACROSS

- 1. Pursuits of animal killing (5,6)
- 8. Complete, out-and-out (5)
- 10. Stopped working (7)
- 10. Die away (7)
- 11. Tender of the sick (5)
- 12. Withstand attack (6)
- 14. Not often (6)
- 18. Smithy (5)
- 19. Infusion-making vessels (7)
- 21. Refreshment place (7)
- 23. Hesitate from uncertainty (5)
- 24. Variance as to facts (11)

DOWN

- 01. Large rounded stone (7)
- 02. Gets, procures (7)
- 03. Was bold enough to (5)
- 04. Naval paymaster, supply officer (6)
- 05. Suite, train of retainers (7)
- 06. Male address (3)
- 07. Pack in tight (5)
- 13. Boats (with anger) (7)
- 16. Scrooge-like (7)
- 17. Stupefaction, lethargy (6)
- 18. Bring, go and get (5)
- 20. Amount to (3,2)
- 22. Assistance (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- 01. Pursuits like fox hunting swaggering dandy trifles with (5,6)
- 02. Publish something that may be true about time (5)
- 09. Left work and went to bed for the night (7)
- 10. Is misled about cause of tummy-ache which will grow less (7)
- 11. Tend to race back southeast (5)
- 12. Among the others, will not give in (6)
- 14. About fifty fashions return but are rarely observed (6)
- 18. Smith is here to strike a wrong note (5)
- 19. Top seat otherwise available in (7)
- 21... here : poet has adapted to it (7)
- 23. Object to rude disturbance made around
- 5th November (5)
- 24. Candy prices are variable, but it won't agree with figure (11)

DOWN

- 01. Less toruous sounding form of rock (7)
- 02. Procuries it by effort if it holds good (7)
- 03. Was courageous enough to have issued a challenge (5)
- 04. Officer on board is the one to chase one being non-r (6)
- 05. Train of servants found ere unit was formed (7)
- 06. Master is to go up at end of Summer (3)
- 07. Marry and give four out with a bit of the cake (5)
- 13. Understands about the way one boils it (7)
- 15. An entrancing sort of person to serve with Norma like this (7)
- 16. Mean to show such wretchedness, being quids in (7)
- 17. Puts up with an alternative to lethargy (6)
- 18. How it will obtain its price may seem attractive (5)
- 20. Say something more when not in bed and make sense (3,2)
- 22. Some help required in writing up diary (3)

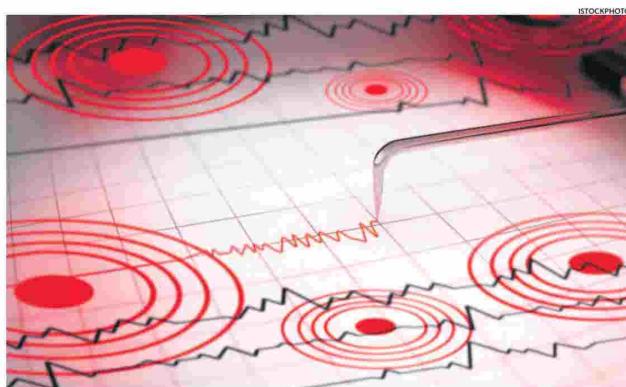
SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2586

ACROSS 1. Nosed 4. Scatter 8. Victoria Falls 10. Scour 11. Ugly 12. Wide 16. Ample 17. Outstandingly 19. Saddled 20. Minor

DOWN 1. Naval surgeons 2. Sic. 3. Dropsy 4. Sailor 5. Afford 6. Talkative 7. Reserve player 9. Collected 13. Pastel 14. Spined 15. Helium 18. Gun



OUR VIEW



Even a tremor-free 2026 would test our resolve

In a world shaken up by tariffs, wars and AI, India's economy fared well in 2025. The public policy response was sharp but the private sector must display much greater determination

John Lennon wrote and recorded a song in 1975 with these evocative lyrics: *So this is Christmas/ What have you done?/ Another year over/ And a new one just begun*. This song was part of his anti-war activism, but the words could apply to various causes. As the sun sets on 2025 and the calendar gets reset for 2026, it might be worthwhile to take a moment to reflect upon what whizzed past as a means of getting a better handle on what awaits us. Two big-picture events and one big technology trend monopolized headlines over the past year. The sharpest dissonance was caused by US president Donald Trump's illogical and unilateral tariff impositions against a host of countries that disrupted global trade flows and damped growth impulses. This came on top of existing geopolitical frictions that had erupted into armed conflicts: Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, among others. But capital markets shrugged all this off in their zest for artificial intelligence (AI), a productivity tool that bullish traders expect will reshape the economy—like how electricity and the internet did—and enable significantly faster growth in the near future. The jury is still out on the scale of any such AI boost, however.

It must be said that India has shown remarkable resilience amid global turbulence. The economy managed to not only notch up impressive growth, but also meet its tariff challenge head-on. India's merchandise plus services export receipts went up by over 5% during April–November 2025, marginally higher than import growth over the same period. This is reflective of how the government leveraged the trade crisis to overhaul its export strategy, both in terms of products and

markets. Over the past year, the commerce ministry sealed trade deals with the UK, Oman and New Zealand, fast-tracked one with the EU and expanded ties with Mercosur. We can also expect the early harvests of pacts signed earlier with Australia and the European Free Trade Association. The broad gains of all this should show up in GDP data. The government also reformed some aspects of import policy that were keeping inputs for export products costly. Reformist moves were made in many other spheres too. Both inflation and the rupee dropped in 2025, even as consumption perked up in many sectors. Of course, monetary and fiscal enablers—such as low rates of interest and GST—deserve macro-level credit for brightening the economy's growth prospects. Yet, we must also point out that it was not all hunky-dory. The private sector has been largely missing from the action, with the government still doing the heavy lifting to foster growth. With private players holding back investment, the economy's expansion remains sub-optimal. Oddly, most of Corporate India's demands have been met, with a revision of labour codes just the latest to ease long-cited bugbears. Private businesses must now start investing at home rather than overseas. They should also update their governance systems to improve plans for everything from cybersecurity and climate action to social responsibility and succession. It might be time for the private sector to renew its commitment to our economy, polity and society. We began with a song and it might be appropriate to end with another, this time from the indie rock band Death Cab for Cutie: *So this is the new year/ And I have no resolutions/ Or self-assigned penance/ For problems with easy solutions.*

RAHUL JACOB



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

At the end of a tumultuous year for India's economy, especially its labour-intensive industries reeling from US President Donald Trump's tariffs, William Shakespeare's words seem apt. "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune... On such a full sea are we now afloat." In that spirit, here's a wish list for the Indian government as it confronts its many challenges.

"Make in India" needs to be comprehensively evaluated and then downsized. The ever-growing list of incentivized industries—more than 25—makes a mockery of the claim that they are all strategic. Instead of this mission creep, we should focus on reducing our dependence on China. The Trump tariffs are prompting Chinese firms to abandon their stranglehold over developing-world markets, leading to the progressive hollowing out of industry in Indonesia and India. Our data shows lower numbers for imports from China than Beijing's export figures do, which suggests some under-invoicing. Our

bilateral trade deficit is about \$100 billion.

Let's redefine nationalism as spending less time abusing each other on social media and instead buying products made in India or at least from countries other than China. We need consistent public messaging to stop buying Chinese goods simply because they are cheaper. A way to help that process and our exporters in the bargain is to let the rupee slide to a level of \$100 to the dollar. Former chief economic advisor Arvind Subramanian argued this week in the *Indian Express* that \$100 per dollar is a worthy new year's resolution for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), not least because China and East Asia have kept their currencies cheap to exploit foreign markets. "The markets are trying to do a desirable job that policymakers have been unable or unwilling to do." Indian companies are savvy enough to hedge their currency exposure.

We should do more to help our most labour-intensive industries. "Make in India" needs to be rebranded as "Hand-Made in India." A much-needed pen-strike reform, says Laila Tyabji, founder of Dastkar, is to "simply remove GST on handloom; it needlessly increases the paperwork and end price." Buy handloom or hand-dyed cotton and walk 400 metres from my apartment to

a tailor who adeptly makes shirts out of Kerala *manchu* material and even delicate *jamdani* that looks like candyfloss.

Consider renaming Ease of Doing Business as a more truthful "use of doing business," thus focusing on reducing the complexity of dealing with the government. It is wonderful, of course, that we can pay our taxes online almost as easily as buying a book off Amazon, but our tax system is still too complex and does little to widen the tax base. In fact, the last budget arguably narrowed it by raising the income threshold for income tax. In a country as unequal as ours, we need an inheritance tax. Most G8 countries have one.

Those of us with considerable amounts of disposable income need to spend and donate more. In the spirit of Henry Ford raising wages in 1914 to raise productivity and turn factory workers into customers, we should regard paying employees more, viewing them as an investment as much as a cost. That starts at home. Recently, I couldn't help noticing the

astonishment of visiting American relatives at how little the clothes-ironing person is paid. We won't "spoil" help and service providers by paying them more or tipping a delivery "partner" more generously. Instead, we will help alleviate the country's demand problem that is holding back corporate investment.

The government could do its bit by thinking more like a service provider and less a judge, jury and overlord. Says Arvind Singh, chairman and founder of Techmopak, "The bureaucracy, especially the IAS/IPS/IRS, needs to reform fundamentally, so that it can align with our present and future (rather than being a remnant of our British past)." RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra is already

a good role model. Not only has RBI made it easier for foreign companies to invest in Indian banks, it has also made it easier for banks to make loans for mergers and acquisitions. While it still spends tens of billions more than it should propping up the rupee, 5,673 circulars have been scrapped by RBI

since he took over, CNBC reports.

The problem, at every level of government, is that mind-numbing references to precedent abound. Mumbai airport's Terminal 1 is a relief for its sensibly sized trays for security checks, which are less than half the size of those in Delhi and Bengaluru and thus allow much faster clearance. Even so, I counted at least 10 notebook registers being maintained by security personnel. One can't help wondering what the "Tools In/Out register" tabulates or the "Dispatch English outgoing register" records.

India's 48-hour weekly rest rules for pilots are among the most generous globally, while all around us are inefficient Indian companies demanding 3-hour workdays, often for six days a week. Meanwhile, according to a column in *The Hindu* by R. Geetha and Prithi Narayan, protections for construction workers are "threatened or entirely repealed" by the country's labour code revisions. A new central code is to replace existing "widely ineffective" site-specific codes with "web-based" compliance, which makes little sense in this context. Construction workers work in pre-Dickensian conditions. It is not just airline pilots who deserve well-regulated work conditions. Much of this is naive and over-optimistic, but a new year beckons.

MY VIEW | MYTHS AND MANTRAS

The principles of investing don't change but portfolios often must

Investors must check if their investments align with their goals and make clinical decisions in 2026



DEVINA MEHTA

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themselves as to why they are investing in Indian stock markets when everything from fixed deposits and gold to US markets has given better returns this year. After all, the Indian market has been in the bottom 10% globally.

The sentiment is downward partly because the average stock has not even done as well as the index. Here is the kicker: sentiment is a contra indicator. When there is uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and questions like this abound, the next period's returns are usually above normal. When 30% returns appear to be available for the taking, as was the case in the first 8–9 months of 2024, you should be wary.

By this yardstick, the returns in 2026

may well be better than what we have seen of late because history shows that sharp market rises come at a time of such despondency. So, the lesson is to stay invested to the extent of your equity allocation, which should not be 100% of your investment portfolio.

Then comes the hard part. Once the new year festivities have died down, take out a couple of hours and look at all your investments. Where are you invested currently? How much in equity, whether directly or via mutual funds, portfolio management services, etc, and how much in fixed income via fixed deposits, tax saving schemes and fixed income mutual funds? Similarly for gold, real estate, cryptocurrency or any other asset that you may have.

Now see whether this is the ideal asset allocation for your goals, when you need the money and so on. If not, decide what changes you want to make and make them latest by the end of January.

Now come to the equity space. Dig out your Depository Participant (DP) statement, grit your teeth and go through it right till the end. You can guarantee there will be many entries that would make you want to squeeze your eyes shut and not think about them. But get rid of all the junk. Anything you will not buy today at today's price, you should not be holding at all.

Most investors hold on to losers for too long instead of moving on to what are the best investments as of today. For the same reason, you should never wait for a stock to return to your purchase price. Book the loss, invest in a better place and move on. The market doesn't care what price you bought it at and many stocks (for example, those that may have done well in the small- and micro-cap boom of 2024) will never come back to those prices again. Your objective is to maximize wealth from your portfolio. It does not have to come from the same stocks. Be clinical.

At a core level, for your equity investments, ask: What is the criteria you are using to pick stocks? Do you even have one? And if you do, such as certain growth numbers, return ratios and governance parameters, do the stocks you have in your portfolio reflect that criteria or have they been bought mostly based on whims and tips? Some reflection is needed on this. It will bring you to the question of whether you should be a do-it-yourself investor or not—something I wrote about in my last column. Should you invest yourself or let professionals do the job for you?

If you want to make an investment resolution for the year, tell yourself that you will never invest in anything because of FOMO (fear of missing out), because that is the beginning of many investing mistakes. Chasing yesterday's hotness is asset class, sector or stock is a surefire way of ensuring under-performance. Unfortunately, financial services companies prey on this. Related to this is the question of whether someone selling you a product actually has the relevant expertise.

As someone who has been advocating global diversification for a while, I watch with trepidation many with no background in global markets launching global products simply because of FOMO feelings among investors.

Step back. Be deliberate and objective in your investment decisions. Have a great 2026!

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Thousands of experts study overbought indicators, head-and-shoulder patterns, put-call ratios, the Fed's policy...

and they can't predict markets with any useful consistency, any more than the gizzard squeezers could tell the Roman emperors when the Huns would attack.

PETER LYNCH

MY VIEW | WORLD APART

A wish list for the government as a new year beckons

RAHUL JACOB



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

At the end of a tumultuous year for India's economy, especially its labour-intensive industries reeling from US President Donald Trump's tariffs, William Shakespeare's words seem apt. "There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune... On such a full sea are we now afloat." In that spirit, here's a wish list for the Indian government as it confronts its many challenges.

"Make in India" needs to be comprehensively evaluated and then downsized. The ever-growing list of incentivized industries—more than 25—makes a mockery of the claim that they are all strategic. Instead of this mission creep, we should focus on reducing our dependence on China. The Trump tariffs are prompting Chinese firms to abandon their stranglehold over developing-world markets, leading to the progressive hollowing out of industry in Indonesia and India. Our data shows lower numbers for imports from China than Beijing's export figures do, which suggests some under-invoicing. Our

bilateral trade deficit is about \$100 billion.

Let's redefine nationalism as spending less time abusing each other on social media and instead buying products made in India or at least from countries other than China. We need consistent public messaging to stop buying Chinese goods simply because they are cheaper. A way to help that process and our exporters in the bargain is to let the rupee slide to a level of \$100 to the dollar. Former chief economic advisor Arvind Subramanian argued this week in the *Indian Express* that \$100 per dollar is a worthy new year's resolution for the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), not least because China and East Asia have kept their currencies cheap to exploit foreign markets. "The markets are trying to do a desirable job that policymakers have been unable or unwilling to do." Indian companies are savvy enough to hedge their currency exposure.

We should do more to help our most labour-intensive industries. "Make in India" needs to be rebranded as "Hand-Made in India." A much-needed pen-strike reform, says Laila Tyabji, founder of Dastkar, is to "simply remove GST on handloom; it needlessly increases the paperwork and end price." Buy handloom or hand-dyed cotton and walk 400 metres from my apartment to

a tailor who adeptly makes shirts out of Kerala *manchu* material and even delicate *jamdani* that looks like candyfloss.

Consider renaming Ease of Doing Business as a more truthful "use of doing business," thus focusing on reducing the complexity of dealing with the government. It is wonderful, of course, that we can pay our taxes online almost as easily as buying a book off Amazon, but our tax system is still too complex and does little to widen the tax base. In fact, the last budget arguably narrowed it by raising the income threshold for income tax. In a country as unequal as ours, we need an inheritance tax. Most G8 countries have one.

Those of us with considerable amounts of disposable income need to spend and donate more. In the spirit of Henry Ford raising wages in 1914 to raise productivity and turn factory workers into customers, we should regard paying employees more, viewing them as an investment as much as a cost. That starts at home. Recently, I couldn't help noticing the

astonishment of visiting American relatives at how little the clothes-ironing person is paid. We won't "spoil" help and service providers by paying them more or tipping a delivery "partner" more generously. Instead, we will help alleviate the country's demand problem that is holding back corporate investment.

The government could do its bit by thinking more like a service provider and less a judge, jury and overlord. Says Arvind Singh, chairman and founder of Techmopak, "The bureaucracy, especially the IAS/IPS/IRS, needs to reform fundamentally, so that it can align with our present and future (rather than being a remnant of our British past)." RBI governor Sanjay Malhotra is already

a good role model. Not only has RBI made it easier for foreign companies to invest in Indian banks, it has also made it easier for banks to make loans for mergers and acquisitions. While it still spends tens of billions more than it should propping up the rupee, 5,673 circulars have been scrapped by RBI



GUEST VIEW

Why the Fed must not function as a lender of immediate resort

A bias in favour of launching rescues could undermine its credibility, harm monetary policy and weaken its independence



AMIT SERU
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The greatest threat to the independence of the US Federal Reserve does not come from President Donald Trump's attacks or a Supreme Court ruling that might expand his authority. It is the Fed's longer-term shift from lender of last resort to lender of immediate resort. Without a clear distinction between temporary liquidity support and protection for insolvent institutions, the Fed's independence turns into cover for *ad hoc* bailouts and monetary policy becomes a hostage of weak institutions and authorities' reluctance to admit supervisory failure.

With each successive crisis over the past decade and a half, from 2007-08 to the 2020 covid shock and the mid-size bank turmoil of 2023, the Fed has steadily expanded the scope and scale of its interventions. What began as emergency liquidity support has become a recurring feature of financial-market management.

When every disruption is said to generate 'spill-overs' and every balance-sheet wobble prompts intervention, the distinction between containing panics and propping up failing institutions blurs, and with it goes the discipline that keeps moral hazard in check. At that point, independence can no longer enforce restraint; it merely shields open-ended emergency measures.

The benchmark for central-bank rescue was set by Walter Bagehot more than a century ago: lend early and freely, but only to solvent institutions, against good collateral, and at a penalty rate. Under this elegant framework, the central bank supplies liquidity, the fiscal authority provides capital and markets impose accountability. Viable institutions are insulated from liquidity panics, while insolvent ones are restructured or shut down.

That framework endured so long as the boundaries between regulated banks and the rest of the financial system were clearly defined, and the line between liquidity and solvency was easier to draw. Modern crises have made it harder to sustain the latter distinction, as sharp asset-price declines quickly undermine institutions that appear stable.

With non-bank entities increasingly performing bank-like functions without comparable oversight, the Fed extended its reach in 2008 and again in 2020, broadening collateral standards and creating new lending facilities on the fly. By the time the pandemic hit, interventions once seen as extraordinary had become routine. While each step may have been defensible in isolation, together they pushed the Fed beyond the limits that preserved its legitimacy.

Whereas illiquidity is a short-term funding problem, insolvency reflects long-term balance-sheet weaknesses that can be addressed only through new equity, mergers or orderly resolution. The key challenge facing policymakers is to deter-



mine whether an institution is solvent yet temporarily illiquid, or insolvent and therefore in need of restructuring. If regulators cannot draw this distinction for banks, despite having granular supervisory data, they certainly cannot do so for non-banks, where visibility is limited.

The turmoil of 2023 underscored the risks created by the Fed's mission creep. My co-authors and I estimated that hundreds of banks faced large mark-to-market losses on long-duration assets, operated with thin capital buffers, and relied heavily on uninsured deposits. Yet, instead of calling for restructuring or new equity, the episode was widely framed as a liquidity crisis. New facilities effectively extended support to roughly \$9 trillion in uninsured deposits, vastly expanding the safety net.

By acting as a lender of immediate resort, the Fed may have steered markets, but it also left the underlying incentives unchanged, setting the stage for the next crisis and putting its independence under strain. Higher interest rates, though necessary to rein in inflation, exposed widespread interest rate risk across the banking system. This left the Fed in a bind: raise rates dramatically and risk breaking the weakest banks, or hold back and allow inflation to run wild. Financial fragility, in effect, became an undeclared ceiling on monetary tightening.

The Fed's dual role as bank supervisor and monetary authority magnifies the conflict. The problem is that admitting supervisory failures or concealed solvency problems is politically costly. That creates an incentive for the Fed to characterize the balance-sheet weaknesses as liquidity issues, leading to a pro-intervention bias that runs counter to the very purpose of central-bank independence.

The answer is not to abandon Bagehot's framework, but to update it. The Fed should set clear conditions for when emergency facilities can be activated, publish transparent eligibility rules that restrict lending to solvent institutions, impose robust penalty rates and haircuts, and publicly disclose how each facility was used once it is wound down. Most importantly, the Fed should limit itself to liquidity support and leave solvency issues to markets and fiscal authorities. Without that separation, the Fed will continue to drift toward industrial policy, undermining its legitimacy.

While some may argue that these safeguards already exist, recent interventions have lacked the one constraint capable of limiting moral hazard: automatic mechanisms that force markets to determine whether an institution deserves to survive.

Banks that get liquidity support should be required to raise equity commensurate with that support within a defined window or face restructuring or consolidation. If markets are unwilling to provide capital, the institution is not illiquid, but insolvent.

Central-bank independence must rest on sound governance, transparency and accountability.

That includes acknowledging supervisory failures when a solvency problem is misjudged as a liquidity one and explaining how those failures will be addressed. After all, a central bank that cannot

refuse intervention during a crisis cannot be expected to hold its ground when tightening monetary policy.

To protect its credibility, the Fed must resist the temptation to treat every problem as systemic.

Otherwise, the financial system will remain fragile

by design and the Fed's credibility will erode every time it rescues another institution that should have been allowed to fail.

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MY VIEW | EX MACHINA

Will the next 25 years surprise us like the last 25 did?

RAHUL MATHAN



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On the last day of the year 2000, the future looked bright. The world had survived the Y2K bug, and early signs seemed to indicate that the rapid proliferation of internet access points would dramatically benefit society. We ended the year with optimism, hopeful that the impending digital revolution would democratize knowledge, erode authoritarian regimes and enable global prosperity. We believed we were on the cusp of a period of sustained technological acceleration that we prematurely christened the 'Long Boom'.

Twenty-five years later, it is clear that our optimism was misplaced. Not only did the internet not create a 'Global Village,' it weaponized connectivity, leading to a world divided by the Great Firewall of China, European regulations and American corporate silos. Social media made things worse, optimizing engagement over information to the point where, in less than a decade, friends and neighbours were divided along tribal lines and forced to operate in echo

chambers that presented divergent versions of the same reality. Rather than coming together, nations have drifted apart, driven by concerns of digital neo-colonialism and the rapacious intentions of technologically advanced nations, as represented by the global corporations that serve as the spearhead of their ambitions.

Given our poor performance, it seems futile to attempt similar predictions today. But this article appears in print on the very last day of 2025 and I couldn't resist reflecting on how I believe technology will shape society over the next 25 years. Here, then, are the four axes along which I believe we will progress.

By far, the most significant technological shift will be in the biological realm, as synthetic biology starts being used to replace the chemical processes we currently rely on. This means that we will soon be able to 'brew what we need' by using precision engineering and cell-freeenzymes systems, allowing us to 'manufacture' on demand whatever chemicals, fabrics, fuels and food we need. This will disrupt the current industrialized production system as we shift to distributed bio-manufacturing ecosystems in which neighbourhood 'brewers' produce our pharmaceuticals, fabrics and food.

When this happens, our economic growth could finally be decoupled from resource extraction, marking the end of the 'Age of Oil'.

The second axis of tech transformation is intelligence—not necessarily the large language models that are all the rage right now, but some form of machine intelligence that will permeate everything we do in society. This will accelerate once cognition becomes commodified and we all get our own personal AI systems. When that happens, always-on medical diagnosis intelligence will be able to detect health concerns well before they become a threat, transforming medicine from a reactive-to-preventative science. It will ensure that everything has a twin who knows exactly how this individual learns best, transforming today's one-to-many teaching environment into a 'one-on-one' approach. It will also enable various micro-efficiencies—traffic lights that 'watch' roads and coordinate with every other light in the city, devices that negotiate

with the grid to buy power when it is most efficient, and refrigerators that re-stock themselves—which will allow us to stop worrying about *how* to do things and focus on *what* needs to be done.

The third axis of transformation will be space, with technology opening up a brand new dimension in which our planetary civilization can operate. Even if we do not reach Mars by 2050, we would by then have begun to use space for industrial activity, leveraging micro-gravity for the manufacture of high-value materials that can't be produced on Earth and augmenting our supply chains by mining asteroids.

This will likely be connected to the fourth and final axis of innovation, which is energy. I believe that in the coming years, it will finally cease to be the challenge it is today as we begin to use orbital platforms to access space-based solar power, collecting energy continuously and beaming it back to Earth. Unlike traditional terrestrial renewables, this system will be free of weather, seasonal and land

constraints, providing us with uninterrupted carbon-free base-load power.

As transformative as these technologies will be, they will necessitate finding new answers to old questions. Synthetic biology will raise new ethical concerns around engineering life, just as commoditized intelligence will force institutions to determine where human agency ends and automated decision-making begins. And as global superpowers compete to establish dominance in new economic zones beyond the atmosphere, space will cease to be a 'global commons' and instead become a new battlefield where conflicts over orbital slots and transmission corridors abounds.

If the year 2000 taught us anything, it is that we overestimate the speed of technological change almost as much as we underestimate its second-order effects. This means that the real story of the next quarter-century may not be as much about what these new technologies enable as the extent to which we can redesign geopolitical and institutional architectures to take advantage of them. Whether this period is remembered as the start of a 'New Long Boom' or the moment new sources of abundance further fractured the global order will depend on how our institutions adapt.

MINT CURATOR

Emissions still rising does not mean climate action has failed

The Paris pact catalysed clean-tech advances that are paying off



LARA WILLIAMS
is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering climate change.



Green-technology adoption means that emissions could peak by 2030.

When 196 nations adopted the 2015 Paris climate accord, the UK prime minister at the time, David Cameron, wrote on Twitter: "Our grandchildren will see we did our duty." Ten years on, what would those grandkids think? The pact has started to look like a failure. But that only holds true if you're fixated on the end goal rather than the journey. The legally binding treaty aims to limit climate change to "well below 2°C" above pre-industrial levels" and pursue efforts to keep the increase close to 1.5°C. It specifies that countries should reach a "global peaking of greenhouse gas emissions" as soon as possible. But carbon emissions and anti-climate sentiments are both on the rise.

In 2025, the US, responsible for about 24% of all emissions ever pumped into the atmosphere, withdrew from the treaty for the second time under President Donald Trump. The EU has weakened key regulations as well, including its 2015 combustion engine ban and pollution reporting requirements. Elsewhere, greenwashing, which plays down environmental efforts to avoid political scrutiny, is on the rise among companies. Many experts seem almost certain that the L5 target is toast. Copernicus, the EU's Earth observation service, said the last three years are set to be the first period when average temperature rise would exceed that goal. And we're nowhere near net-zero emissions.

But then, were our expectations too high? The treaty gave us a multi-prisoners' dilemma. Part of the problem is that the Paris pact has no penalties for inadequate plans or action, so the incentive to free ride is high: While only those parties cutting emissions bear the costs, everyone benefits from their efforts. Meanwhile, petro-states want to keep squeezing profits out of their businesses. Oil and gas companies have been making about \$2.5 billion a day in profit for the last 50 years, according to a 2022 analysis of World Bank data. Why would they give up that revenue?

Yet, the Paris Agreement has put us in a far better position than we would have been without it. In October 2015, Climate Action Tracker calculated that policies and actions at the time put the world on track for 3.6°C of warming by 2100 but projected warming is now 2.6°C. This signals progress. The idea of a net-zero goal has also sparked a flurry of innovation. If researchers didn't believe that anyone would want great technologies, then why would they invest in them? The accord sent a signal [of net-zero-aimed demand].

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{ OUR TAKE }

Restoring trust in the judicial process

Apex court's order on Sengar closes a critical gap in case jurisprudence and underlines the severity of charges against the former legislator

The Supreme Court's decision to stop the release of former BJP lawmaker Kuldeep Singh Sengar from jail and stay an earlier order by the Delhi High Court, which had opened the door for some relief for the convicted rapist, makes two important points.

One, it points out that Sengar was convicted not just under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (PoCo) Act — the victim was a minor when the crime occurred in 2017 — but also under section 376 (rape) of the Indian Penal Code. The apex court said that the high court was not conscious that the strongman politician was found guilty under two penal statutes, and therefore, the definition of public servant under PoCo — the high court had found that Sengar could not be classified as a public servant — was not the only relevant question. In finding so, the apex court has moved to close a critical gap in case jurisprudence and underlined the severity of charges against the former legislator.

Two, it hinted that the high court's definition of "public servant" might have been off the mark. In its earlier controversial decision, the high court had said that Sengar was convicted under Section 5 (C) (aggravated penetrative sexual assault by a public servant) of the PoCo Act, but an elected representative did not fit the definition of a "public servant" under Section 21 of the IPC, now BNS Section 2(28). The apex court, however, said that this interpretation was "a little bit disturbing" because a constable or *patwari* will be classified as a public servant, but an elected member of a legislative assembly or council will be exempt. The top court is right in taking an expansive view of the issue and considering the real-world meaning of a public servant, instead of favouring a hyper-technical view that runs the risk of endangering justice.

In a country where politicians often enjoy unbridled impunity from prosecution, it is rare for any lawmaker — let alone a regional strongman who ran a region by fiat and won four times from three different parties — to pay for his crimes. It took national outrage after the victim attempted to immolate herself in 2018, and multiple charges — the conspiracy to kill the victim's father in custody, for one — for Sengar to be arrested, charged and finally convicted. While any convict or undertrial deserves due process and the full protection of the law, there should be adequate consideration of the victim's rights and the sociopolitical powers of the convict. Anything less might be a miscarriage of justice.

What Khaleda Zia meant for Bangladesh politics

Bangladesh's first woman prime minister Khaleda Zia, who has died at the age of 80 after prolonged illness, will perhaps be best remembered for her intense and decades-long rivalry with another former PM, Sheikh Hasina, and how this shaped the politics of the two leaders and the path of their country. Khaleda was thrust into politics in after the assassination of her husband, military ruler Ziaur Rahman, in 1981, and played a key role in shaping his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) into a national force, as well as in the movement against the autocratic rule of another military dictator, Hussain Muhammad Ershad, for which she joined hands with arch-rival Hasina.

Khaleda held the post of premier three times and took steps to ensure free education for girls and carried out economic reforms. She became known for her uncompromising approach towards politics, and her death could lead to a sympathy wave for the BNP in Bangladesh's election scheduled for February 12.

However, Khaleda's stints in power will also be remembered in India for the strains in bilateral ties. Her third term in the early 2000s was marred by allegations of support for several anti-India militant groups from the northeastern states, which set up bases in southeastern Bangladesh, and the infamous "Chittagong arms haul" case of 2004, when security forces intercepted a huge consignment of arms and ammunition meant for the United Liberation of Assam (ULFA). The Jamaat-e-Islami, which was then part of Khaleda's government, was also accused of backing radical Islamist forces on both sides of the border. With the BNP expected to emerge as the largest force in the upcoming election, New Delhi will be watching to see the approach of Khaleda's party towards India under the new leadership of her son Tarique Rahman.

Old ideas for a new India, amid the churn

Revisiting four powerful ideas — not ideological novelties, but pragmatic reforms rooted in efficiency, governance, and basic morality

In many ways, 2025 can be called a watershed year. Several long-held orthodoxies have collapsed. A rule-based global order — governing trade, war, alliances, and policy predictability — has weakened sharply. In its place has emerged a world driven by naked military and economic power. Transactional, narrowly self-interested, and fundamentally zero-sum in outlook.

This shift has been rapid. In parallel, alongside dramatic advances in artificial intelligence and technology, interlocking sustainability challenges, and accelerating demographic change. These forces together compel all countries to reassess their economic strategies, institutional frameworks, and global alliances. India is no exception.

Task that were once considered impossible — not ideological novelties, but pragmatic reforms rooted in efficiency, governance, and basic morality. These are: Converting all subsidies into direct benefit transfers (DBT), consolidating public sector ownership under a government holding company, decisively fixing power distribution companies, and ensuring the pending cases in our judiciary are cleared rapidly.

Convert all subsidies into DBT: India operates a maze of inefficient and distortionary subsidies. These include fertiliser

subsidies, minimum support prices (MSP), free power, free water, and various forms of job guarantees. Officially, subsidies account for 3.5% of GDP, but the total bill has increased to 9%.

The fertiliser, or rather urea subsidy, has encouraged urea overuse and degraded soil quality. Free power and water for agriculture have contributed to severe groundwater depletion.

Together with MSP, this has held back improvements in agricultural productivity, highlighted often by economist Ashok Gulati. These subsidies are not only fiscally expensive but also environmentally unsustainable, accountable, and efficient.

If subsidies amount to roughly 7% of GDP in a \$4.1 trillion economy, this translates to nearly \$300 billion annually. Instead of distributing this money inefficiently, imagine transferring it directly to households. Think 150 million Indian households — about half of all households — could each receive roughly \$2,000 per year, or about \$8,100.

This approach would dramatically reduce the cost of subsidies, and allow households to decide the best use of their income. To make this credible, it must be backed by an enforceable, all-party agreement prohibiting any individual voter from receiving subsidies or freebies outside the DBT framework. Without such political discipline, reform will fail.

PSU consolidation under a government holding company: Industrial policy has returned globally, and India should learn from countries that have implemented it effectively. Singapore's Temasek offers a compelling model: A government-owned holding company that manages commercial assets independently, provides a clear and arm's length from political ministerialism.

India should consider creating a similar government holding company and transferring ownership of all central public sector enterprises (CPSEs) into it. This would improve governance by separating ownership from regulation. Today, ministries both regulate sectors and own firms within them — an obvious conflict of interest. Think steel ministry, coal ministry, petroleum ministry, among others. This structure undermines efficiency, accountability, and efficiency.

A holding company would enable a serious national debate on strategic sectors. In which industries does India

need a domestic manufacturing presence to avoid long-term vulnerability? For example, defence, capital machinery, and green technologies.

The government's role should be to incubate, take early risks, and build capabilities where private capital is hesitant to do so. This is the role of the state. Equally important are clear-cut principles. When should the State withdraw, how much should it divest, and through what mechanisms? Listing norms, ownership structures, and sunset clauses must be defined upfront.

This model will be superior to the current fragmented and politicised ownership structure.

Fix discourse: If AI is the defining technology of the future, then power and compute capacity are its true foundations. Algorithms attract attention, but

electricity enables everything.

The US has an installed power capacity of about 1,230 GW, China around 3,350 GW, and India roughly 462 GW. Renewable energy (excluding hydro) accounts for 24%, 42% in China, and 10% in India. India's hydro pushes China and India above 50%. Having plentiful power capacity will become a strategic necessity. Already, in the US, data centres consume about 5% of total electricity — a share that will inevitably rise, as will it in India, too.

Against this backdrop, India's distribution companies are a crippling weakness. Their cumulative losses amount to nearly ₹7 lakh crore, or around \$80 billion. Without fixing losses, India cannot power its ambitions and its aspirations. The Odisha model demonstrates the partnership with majority private ownership. Mumbai shows how multiple suppliers can operate over common distribution lines. Cost-reflective tariffs, timely orders from state regulators, elimination of cross-subsidisation, and provision of subsidies only through a transparent DBT is essential.

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bution companies are a crippling

weakness. Their cumulative losses

amount to nearly ₹7 lakh crore, or

around \$80 billion. Without fixing

losses, India cannot power its ambi-

tions and its aspirations.

The government's role should be to

incubate, take early risks, and build

capabilities where private capital is

hesitant to do so. This is the role of the

state. Equally important are clear-cut

principles. When should the State with-

draw, how much should it divest, and

through what mechanisms? Listing

norms, ownership structures, and sunset

clauses must be defined upfront.

This model will be superior to the

current fragmented and politicised

ownership structure.

Fix discourse: If AI is the defining

technology of the future, then power

and compute capacity are its true

foundations. Algorithms attract atten-

tion, but

electricity enables everything.

The US has an installed power capaci-

ty of about 1,230 GW, China around

3,350 GW, and India roughly 462 GW.

Renewable energy (excluding hydro)

accounts for 24%, 42% in China,

and 10% in India. India's hydro

pushes China and India above 50%.

Having plentiful power capacity will

become a strategic necessity. Already,

in the US, data centres consume about

5% of total electricity — a share that

will inevitably rise, as will it in India, too.

</div

The Statesman

Incorporating and directly descended from
the Friends of India founded 1818

Editing the Future

India has quietly crossed a scientific threshold in its northernmost region. At a state agricultural university in Kashmir, researchers have successfully developed the country's first gene-edited sheep - an animal that has now completed a year of monitored growth with normal health indicators and improved muscle development. The achievement has not triggered headlines or public debate. Yet its implications extend well beyond the laboratory in which it was born. Developed at Sher-e-Kashmir Agricultural University in Srinagar, the project reflects years of publicly funded research that has advanced quietly, without the regulatory attention such breakthroughs usually demand.

The sheep was developed using precision gene-editing techniques that alter an organism's existing DNA rather than inserting foreign genetic material. By disabling a gene known to limit muscle growth, scientists have demonstrated measurable gains in body mass without observable physiological stress. This is not experimental tinkering for novelty's sake. The research emerged from a region that shrinks far more muscle than it produces, under conditions of shrinking pasture, water stress, and rising demand.

What makes this development consequential is not the animal itself, but the policy vacuum surrounding it. India has, in recent years, signalled openness to gene-edited crops. Approving varieties developed through similar techniques. Livestock, however, remains in regulatory limbo. There is no clear guidance on whether gene-edited animals will be treated as natural variants, subjected to transgenic regulations, or evaluated under an entirely new framework. This uncertainty effectively caps progress, regardless of scientific success.

Globally, countries have begun to resolve this dilemma by focusing on outcomes rather than methods - assessing food safety, animal welfare, and environmental impact rather than the mere presence of gene editing. Some have allowed gene-edited animals into the food chain under defined safeguards. Others remain cautious but are actively revising their rules. India's hesitation, by contrast, appears less philosophical than procedural. Ethical concerns surrounding animal biotechnology are legitimate and should not be minimised. But ethical governance requires clarity, not silence. A regulatory architecture that includes transparent approvals, traceability, animal welfare standards, and post-deployment monitoring is not an endorsement of unchecked innovation. It is an assertion of state responsibility. There is also a strategic dimension India cannot ignore. Protein availability, especially affordable animal protein, is becoming a structural challenge. Climate constraints and land limitations make conventional expansion models increasingly unsustainable. Technologies that improve yield efficiency per animal are not indulgences; they are potential stabilisers in a stressed food system. India's past food security breakthroughs were not accidental. They were the result of timely decisions to align science with policy, even amid uncertainty. Gene-edited livestock presents a similar moment. Scientific capability has arrived quietly. What remains to be seen is whether regulatory resolve will follow. For now, the sheep thrives in controlled conditions. Whether its promise survives beyond them depends entirely on the choices policymakers make next.

Without choice

Nearly five years after Myanmar's military seized power, the generals have returned to a familiar ritual: the ballot box. But this election, held in phases amid an active civil war, is not an exercise in democratic renewal. It is an attempt to convert control into consent at a moment when the state itself is fractured. The conditions under which the vote is being conducted tell the real story. Large parts of the country are excluded on grounds of "instability": opposition parties have been dissolved, and prominent leaders remain imprisoned or exiled. The National League for Democracy, which won decisive mandates in earlier elections, is absent, its leadership jailed under charges widely seen as political. In such circumstances, the vote cannot serve as a mechanism of representation; it can only function as a managed outcome. The junta's argument is procedural: that phased voting, security arrangements, and participation by registered parties, amount to progress towards a multi-party system. Yet, procedure divorced from political freedom is a hollow substitute. Laws criminalising criticism of the election, with penalties extending to long prison terms and even death, invert the meaning of civic participation. Voting under threat is not a choice; it is compliance.

That some citizens still line up to vote is not evidence of legitimacy, but of complexity. Years of conflict, economic collapse, and inflation have left ordinary people desperate for stability. For many, casting a ballot may feel like a small assertion of normalcy or a hope - however faint - that prices will fall or daily life might improve. These motivations are human and understandable. But they cannot repair a process structurally designed to exclude dissent.

The broader context makes the exercise even more tenuous. Myanmar remains a battlefield, with the military facing armed resistance groups and ethnic militias across multiple fronts. Air strikes continue even as polling proceeds, underscoring the contradiction at the heart of the exercise: a government claiming democratic intent while relying on coercion as its primary instrument of rule. External support, particularly diplomatic and material backing from major powers, has allowed the stalemate to persist, but not to resolve.

Regional and international reactions reflect this scepticism. Western governments have rejected the polls outright, while ASEAN has urged dialogue before any election - an implicit admission that ballots cannot precede reconciliation. The junta's leadership, embodied by Min Aung Hlaing, insists the process is free and fair, but legitimacy cannot be asserted by declaration. It must be earned through inclusion.

For India and the wider region, Myanmar's election poses an uncomfortable truth. Stability achieved through exclusion is rarely stable for long. An electoral timetable that sidelines a popular political force associated with Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and ignores half the country's population may deliver an administration, but not authority. In the end, this vote is less about choosing a future than about freezing the present. Without dialogue, ceasefires, and the restoration of political freedoms, Myanmar's ballot risks becoming another milestone in the normalisation of military rule.

Greater Accountability

Twenty years of operational experience (MNREGA was introduced in 2005) have generated several operational lessons. It would be a dereliction of public policy if these lessons were not incorporated for aligning VB-G RAM G, which basically provides a social security net, with radically changed ground realities of rural India. By locating VB-G RAM G firmly within the digital framework and establishing unambiguous and clearly defined regular monitoring mechanisms, we can expect that fake rolls, exaggerated employment claims, payment pendency, and leakages will be minimized and eventually eliminated.

Several commentators and opposition leaders have sought to trivialize the reform undertaken for the rural employment guarantee scheme as a mere attempt to change the name and dispense with Mahatma Gandhi's name from the title. This is of course as absurd as it can get. No government, specially not one which sees itself as pursuing the Mahatma's principal goal of eliminating poverty from our midst, could contemplate such a change in the nomenclature.

It is also rather futile to focus the debate on a change in the name and not dwell on the substance of the change that is embedded in the Act which has introduced the Vikas Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar And Aneekya Mission (Gramin) Act (VB-G RAM G Act). In this piece we intend to address some of the fears, somewhat misplaced, about VB-G RAM G.

First, the reason that by raising the share of the State governments to 40 per cent, the VB-G RAM G scheme will face fiscal constraints as States will not be able to contribute their share of the expenses. It should be noted that the Himalayan and North Eastern states (31 in all) will still receive 90 per cent of the total outlays from the Central Government.

A higher share of the remaining States will ensure that state governments, now with skin in the game, will try harder to ensure a proper implementation of VB-G RAM G and eliminate the leakages that had come to characterize the earlier version. This attempt at making States an almost equal partner in the matter of providing a



viable social security net to their own people is completely in sync with the federal nature of our polity.

Second, the switch from a demand driven to a nominated expenditure format has evoked the criticism from the 'bleeding heart' group of civil society activists' who argue that this will not allow VB-G RAM G to meet the needs of the rural unemployed. They forget that the guarantee doesn't get affected merely by adopting a different fund-sharing pattern, the worker's right to demand employment remains intact, and if employment is not provided within 15 days, unemployment allowance needs to be paid.

Third, an outlay for each state based on an in-depth enquiry of their actual needs will ensure that State governments are fully aware of the annual outlay and can hence plan the implementation of VB-G RAM G more effectively to better tackle the employment loss in lean months.

The provision for State governments to pause the implementation of VB-G RAM G for 60 days in a year to coincide with the peak agriculture seasons of sowing and harvesting is well-considered one. It will help alleviate labour shortages that heavily constrain the farmers' ability to complete necessary farm operations in time during the peak season.

Fourth, the focus on four critical infrastructure and climate related projects is most welcome. India is a severely water stressed country with 4 per cent share of global fresh water availability and 16 per cent of the world population. Our per capita water availability has been declining rather sharply over the past decades. Therefore the focus on rainwater harvesting, dredging of ponds and reservoirs to increase their water holding capacities and all water conservation projects will

address an acute emerging problem. In fact, given the urgency and severity of the water problem, it could be eminently useful for VB-G RAM G to focus almost exclusively on water conservation and its rational utilization for the next few years. It will yield handsome and accountable returns.

Fifth, linking projects undertaken under VB-G RAM G to National Rural Infrastructure Stack and to PM Gati Shakti and making these a part of the Vikas Gram Panchayat Plans in conjunction with its focus on four key sectors, will ensure more bang for the buck. The planning envisaged in the new Act is decentralised, participatory and bottom-up. Vikas Gram Panchayat Plans will be prepared by Gram Panchayats through Gram Sabha themselves. The National Rural Infrastructure Stack is simply an aggregation of the works planned and taken up under the Vikas Gram Panchayat Plans. It will ensure that infrastructure projects are part of the decentralized development plans prepared by Gram Panchayats on the one hand and converge with the national level effort to improve logistics infrastructure and lower overall costs for not only the agriculture sector but the overall economy.

Improvements in rural infrastructure and linking it to logistics network will facilitate labour mobility and transfer of goods and services that will directly benefit the rural workforce and farmers.

Sixth, while appreciable progress has been made in preventing leakages, with 99.94 per cent payments already digital in 2024-25,

the attempt to plug all possible leakages and acts of commission and omission is indeed welcome.

These efforts include appointment of Steering Oversight Committees at Central and State levels; a Program officer for regular monitoring of the projects' implementation; AI based fraud detection system; Enhanced monitoring role of the Panchayats; GPS for mobile-based monitoring; and weekly public disclosures. The most important improvement, in my view, is the provision of stronger Social audits twice a year. This might be the key to eliminating the remaining weaknesses, which had plagued MNREGA's implementation.

Twenty years of operational experience (MNREGA was introduced in 2005) have generated several operational lessons. It would be a dereliction of public policy if these lessons were not incorporated for aligning VB-G RAM G, which basically provides a social security net, with radically changed ground realities of rural India.

By locating VB-G RAM G firmly within the digital framework and establishing unambiguous and clearly defined regular monitoring mechanisms, we can expect that fake rolls, exaggerated employment claims, payment pendency, and leakages will be minimized and eventually eliminated. That will help make VB-G RAM G the social security net which will provide succor to people during times of distress and unforeseen loss of employment.

While the number of days for which VB-G RAM G employment can be availed has been extended to 125 days in a year, the policy effort will be more productively directed to ensure that our workforce is increasingly formalized and engaged in high productivity and high wage employment that will ensure a Vikas Bharat@100.

Viet Nam News

Freedom of religion not subject to politicisation

With the latest update by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which once again gave biased and prescriptive assessments of religious freedom in Viet Nam, a concept rooted in humanitarian values has continued to be distorted and politicised as a tool for pressure.

Viewing the issue solely through the lens of a single report or organisation remains insufficient. But a constitutional right institutionalised through the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion and reflected in vibrant religious life across the country.

This reality is undeniable. Yet it is precisely this harmonious picture that hostile forces seek to exploit, turning the protection of religious freedom into a political instrument.

A common tactic is to distort Viet Nam's religious policies and laws through the activities of individuals, organisations

cultural and legal context.

Viet Nam is a multi-religion country, where spiritual beliefs coexist peacefully, enjoy equality before the law and are closely connected with the nation's history. Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Taoism, Hoa Hao, Islam and other religions are all religious practices protected by law.

The freedom of belief and religion is not a slogan, but a constitutional right institutionalised through the 2016 Law on Belief and Religion and reflected in vibrant religious life across the country.

This reality is undeniable. Yet it is precisely this harmonious picture that hostile forces seek to exploit, turning the protection of religious freedom into a political instrument.

A common tactic is to distort Viet Nam's religious policies and laws through the activities of individuals, organisations

and international forums. Under the guise of human rights or religious freedom, certain reports deliberately absurdist religious freedom, separating it from legal frameworks and social order.

State management measures designed to safeguard the rights and legitimate interests of the community are mischaracterised as interference, restriction or repression.

Annual USCIRF reports, for many years relying largely on information from overseas opposition groups and self-proclaimed 'religious activists', have repeatedly misrepresented Viet Nam's religious reality, interpreting religious issues through subjective and biased perspectives.

Despite being publicly refuted by Viet Nam on multiple occasions, these narratives are recycled as a template, creating a distorted image among audiences unfamiliar with the country's religious context.

Another dangerous tactic is the deliberate

magnification of differences or isolated frictions within or between religious communities to undermine national solidarity. Historical legacies, local disputes or administrative shortcomings in some localities are selectively stripped of context and labelled as 'religious conflicts' or 'discrimination'.

This approach has been persistently applied to land-related issues involving religious facilities, where administrative or legal disputes are recast as allegations of 'land seizure' or 'religious repression', fueling antagonism between believers and authorities. Such misinformation continues to circulate widely online despite transparent legal disclosures and dialogue by relevant agencies.

More alarmingly, in areas of strategic importance to national defence and security, especially those with ethnic populations, reactionary elements have exploited religion to incite separatist or autonomous ideologies.

Letters To The Editor | editor@thestatesman.com

Outcomes

Sir, The protest over replacing or reworking MNREGA ignores the substance of the new rural employment framework. While the Congress argues that removing Gandhi's name dilutes a rights-based law, policy outcomes matter more than symbolism. Gandhi's principles were never about labels, but about dignity of labour, village self-reliance, and honest delivery.

The new Gramin employment scheme focuses on convergence with housing, irrigation, and agriculture programmes, creation of durable assets, skill-linked work, faster wage payments through DBT, and greater use of technology for transparency and accountability.

It also aims to reduce delays, improve productivity, and align rural work with local

economic needs rather than repetitive manual tasks.

If wages are timely, assets are useful, and village命名为sustainable, protesting over nomenclature serves little public purpose. Gandhi's ideals are best honoured through effective governance, not political ownership of a name.

Yours, etc, M. Barathi,
Bengaluru, 29 December.

Mobile library

Sir, There was an interesting article in the media about a person in Tamil Nadu, who was passionate about reading and writing, and who has converted his scooter into a mobile library.

As per the report, this unique way of nurturing reading has drawn many people, including children and he runs the library

on the Thoothukudi-Tirunelveli highway every evening for two hours, after his work at a private company.

At a time when people are addicted to mobile phones, and the reading habit is on the decline, such an initiative, without any charges, will certainly help in reviving the habit.

Yours, etc, S. Sankaranarayanan,
Chennai, 25 December.

Safe highways

Sir, The accident in Chitravadi, where a truck crossed the median and collided head-on with a private bus, leading to fire that claimed six lives, is deeply distressing. It reminds us of similar tragedies in winter, particularly fog-related crashes in northern India.

Dense seasonal fog reduces visibility

drastically, and when combined with driver fatigue - often from long hours without proper rest - and inadequate or improperly adjusted headlights, the risk of vehicles veering across medians rises sharply.

In this case, the truck driver appears to have dozed off, a recurring issue in overnight commercial travel. Such incidents highlight how small lapses in vigilance or vehicle maintenance can turn fatal on busy highways.

To prevent repeats, authorities should enforce stricter rest rules for drivers, mandate fog lights and regular headlight checks, install stronger medians with reflective markers, and increase night patrols. Public awareness on safe winter driving would also help. Simple measures like these could save many lives.

Yours, etc, Avinashaiappan Myllesami,
Cochin, 26 December.



AI momentum: What lies ahead for India?

AMIT KAPOOR AND MOHAMMAD SAAD

Ever since the launch of ChatGPT in 2022, AI usage in India has evolved significantly in both scale and variety. Initially limited to business applications in a few companies, AI adoption has since expanded sharply, with India accounting for 13.5 per cent of ChatGPT's 700 million weekly users. A recent TCS-CII survey found that 69 per cent of organisations now use AI-enabled products and services. Innovation has surged as well, with 83,059 AI patents filed between 2019 and 2025, compared to just 3,931 from 2010 to 2018.

This rapid diffusion of AI is intensifying its interaction with the macroeconomy, giving rise to an evolving AI ecosystem. This ecosystem is not only shaping AI's trajectory but is also being reshaped by AI's impact on labour markets, governance, and infrastructure. While the spillover effects of these interactions will influence the broader economy and will require policy vigilance, they also create significant opportunity areas for India to enter and add value in the global AI race.

Globaly, emerging AI ecosystems are essential for the ethical, equitable, and effective adoption of AI. These ecosystems, comprising the labour market, digital infrastructure, and governance, are not only individually necessary but also complementary. Each element both influences and is influenced by AI, shaping the broader macroeconomy and national competitiveness.

Securing the AI ecosystem therefore requires more than simply establishing these core components but the policies need to be dynamic, such that they account for ongoing interactions between AI and its users. This is particularly critical in India, where AI adoption is already widespread

but uneven across socio-economic groups. Continuous policy vigilance is therefore needed to prevent potential macroeconomic risks that could affect the future trajectory of AI adoption.

The most intense challenges policymakers face in securing India's AI ecosystem arise from the labour market. The advent of AI has raised concerns about workforce skill erosion, socio-economic barriers to transitioning into AI roles, and job insecurity, particularly in the IT industry. Recent research increasingly supports these concerns, showing that AI can degrade skills over time and displace tasks.

At the same time, many advocates argue that AI will generate new jobs in AI development and maintenance to replace jobs that it eliminates. While this is true, the statement overlooks significant structural barriers. Although many people could benefit from these new opportunities, existing workers may encounter challenges such as the cost of reskilling, limited access to employer-provided training, and personal constraints including work and family responsibilities, which can make reskilling unfeasible for large sections of the population.

Although AI can theoretically replace jobs and create new ones, its effects on the labour market are often unexpected and multifaceted. In coding, for example, fears of job displacement are widespread as AI models can already assist with writing and debugging code. Yet AI does not truly "understand" problems; it generates outputs by learning patterns from existing data and struggles with genuinely novel challenges outside its training set. Coupled with the erosion of human skills due to overreliance on AI, this dynamic may create a highly uneven labour market where a few elite-level jobs emerge and lower-level coding positions disappear. The result is a labour market that may simultaneously demand higher skills, offer fewer opportunities, and deepen inequality if access to reskilling remains limited.



In this context AI compels us to rethink growth paradigms, because traditional economic models may ultimately be insufficient to capture its impact on output. Take the Solow growth model, for instance, which posits that long-run economic growth depends on technological progress, which enhances labour productivity rather than replacing labour itself. However, the theoretical possibilities introduced by advanced AI challenge this foundational premise.

AI has the potential not only to augment human labour but, in some cases, to substitute for it entirely. If AI reduces labour input while overall output continues to rise, conventional metrics such as GDP per capita may fail to reflect true economic well-being. Wealth may become increasingly concentrated among business owners and technical elites, while broad-based participation in the economy diminishes, exposing limitations in how traditional growth models measure prosperity in an AI-driven world.

Apart from its impact on the labour market, AI also poses significant challenges in the policy and governance dimension of the ecosystem. Data privacy and ethical usage are the most pressing concerns. Users in India and elsewhere remain largely unaware about how their personal data may be incorporated into AI training models. Policymakers are still deliberating over a formal governance framework, yet AI models have been deployed in India since 2022, meaning data may already have been included in AI systems without consent and cannot be practically retrieved.

Given these dynamic interactions between AI and its ecosystem, securing India's AI ecosystem is a complex task for policymakers. As the year closes, some areas demand immediate attention, while others require strategic shifts and broader stakeholder consultation. AI effects are multifaceted and often unexpected, with the labour market likely to feel the strongest impact. Policymakers must focus on adapting education systems and addressing socioeconomic barriers to ensure a smooth transition for existing workers. Potential inequality arising from AI-driven displacement may also require a rethink of growth paradigms. India's AI future depends not only on dynamic policy action but also on leveraging opportunities to overcome current system limitations, create original use cases, and add genuine value through innovation.

(The writers are, respectively, chair and a researcher, Institute for Competitiveness.)

Policy must offer smokers an off-ramp

SHREY MADAAN

India wants to reduce smoking, but its approach defies basic public-health logic. By raising cigarette taxes while outlawing safer alternatives, it forces smokers into a false choice: keep paying more to smoke, or break the law to curb smoking.

Even countries with far higher tobacco taxes have learned that taxation works only when paired with harm-reduction tools. That is why New Zealand raises taxes minimally and allows safer alternatives for adults trying to quit. Sweden, now on track to become the world's first "smoke-free" country, did not get there by taxing cigarettes alone. It succeeded because it encouraged low-risk alternative烟雾. The UK cut smoking rates dramatically not with punitive taxes, but by actively promoting vaping as a safer alternative for smokers.

India wants to achieve the same public health goals as the countries that have slashed smoking rates dramatically, but it has banned the essential tools needed to achieve that goal. By outlawing e-cigarettes and safer nicotine products under PECAs, India has closed off the most credible exit route for adult smokers.

The result is entirely predictable: prices keep rising, choices keep shrinking, and smokers are left with nowhere to go except back to more harmful products. When taxes go up, and alternatives stay illegal,



people do not quit; they switch to cheaper, more harmful tobacco or to unregulated black-market products. This inconsistency also harms the workers whom MPs raised concerns about, including bidi rollers, leaf pluckers, and small rollers.

A tax-only approach squeezes demand unpredictably but doesn't build a transition plan for the communities dependent on tobacco cultivation. A modern tobacco framework would pair tax reform with a structured shift toward less harmful products, more stable markets, and genuine cessation pathways.

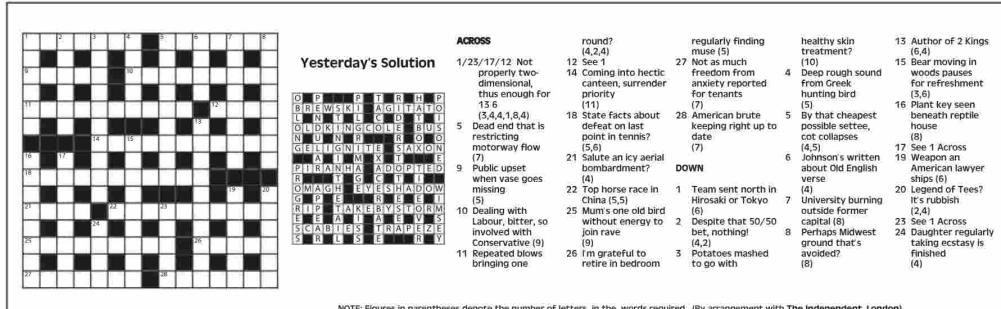
India does not need to reinvent the wheel; it needs to stop ignoring the evidence that already works. A coherent science-driven policy would keep taxes smart, not punitive; regulate and legalize safer alternatives for adults and farmers and workers in diversifying to other crops and industries. This is not a lenient

approach but only a strategy proven to reduce harm.

Raising cigarette taxes may preserve government revenue and satisfy the WHO on paper. But if the goal is fewer smokers, not just fuller ones, India must offer people an off-ramp. Without harm reduction, tax hikes are little more than a costly detour.

(The writer is Indian Policy Associate, Consumer Choice Center.)

Crossword | No. 29336



100 Years Ago

OCCASIONAL NOTE

TURKEY, we are told, may be tempted to go to war over Mosul, first in order to procure the restoration of her prestige, and, secondly, in order to stifle the complaints of her nationals who have been upset by the loss thereof. A further, and perhaps a more sinister, reason for keeping a watch upon Angora at the present time is the rumour of a secret treaty under which Russia undertakes to come to the help of the Turks in the event of war. If Kemal permits himself to be jockeyed into war by any of those considerations, he will write himself down as less than a statesman. And if Moscow has pledged itself to send Red troops so far afield as Mesopotamia it will be courting a repetition of the developments which paralysed Tsarist Russia during the war and eventually led to the revolution. But if statesmen always behaved like statesmen there would be no such thing as war.

News Items

BENGAL TEACHERS IN CONFERENCE

IMPROVEMENT SCHEME UNDER CONSIDERATION

NOVEMBER 29, 2025

THE sixth session of the All-Bengal Teachers' Conference commenced here to-day. Dr. Urquhart, who presided, informed the Congress that the University had been attempting to raise the minimum demand before recognition was given or continued and had been using what powers it possessed to prevent arbitrary treatment to teachers. It had at present under consideration a scheme which, if put into operation, would do much towards improving the status and pay of teachers, and it was also discussing the formation of an arbitration board.

The reorganization of the control of secondary education would, no doubt, soon be taken up by the authorities concerned. The Government had been able to set aside in the last budget a sum of Rs. 3 lakhs for the improvement of the salaries of secondary teachers and had also been able to give some assistance towards the institution of provident funds.

Continuing, Dr. Urquhart said an improvement was specially necessary in the relations between teachers and the local managing committees. The teachers ought to have a substantial share in the membership of that committee and it ought to be more clearly recognized that it was the committee existed for the sake of the school and not the other way about. Dr. Urquhart proposed the organization of arbitration boards, which need not be centralised too much.

DEMONSTRATION FLIGHT

PLANES OVER CALCUTTA TO-MORROW

THERE will be a demonstration tomorrow of flying over Calcutta by aeroplanes belonging to the R. A. F. It is anticipated that several officers stationed in Calcutta will take the opportunity of ascending.

One purpose of the flights, however, will be the discharging from the aero-planes of leaflets containing the announcement of the forthcoming military tattoo.

The concerted flight will be undertaken at twelve o'clock in the day, and will be fully visible from the Maidan.

INDIAN CHRISTIANS

THE twelfth session of the All-India Conference of Indian Christians is meeting in Bishop's College, Calcutta. Resolutions have been passed mourning the death of Mr. C. R. Dass and Sir Surendra Banerjea and advocating total prohibition within five years. The position of Indian Christians in the Legislature is being considered.

LALA LAJPAT RAI

CAWNPUR, DEC. 29

IT is understood that as a result of the Congress taking over the Swarajist programme in the Councils, Lala Lajpat Rai will join the Swaraj Party in the Assembly and will be proposed for election as deputy leader of the Party in the Assembly in place of Mr. N. C. Kelkar, resigned.



Editor's TAKE

Clean energy: India's renewable surge

With record renewable energy generation, India's energy transition is no longer optional — it has become an economic and environmental imperative

One sector where India has consistently delivered, despite persistent challenges, is its push for green energy. The renewable energy journey has now reached a crescendo, with the country clocking record levels of renewable energy generation this year. With a record addition of 44.5 GW of renewable capacity till November, the country has not only achieved its highest-ever annual expansion but has also crossed a major milestone: non-fossil fuel sources now account for over half of the total installed electricity capacity. At 262.74 GW, non-fossil capacity constitutes 51.55 per cent of India's installed power capacity, meeting its Paris Agreement target five years ahead of schedule. Solar power has been the clear engine of this transformation. Nearly 35 GW of solar capacity was added in 2025, pushing total installations to 132.85 GW — an increase of over 40 per cent in just one year. Wind energy also made steady gains, with capacity rising to nearly 54 GW. India now ranks among global leaders in renewable energy, standing third in solar power capacity and fourth in wind and overall renewable capacity. In July, renewable energy met over half of India's total electricity demand on a single day — an accomplishment worth cherishing. Government policy initiatives have played a crucial role in this progress. Schemes such as PM Surya Ghar: Mukt Bijli Yojana and PM-KUSUM have expanded rooftop solar and decentralised generation. The National Green Hydrogen Mission aims to make electricity a clean industrial energy source. Growth in domestic solar manufacturing, reforms in wind energy policy, and the launch of geothermal energy initiatives have further strengthened the ecosystem.

While this is a moment to be proud of, there is still a long way to go to make the transition truly sustainable and cost-effective. Technological challenges remain daunting. Weaknesses in grid infrastructure, storage capacity, and transmission networks need urgent attention. Without sufficient battery storage, pumped hydro, and flexible grid management, renewable energy cannot become a fully reliable power source. Land acquisition issues, delays in transmission projects, and financial stress in power distribution companies continue to haunt the sector.

Another major concern is India's dependence on imports for key components, especially in advanced solar technologies and battery materials. The road to achieving 500 GW of non-fossil capacity by 2030 will therefore require more than record-breaking installations. It demands massive investment in grids, storage solutions, and forecasting technologies to improve efficiency. Regulatory clarity, long-term policy consistency, and faster project clearances will be essential to sustain investor confidence. India's renewable energy push is no longer a choice; it is a strategic necessity. Clean, green energy offers resilience against climate risks and greater energy security. The achievements of 2025, though encouraging, are not sufficient in themselves. The challenge now is to maintain the momentum to achieve a reliable and inclusive energy future.

PICTALK



People take a boat ride as seagulls hover over the Yamuna on a foggy winter day in Delhi.

PHOTO: PANKAJ KUMAR

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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BUILD HAPPIER HOMES AND STRONGER FAMILIES

As 2025 ends and we step into the New Year 2026, hopes rise for steadier days. We aim to act wisely, nurture harmony, and build happier homes. Happiness rarely arrives by chance; it grows from everyday choices grounded in care and respect.

Seek it with purpose. In life, as in sport, striving develops resilience even when results are modest. That instead, A stick in time saves nine, to help small problems early and cultivate the habit of saving for difficult days. Live — and let others live.

Let the coming year mark a break with unhealthy habits. Quitting smoking protects health and lightens the burden on families. Share knowledge generously. Teachers, including music teachers, open minds and awaken creativity.

Express gratitude to parents, teachers, and patients; each of us

may one day depend on others' kindness. Play your part at work, and help colleagues when they need support. Listen carefully, refine good ideas, and make thoughtful suggestions. When provoked by careless words, hold your composure and honour family values and traditions.

By choosing simple living and high thinking, we find peace of mind. Holistic health, robust health, and confidence in children: the future of India can help us create homes in 2026.

A thoughtful society is built on kindness and discipline. Homes grow happier when we choose simple living over needless luxury. Faith, honesty, and gratitude strengthen families through every season. With these values, 2026 can truly become a year of peace and joy.

JAYANTH SUBRAMANIAM | MUMBAI

Please send your letter to the info@dailypioneer.com.

In not more than 250 words. We appreciate your feedback.

Migration, hospitality, and civilisational test

Migration today has become one of the most contentious issues in global politics. Yet history consistently demonstrates that migration has not weakened societies; on the contrary, it has enriched them — economically, culturally, and intellectually



PRAFULL GORADIA

The press has lately been preoccupied with migration, largely because President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened residents of the United States with expulsion to their countries of origin. What has unsettled many observers is not only the substance of these threats, but the tone in which they are delivered — often with a sense of bravado, as though migration were inherently an act of intrusion or infiltration. From a Hindu civilisational perspective, such framing appears alien and historically shallow.

The ancient maxim *Atithi Devo Bhava* — the guest is akin to the divine — encapsulates an ethical universe in which hospitality is not a matter of convenience or political calculation, but a moral obligation. To welcome the outsider with one's own refinement. This did not imply the absence of rules or discernment; rather, it reflected a civilisational confidence grounded in moral clarity.

Intellectual honesty, however, demands an important distinction. A guest, a lawful immigrant, and an illegal entrant are not the same, and conflating them corrodes public debate. Few societies understand this complexity as intimately as India. The Sanatana or Vedic civilisation is believed to be partly indigenous and partly shaped by successive waves of migration — from Persia, Central Asia, and beyond. Far from weakening India, these movements enriched it, adding layers of language, custom, philosophy, and artistic expression. Immigration was not incidental to Indian civilisation; it was foundational. The same can be said of most great civilisations across history.

India's civilisational strength lay in its capacity to absorb external influences without losing its core identity. This is why texts such as the Bhagavad Gita transcend geography and time. Regarded by many as part of humanity's shared intellectual inheritance, the Gita continues to shape ethical reflection across cultures. Veteran journalist Saeed Naqvi once recounted an anecdote from Turkey, where a former president confided that after exhausting days in office he would turn to a Turkish translation of the Gita to steady his mind. Ideas, unlike borders, migrate freely — and often to humanity's lasting benefit.

This tradition of receiving newcomers as guests endured for millennia, until certain historical incursions — marked not by peaceful migration but by conquest and coercion — clashed fundamentally with India's ethos of accommodation. Even then, it bears emphasis that no genuine immigrant, as distinct from an invader, ever proved indigestible to Indian society. Traders, scholars, refugees, and seekers of spiritual refuge found



e Suresh

SOME MIGRATIONS TOOK FORMS SO UNUSUAL THAT ENTIRE TERRITORIES WERE ACQUIRED BY PURCHASE RATHER THAN CONQUEST.

CALIFORNIA, NEW MEXICO, AND ALASKA WERE BOUGHT ALONG WITH THEIR INHABITANTS, TURNING LAND AND PEOPLE INTO COMMERCIAL ASSETS. ANCIENT INDIAN SOCIETY, BY CONTRAST, PLACED NEWCOMERS WITHIN A MORAL FRAMEWORK OF OBLIGATION AND RESTRAINT

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space and acceptance. The rupture came with the Partition of 1947. Partition was not migration in any natural historical sense; it was displacement on a civilisational scale, accompanied by violence, fear, and demographic upheaval.

In its aftermath came large-scale illegal migration, generating resentment and the harsh label *ghuspalithiya*. India, already burdened by poverty and a vast population, struggled to absorb the sudden pressure. The geopolitical reality worsened matters: territorial balance had been lost in the west with the creation of Pakistan, while demographic pressure continued from the east. What had once been a gradual civilisational process unfolding over centuries was compressed into a few traumatic years. The scars of that compression continue to shape Indian politics.

In later decades, migration became a political instrument elsewhere as well. Bangladeshi leaders are often accused of encouraging outward migration to ease demographic stress, effectively exporting surplus population. The demographic transformation of global cities bears witness to this phenomenon. London, once spared of the capital of the world, today has a mayor of Pakistani origin, elected with strong support from Bangladeshi communities concentrated in the East End. New York, America's financial capital, has likewise elected a mayor of Pakistani origin. Whatever one's view of these outcomes, they underscore how migration reshapes not only societies but political power.

History shows that migration has played a decisive role in both building and unravelling civilisations. Eastern Greece, or Anatolia, was rendered vulnerable to Turkish conquest through earlier Roman and Byzantine policies that altered its demographic character. Central Asia was repeatedly reshaped by waves of migration and conquest, producing both cultural synthesis and chronic instability. The United States pre-

sents the most striking example of all: a nation built almost entirely by immigrants. Europeans displaced indigenous peoples, Africans were brought forcibly through slavery, and later waves arrived in search of opportunity.

Some migrations took forms so unusual that entire territories were acquired by purchase rather than conquest. California, New Mexico, and Alaska were bought along with their inhabitants, turning land and people into commercial assets. Ancient Indian society, by contrast, placed newcomers within a moral framework of obligation and restraint. It is therefore a striking irony that a modern American president now threatens to expel the descendants of immigrants whose presence constitutes the very foundation of the American nation.

Consider finally the Jews, often described as the most persecuted people in recorded history. Expelled or marginalised in country after country, they found in India a rare exception. Across centuries, Jews in India never felt unsafe or alien. Jewish leaders worldwide have repeatedly acknowledged this singular historical record. Those who left India — such as the Cochin Jews — did so voluntarily to settle in Israel, not under compulsion. Some even returned, rediscovering that India remained their truest home.

There is a lesson here. Migration need not inevitably lead to exclusion or civilisational anxiety. Under the right ethical framework, it can foster belonging and continuity. The challenge for modern nation-states is not to deny migration's reality, but to manage it wisely — distinguishing hospitality from lawlessness, compassion from chaos. Civilisations endure not merely by erecting walls, but by cultivating moral confidence. India's long experience suggests that openness, tempered by discernment, remains among the surest foundations of a resilient society.

Seeking peace outside while losing it within



RAJYOGI BRAHMA KUMAR NIKUNJ JI

2ND OPINION

THE PIONEER

We inhabit a world that has been shaped, trained, and educated in the logic of war rather than the wisdom of peace. Our very patterns of thinking reflect this conditioning — argument and counterargument, victory and defeat, domination and resistance. Language itself carries the imprint of conflict. And yet, this is the most intellectually advanced, materially prosperous, and globally connected generation in human history. Paradoxically, it is also a generation deeply at war — with itself, with others, and with nature. The question that confronts us is unavoidable: why, despite unprecedented progress, are we more desperate than ever for peace? Why does peace seem to retreat further as our comforts and capabilities expand? The truth is that peace in the world cannot be separated from peace within

individual lives. As inner harmony erodes, external conflict multiplies. The steady rise of wars, crime, violence, environmental destruction, and moral decay signals that humanity is drifting away from living peace and edging closer to a silence found only in graveyards. Perhaps most alarming is that even nations once known for their pacifist traditions are now drawn into relentless arms races.

As repeated attempts to secure peace through treaties, power balances, and social reforms fail, despair grows about the possibility of a harmonious human future. Yet, even in this bleak landscape, there are signs of hope. But before we can grasp them, we must confront a fundamental error that has plagued humanity for centuries. We have consistently misunderstood peace. Many assume peace is merely the absence of war or conflict, or that it will automatically arise once social justice is achieved. These conditions, however, are not cause but consequences. They are outward expressions of an inner state. The real mistake lies in searching for peace outside ourselves instead of within.

The roots of unrest do not lie in systems or structures alone; they lie in the human mind. Greed, ego, anger, lust and attachment steadily drain our spiritual strength. When these vices dominate consciousness, they distort thought and action, leading inevitably to suffering. True and lasting peace can return only when these inner enemies

are confronted and overcome. When attention turns inward and awareness reconnects with the deeper self, a profound realisation emerges: peace is not something to be acquired — it is our natural state. We may sustain anger or hatred for a while, but peace alone has the power to endure. Few recognise that we are born with this inner harmony. Yet, as we engage with the physical world — identifying with the body, possessions and relationships — we lose touch with our original energy. Negativity takes root, manifests in action and culminates in pain.

Trapped in cycles of karmic bondage, we long to return to peace but lack the inner power. Restoration begins by connecting the soul to a supreme source of strength and purity.

Peace follows purity, just as light follows the removal of darkness. It is not isolated; it is collective. One cannot live in peace while denying it to others. Only actions that nurture harmony within oneself, society and the environment can sustain universal peace. This transformation becomes possible when we understand our relationship with the Supreme — an inexhaustible source of peace, love and wisdom. Ultimately, unless we make peace within, we cannot hope to restore peace on Earth.

The writer is a spiritual teacher and popular columnist

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A Tribute to Khaleda Zia's Legacy

Sad to learn of the passing of Bangladesh's first female prime minister, Khaleda Zia, at the age of 80 after a prolonged illness, as reported by the media. Doctors said she had been suffering from advanced cirrhosis of the liver, arthritis, diabetes, and serious chest and heart problems.

Khaleda Zia was born on August 15, 1945 in Dinajpur, then in East Bengal, India, now part of Bangladesh. She became the country's first woman prime minister, serving two terms, from 1991 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2006.

She was married to Ziaur Rahman and had two sons, Tarique Rahman and Arafat Rahman. Ziaur Rahman played a key role in Bangladesh's struggle for independence from Pakistan and later served as president in 1977.

He was assassinated in 1981, a tragedy that deeply affected the nation. Khaleda Zia's long political career shaped Bangladesh's democratic journey, often in difficult and divisive times.

May her soul rest in peace, and may her family find strength at this time of loss. Her legacy will continue to inspire leaders, citizens, and future generations across the region.

GANAPATHI BHAT | AKOLA

Power cannot shield the guilty

Apropos the report "SC stays HC order suspending Kuldeep Sengar's life sentence" (Dec 30). The Supreme Court's decision to stay the Delhi High Court order that might have enabled the release of former MLA Kuldeep Singh Sengar is a reassuring assertion of judicial responsibility.

In a case as grave as the 2017 Unnao rape, where the convict stands guilty under both the IPC and the stringent POCSO Act, any premature relief would have sent a disturbing signal to society, for survivors of sexual violence. The apex court's view that substantial questions of law arise highlights the need for scrutiny in crimes that strike at human dignity. Justice must not only be done, but must also be seen to be done, especially when the accused enjoys political influence. The law cannot appear indulgent towards those who abuse power to commit heinous crimes.

Equally inspiring is the courage of the survivor, who has fought despite intimidation, trauma, and hardship. This order reaffirms a principle: the law is supreme and applies to all. Exemplary punishment deters future offenders and strengthens faith in justice. Justice, when applied firmly and fairly, strengthens public trust in the courts.

After the chaos, stability returns

The long eclipse of Trump's so-called doctrine of chaos in 2025 compelled nations to confront their core weaknesses rather than flaunt imagined strengths, and in doing so it triggered fresh resolve and renewed confidence. Nations and markets are learning to absorb stress rather than amplify it, and, just as significantly, serious dialogue has begun even among adversaries. Economically, conditions appear to be stabilising. Inflation is easing, interest rates are normalising, and growth is beginning to rest on firmer ground.

Investment is shifting towards long-term priorities — technology, infrastructure, and the energy transition — signalling confidence in the future rather than anxiety about the present. Global trade is reshaping as supply chains diversify. Emerging economies are contributing more meaningfully to global growth, lending the system broader momentum and balance, while extremes steadily lose their appeal. Governments, markets, and societies are choosing continuity, repair, and incremental progress. A once-singed globe now seems determined to seek calmer climates in 2026. With patience and prudence, leaders recognise that cooperation offers safer rewards than reckless brinkmanship, for their people and planet.

R NARAYAN | MUMBAI



From abundance to alarm: Punjab's soil crisis

A fundamental question is: can an ancient, ecologically fragile, and already degraded mountain system like the Aravali be defined by a rigid geometric benchmark, or does such a definition risk withdrawing protection from large parts of the landscape, thereby enabling mining, real estate expansion, and irreversible ecological harm?



AS
MITTAL

Guru Nanak Dev Ji's timeless words — "Pavan Guru, Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat" — frame nature as our teacher, father, and great mother. Vande Mataram, India's national song, similarly celebrates a land of flowing rivers and fertile fields. Yet, as the nation marks 150 years of Vande Mataram, which sings of abundance, the ground beneath our feet tells a far grimmer story. India's soil — once the bedrock of food security and rural prosperity — is now exhausted, contaminated, and dangerously out of balance. Nowhere is this crisis more evident than in Punjab, the epicentre of India's first Green Revolution.

In the race to build roads, factories, and livelihoods — undeniable necessities — we forgot a simple truth: development that damages air, water, and soil ultimately harms people, animals, birds, and even micro-life.

From Delhi to northern states choking under severe AQI levels, to poisoned groundwater and declining farm productivity, climate change and pollution are no longer abstract warnings. They are lived realities. The right to a clean environment — repeatedly affirmed as intrinsic to the Right to Life — is now being tested by prolonged policy inertia.

Punjab's Evidence is Alarming

Recent findings from the Central Ground Water Board's Annual Ground Water Report 2025 are deeply disturbing. Punjab has emerged as the worst-affected state in India, with uranium levels exceeding the permissible limit of 30 ppb in 62.5 per cent of post-monsoon groundwater samples, up sharply from 33.6 per cent in 2024, a staggering 91.7 per cent year-on-year increase. Sixteen of the state's 23 districts fall within contaminated zones, with Sangrur and Bathinda reporting uranium concentrations above 200 ppb.

This is no longer merely an environmental concern; it is a public health emergency. Elevated uranium levels are linked to kidney disease and cancer. Excess nitrates and fluoride raise the risk of Blue Baby Syndrome and skeletal disorders.



A NATION ASPIRING TO VIKSIT BHARAT CANNOT BUILD PROSPERITY ON POISONED WATER AND DYING SOIL

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Rising salinity and residual sodium carbonate are rendering once-fertile land increasingly unproductive. Zameen bhi beemar, pani bhi zahreela, aur insaan bhi — the crisis is systemic. Compounding the problem is the excessive use of chemical inputs.

Punjab's fertiliser consumption stands at 247.61 kg per hectare, nearly double the national average. Pesticide usage, at 77 kg per hectare, places the state among the highest users in the country.

What once delivered bumper harvests now depletes soil organic carbon, destroys microbial life, contaminates food chains, and inflates the fertiliser subsidy bill beyond ₹2 lakh crore annually — without commensurate productivity gains.

A nation aspiring to Viksit Bharat cannot build prosperity on poisoned water and dying soil.

The Pioneer
SINCE 1845

The human toll is equally stark. In districts such as Bathinda, Mansa, and Ludhiana, up to 60 per cent of soil samples reportedly contain toxic pesticide residues, including chemicals long flagged as hazardous. These toxins migrate through water and food systems, accumulate in human bodies, weaken immunity, and burden future generations with genetic and metabolic risks. Farmers and rural communities — those closest to the land — suffer first and most.

Regulatory Blind Spots

India's pesticide governance remains trapped in another era. The regulatory backbone — the Insecticides Act of 1968 and Rules of 1971 — is outdated. The proposed Pesticide Management Bill, 2020, though well intentioned, leaves critical gaps: inadequate farmer protection, weak labelling norms, limited griev-

ance redressal, and no mandatory provision of personal protective equipment for small and marginal farmers.

Training deficits compound the problem. Over nearly three decades, fewer than six lakh farmers have received Integrated Pest Management training in a country with over 15 crore cultivators. Aggressive marketing by agrochemical companies often fills this knowledge vacuum, turning retailers into the primary and frequently unreliable advisers. Yeh sifir fason ka nahi, naslon ka sawal hai.

Soul Intelligence and the Path Forward

Punjab's revival lies not in abandoning productivity, but in rebuilding its foundation. The future of agriculture must be digitised, biology-based, and digitally empowered.

The Soil Health Card scheme demonstrated that data-driven nutrient management works. Punjab now needs a Digital Soil Health Mission that integrates

satellite imagery, AI analytics, weather models, and real-time soil sensors to deliver farm-level advisories. Decentralised soil-testing labs run by FPOs, rural youth, and women's groups can transform soil testing from a periodic ritual into a continuous intelligence system. Equally vital is restoring the soil microbiome. Decades of chemical overuse have disrupted microbial networks essential for nutrient cycling, moisture retention, and crop resilience. Integrated Nutrient Management — combining chemical, organic, and biological inputs based on real diagnostics — can reduce costs, limit leaching, and rebuild long-term fertility.

Biofertilisers offer a promising bridge. Inputs such as seaweed extracts, protein hydrolysates, and beneficial microbes enhance nutrient uptake and stress tolerance without damaging soil ecology. India's decision to regulate biofertilisers under the Fertiliser Control Order from June 2025 will boost quality assurance, farmer confidence, and global competitiveness.

India also holds immense untapped potential in seaweed-based biofertilisers. Seaweed cultivation requires no freshwater, fertilisers, or arable land, and can generate over ₹13 lakh per hectare annually — creating livelihoods while reducing chemical dependence. For Punjab, this opens a pathway to align agriculture with a broader bio-economy.

Punjab's agricultural renewal must become a coordinated national mission. Policy incentives should reward soil restoration, not just output, through carbon credits, preferential finance, and benefits linked to improvements in soil organic carbon. Massive investments are needed in farmer education, mandatory safety protocols, and transparent data systems to close regulatory gaps.

Research institutions — ICAR, agricultural universities, and IITs — must accelerate the development of crop-specific biological solutions. Rural bio-economy hubs that process agro-waste, seaweed, and organic residues can generate jobs while supplying clean inputs at scale.

Punjab once fed India through the Green Revolution. Today, it must lead Green Revolution 2.0 — regenerative, climate-resilient, and rooted in living soil.

Because when soil heals, farmers prosper, consumers remain healthy, and the nation stands stronger. *Yeh bachege, tabhi bhavishya bachege.*

FIRST Column

Bangladesh: A country in turmoil – dangerous game of betrayal and sabotage



KRIPA
NAUTIYAL

Bangladesh came into being in 1971 with critical support from India, which helped liberate it from Pakistani oppression. For nearly five decades, the two nations enjoyed robust bilateral relations built on shared history, economic interdependence, and cultural affinity. However, the political upheaval of August 2024 has dramatically altered this landscape, raising troubling questions about Bangladesh's future trajectory and the stability of South Asia.

In August 2024, student-led protests that initially focused on quota reform in government jobs escalated into a full-fledged uprising after violent government crackdowns. According to a United Nations report, up to 1,400 people may have been killed during the protests between July 15 and August 5, 2024. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was evacuated to India on August 5, 2024, after protesters surrounded her residence, ending her 15-year rule. The present state of violence following the death of a radical young activist, Osman Hadi, has a disturbing anti-India pattern which further complicates the situation.

The immediate aftermath saw Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus assume leadership of an interim government. While Yunus's international reputation initially inspired hope, the subsequent months have witnessed concerning developments that threaten regional stability. The narrative that external powers orchestrated Hasina's ouster to punish her for resisting Western pressure is contentious and lacks definitive evidence.

However, analysts note that Washington viewed Yunus's appointment as an opportunity to enhance US presence in the Indo-Pacific, capitalising on his openness to collaboration with the West. The US moved quickly after the transition, with officials holding talks to support Bangladesh's economy and USAID signing an agreement to provide over \$202 million in aid. Former Prime Minister Hasina has made serious allegations. She claims there is forensic evidence suggesting foreign mercenaries acted as provocateurs during the protests, though she maintains she does not believe the US government was directly involved. The truth likely lies in a complex interplay of domestic grievances, institutional failings, and shifting geopolitical interests rather than simple external conspiracy.

The most alarming development under Yunus's interim government has been the systematic violence against religious minorities, particularly Hindus who comprise approximately

eight per cent of Bangladesh's population. The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council reported that between August 4 and 20, 2024, a total of 2,010 incidents of attacks on minorities occurred, including attacks on 69 temples. Between January and December 2025, the Institute for Conflict Management recorded at least 34 cases of minority persecution, including lynchings, lynching, abduction, land seizures, and attacks on places of worship. These are not isolated incidents but part of a disturbing pattern.

Yunus's response has been inconsistent. While he initially acknowledged persecution in interviews with NPA and others, he later dismissed allegations of Hindu persecution as "baseless" at the UN General Assembly. He has claimed that attacks on Hindus were political rather than communal, occurring while targeting Awami League supporters. This explanation rings hollow when temples are destroyed and minorities face systematic targeting. Whether Yunus lacks the capacity to restore order or is allowing instability to delay elections remains debatable, but what is clear is that his government has failed to protect vulnerable communities. Elections expected in late 2025 or early 2026 now appear increasingly uncertain, raising fears of democratic backsliding. Perhaps most disturbing is Bangladesh's warming relationship with Pakistan — the very nation whose military committed genocides, mass rape, and atrocities in 1971. Reports suggest Pakistan's ISI has re-established a presence in Dhaka, alongside renewed defence exchanges. Three million Bangladeshis died in 1971, and countless women were raped. For Bangladesh to now tilt towards Pakistan and adopt an anti-India posture is not merely ungrateful — it is strategically reckless.

These shifts signal a drift away from secular democracy and towards Islamist politics, echoing rising influence of Jamaat-e-Islami and other radical groups. The deteriorating India-Bangladesh relationship carries severe economic costs for both nations. Cross-border trains have been suspended, Bangladesh has banned imports of 33 Indian product categories, and India withdrew diplomatic missions in April 2025. Bilateral trade, worth \$13-15 billion annually, faces disruption.

Major connectivity projects — including transit agreements that benefited Bangladesh's landlocked access — are at risk. For Bangladesh, antagonising India is economically suicidal. India is Bangladesh's largest trading partner in South Asia, its primary electricity supplier, and the gateway to markets in Nepal and Bhutan. Meanwhile, the Trump administration imposed a 37 per cent tariff on Bangladeshi products, forcing Yunus to plead for tariff suspension. Bangladesh cannot afford to lose both Indian cooperation and favourable Western trade terms simultaneously.

For India, an unstable Bangladesh represents security threats: refugee flows, terrorism, and

Chinese military encroachment near strategic corridors. A Bangladesh aligned with Pakistan and China fundamentally alters South Asian strategic calculations. Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture. The interim government must prioritise three urgent actions: first, immediately end violence against minorities through decisive law enforcement, not mere rhetoric. Prosecute perpetrators and provide reparations to victims. Constitutional protections for religious freedom must be enforced not merely proclaimed. Second, conduct free and fair elections without further delay.

Democratic legitimacy cannot be indefinitely postponed under the guise of reforms. All major parties, including the Awami League, must be allowed to participate to ensure political legitimacy. Third, recalibrate foreign policy pragmatically. Bangladesh's geography, history, and economic interests demand constructive relations with India. The Pakistan embrace must be abandoned before irreparable damage occurs. Balance relations with Western powers while maintaining independence, but recognise that India remains indispensable for Bangladesh's prosperity and future.

For India, strategic patience is essential. While protecting its interests firmly — including demanding justice for minorities and opposing anti-India activities — New Delhi should maintain economic ties, support Bangladeshi civil society, and engage with all political stakeholders, including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Overreaction could push Bangladesh further towards Pakistan and China.

Bangladesh's current trajectory threatens to surpass the gains of five decades. The student protesters who courageously demanded democracy deserve better than violence, instability, and dangerous geopolitical realignments. The bloodshed seen in 1971 for Bangladesh's independence should not be forgotten in 2025 through ill-conceived partnerships with historical oppressors.

The stakes transcend bilateral relations. Bangladesh's choices will determine whether South Asia moves towards integration and prosperity or fragmentation and conflict. The interim government must recognise that Bangladesh's future lies not in embracing Pakistan's ISI or playing great-power games beyond its capacity, but in honouring its democratic aspirations, protecting all citizens regardless of faith, and maintaining the strategic partnerships that enabled its birth as a nation. Time is running out to choose the right path.

Institutionalising trust through digital transparency



RAJAT
BANSAL

To deepen governance reforms, Chhattisgarh has leveraged technology to create Khanji Online 2.0, a transparent, real-time digital platform that is transforming mineral administration across the value chain.

The transition towards the ambitious goals of Viksit Bharat demands not only policy vision but also precise, scalable, and accountable mechanisms for implementation. In a resource-rich state like Chhattisgarh, where key national industries rely on minerals, ensuring the integrity and efficiency of resource management is a core administrative imperative. The successful digital transformation of the mining sector through Khanji Online provides a robust model for how technology can institutionalise trust and accountability across diverse stakeholders.

The Imperative for Digital Governance

Historically, mineral administration often suffered from information asymmetry, procedural opacity, and leakage points between extraction and royalty collection. This systemic inefficiency burdened lessees and licensees while hindering the government's capacity for real-time compliance monitoring.

The first response to this challenge was the introduction of Khanji Online in 2017. This marked a pivotal moment, shifting mineral administration from manual, file-based processing to a single, integrated digital platform. This initial policy fix addressed the need for programmatic loyalty by focusing on systemic reforms, ensuring that the government programme was implemented efficiently and transparently.

Policy Achievements

The initial version of the platform rapidly integrated key sector stakeholders, including 131 leaseholders, 172 licensees, 3,264 end users, and over 56,901 registered vehicles. This integration yielded immediate and measurable results, evidenced by the 138 million tonnes of mineral despatch facilitated and the collection of substantial state revenue (over ₹8,124 crore in royalties and levies). The system's efficacy was validated by the prestigious National e-Governance Award (2019-20), recognising its success in digital transformation.

This trust was fostered primarily because the system provided essential functional integrity. It achieved this through real-time production and despatch monitoring for government officials,

automated approval of daily discharges, and simplified single-click payment for all statutory dues (including royalty, DMF, NMET, and cess). Crucially, logistical integrity was ensured on the ground through the mandatory generation of barcoded e-Transit Passes and the use of GPS-enabled tracking alongside e-check posts, effectively eliminating opportunities for manual intervention and pilferage. This demonstrated that bureaucratic discipline, when enabled by technology, creates a competitive advantage for major users like BALCO, Hindalco, ACC, UltraTech, NMDC, and SELC.

Scaling Up Accountability

The administration recognised that sustained excellence requires continuous adaptation. The launch of Khanji Online 2.0 marks the next logical step in institutional evolution. The upgraded platform is now hosted on a robust, MeitY-empowered cloud (Paas), offering zero downtime and disaster-recovery capabilities — a critical feature for maintaining the integrity of central government data. This new version is designed to further enhance accessibility and ease of doing business by introducing Android and iOS mobile applications, extending operational capability to field level. Furthermore, the capacity for real-time assessment and auto-generated MIS reports provide continuous, verifiable data, making the system inherently immune to opaque decision-making and supporting the online grievance module and 24x7 helpline.

The Path to Evidence-Based Governance

The success of Khanji Online is a powerful narrative of policy advocacy achieved through objective means. It critiques the historical systemic inefficiencies of manual procedures and advocates for a structural solution: digital architecture. The implementation of this platform establishes Chhattisgarh as a leader in digital governance and sustainable mineral resource management.

The future of governance hinges on the ability to integrate quantifiable data with administrative action. By strengthening the foundation of Khanji Online 2.0, the state ensures that all decisions regarding resource use, environmental impact, and social investment (via DMF) are guided by performance-measurement and accountability metrics.

This proactive approach fulfils the directive of promoting clean and efficient governance and guarantees that the state's mineral wealth continues to drive the nation towards its shared developmental vision.

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♦ The Indian EXPRESS

- FOUNDED BY -
RAM NATH GOENKA
♦ IN 1932 ♦

BECAUSE THE TRUTH
INVOLVES US ALL

Khaleda Zia leaves a country in the remaking

After Khaleda Zia's death, with Sheikh Hasina in exile, Bangladesh faces an election that will see the "battle of begins" no more. For a nation grappling with unresolved historical legacies and current crises, with the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus failing to step up to its mandate, the death of Bangladeshi's first woman prime minister and BNP chief marks the end of an era. Her passing coincides with the return of her son, Tarique Rahman, from 17 years of self-imposed exile in London. The size of the crowds he drew at his July 36 Expressway rally signalled that he could be a major political force, and possibly the prime ministerial candidate, in the upcoming election. The challenges are formidable, but an opportunity could also be opening up to tap into the aspirations of young Bangladeshis and overcome the hurdles posed by the old elites. The new government will need to resist extremists who will try to take advantage of the political vacuum. But before that, given that the Awami League has been banned from contesting, free and fair elections will be the first test.

Khaleda Zia leaves behind a Bangladesh she played a decisive role in shaping. Her decades-long political feud with Hasina was the continuation of an older struggle over Bangladesh's identity and political destiny between former presidents, Khaleda's husband, Ziaur Rahman, and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Hasina's father. Mujib and Zia fought on the same side during Bangladesh's Liberation War, yet they never truly agreed on what Bangladesh was, or ought to become. Bangabandhu's vision was rooted in Bengali nationalism, secularism and socialism. Ziaur Rahman advanced a project centred on Bangladeshi nationalism and the Islamisation of society and governance. Though they briefly united to oust the autocratic President H M Ershad in 1990, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina inherited this foundational disagreement.

For too long, the tensions between Bengali nationalist and Islamist forces have prevented Bangladesh from realising its potential. The BNP, too, has exploited religious identity and anti-India sentiment for political leverage. These, however, were also reactive strategies to the Awami League. Now, the BNP under Tarique Rahman has the space to chart its own course while playing a stabilising role in the country. To succeed, the new dispensation in Dhaka will need to cast a wide net, unite factions across the political spectrum, and protect minorities. Rahman has emphasised "deep historical and geographical ties" with India, framing the BNP's nationalism as "pro-Bangladesh and not anti-India." That External Affairs Minister S Lalshankar will attend the funeral in Dhaka affirms the strength – and potential – of an old relationship.

Anjel Chakma's murder isn't just one murder

We are not Chinese... we are Indians." These were Anjel Chakma's last words before he was stabbed on December 9 in Dehradun. They were a plea for recognition that the 24-year-old from Tripura was no less Indian than his assailants. Chakma succumbed to his injuries on December 26, months away from graduating, months away from his dream of working with the French multinational company that had reportedly offered him his first job. The arrests that followed, and the protests that have erupted in Tripura and elsewhere, carry grief and fury.

For decades, citizens from the Northeast have, all too often, been made to feel exoticised and othered. Racised abuse has followed them into classrooms, rented apartments, marketplaces and thoroughfares, even erupting in violence. Chakma's death joins a grim ledger of such fatalities, including the murder of 20-year-old Nido Tania from Arunachal Pradesh in the Capital in 2014. Earlier, in 2012, following ethnic clashes in Assam, there was an exodus of people from the Northeast from cities such as Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Chennai and Pune, spurred by the mass circulation of inflammatory messages. Over the past decade or so, in a culture of impunity, hyper-nationalist rhetoric that flattens diversity and the absence of meaningful legal deterrence – the recommendations of the Bezwadkar Committee set up after Tania's murder remain largely unimplemented – have combined to make old prejudices more stubborn.

In the aftermath of Chakma's death, Tripura's CM Manik Saha reached out to Uttarakhand CM Pushkar Dhami seeking justice. But what the murder demands is both accountability in the courtroom and honesty in the public square. It calls for a deeper societal reckoning with what it means to belong in a diverse nation, to be sensitive to the complexities of identity. Instead of reducing pluralism to mere lip-service, it must be fostered actively – taught early, reinforced often – in schools, universities and workplaces. In acknowledging the tragedy of Chakma's death, the nation must confront wider complices in the conditions that led to it.

In 2025, women's sports came to the fore

From TAMBALAHATTI village in Andhra Pradesh emerged TK Deepika, the captain of India's 120 World Cup-winning Blind Women's Cricket Team. She grew up in poverty, but Deepika didn't let anything come in the way of chasing her dreams. The triumph came just weeks after the Harnamkaur Kaur-led team won its first major title by beating South Africa in the semi-final clash of the ICC Women's World Cup. After near-miracles, they won silverware the team deserved after years of living in the shadow of male cricketers. The cricketers were not the only ones who made it a year of women's sports.

Like Deepika, armless archer Sheetal Devi defied the odds to win on the world stage. Already an Asian champion, Asian Para Games and Paralympics medallist, 18-year-old Sheetal from Kishanpur, in J&K, became a Para World Champion in Gwangju, South Korea. In chess, Oliva Deshmukh won the Women's Chess World Cup in Batumi in Georgia in July. Divya, and the trailblazer Koneri Humpy, almost double her age, played the final. With the Koneri Humpy, almost double her age, played the final. Divya also became a grandmaster, only the fourth woman from India to earn the prestigious title.

Shooting brought India three of its six medals at the 2024 Paris Olympics and the future is in good hands with Suruchi Phogat, a wrestler-turned 10m air pistol shooter, winning a hat-trick of golds at World Cups. While it's all doom and gloom for men's football with the Indian Super League in limbo, the women's Under-17, Under-20 and senior teams have all qualified for the AFC Asian Cup tournaments. Antim Panghal in wrestling and Preeti Pawar in boxing raise hopes of a bright future in Olympic sports.

It was a year of deferred accountability. Opposition must see its opportunity

THE YEAR will soon recede into the annals of history will be remembered as a time when the machinery of state revealed a startling fragility in its core functions of governance, security and democratic accountability. From the still smouldering valleys of Manipur to the national security incidents, the fading year laid bare a governance model that is intrinsically fragile and divorced from the fundamental covenant of constitutionalism.

The tragedy of Manipur stands as an open wound in the nation's conscience. The resignation of the state government and the subsequent imposition of President's Rule in February were not solutions but a tacit acceptance of failure. They do not mask the stark reality of ethnic cleavages that deepen even as democracy is in suspended animation.

Nothing illustrates the negation of constitutional guarantees better than the repetitive pattern of violence around Christmas, now going back almost a decade.

In the realm of national security, 2025 delivered jarring shocks that should have precipitated profound introspection. The horrific Palghar terror attack was not merely a security dereliction but also pointed to intelligence and governance failures. The kinetic responses between May 7 and 10 demonstrated military prowess but ostensibly missed the strategic forest for the tactical trees. The fundamental question – is conventional retaliation sufficient to establish lasting deterrence against a nuclear-armed adversary committed to asymmetric warfare – remains unanswered even today.

The parliamentary debate that followed unfortunately turned into a political point-scoring exercise that failed to address another critical dilemma. Why does India with a defence budget nearly nine times that of Pakistan and immense diplomatic heft, still find itself trapped in a provocation-and-response cycle?



MANISH
TEWARI

collection, especially that of sub-castes and lineage markers, along with key economic indicators necessary for taking social emancipation to the next level.

The subordination of the state to politics has manifested most alarmingly in the deliberate weakening of democratic institutions and norms. The new process for appointing Election Commissioners, having removed the Chief Justice from the selection panel, has produced a Commission that embarked on the logically dubious and democratically dangerous path of the Special Intensive Revision, a mass disenfranchisement campaign masquerading as an electoral roll clean-up exercise.

The passage of the SHANTHI Act for the nuclear sector is a case study of the dangerousness of passing legislation without rigorous parliamentary scrutiny. By capping the liability of operators at a paltry Rs 3,000 crore and completely exempting foreign suppliers, thereby privatising profit and socialising liability, the government has jeopardised public safety for opaque objectives.

Replacing the MGNREGA, putting Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Ram at odds, is not just anti-Gandhian but fundamentally regressive. The National Sports Governance Law and the Higher Education Bill are unabashed power grabs by the Centre, symptomatic of a deep distrust of federalism and institutional autonomy. The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules of 2025 complete this Orwellian picture, handing the digital souls of citizens to the state with minimal safeguards.

Policy has been wholly subsumed by politics, with every decision assessed primarily through the prism of immediate electoral utility. This is not governance, it is a delusion that views the citizenry as subjects to be managed, not as sovereigns to be served. This disturbing theme of accountability deferred also echoed across the na-

tion's crumbling infrastructure, belying all boasts of monumental achievement.

The railways, the lifeline of India, saw a year of avoidable tragedies. This systemic rot extended beyond the tracks. Bridges, symbols of connection, collapsed. These were not acts of God but failures of maintenance and oversight.

The tragedy reached the skies in June with the crash of Air India Flight 171 in Ahmedabad, a catastrophe that claimed precious lives and raised grave questions about aviation safety and regulatory oversight that are sought to be deflected at worst buried, ostensibly to protect global corporate interests. The spectre of duopolies has become entrenched in every sector of the Indian economy. Nothing demonstrates this better than Indigo's brazen defiance of FIDT norms.

Each catastrophe was met with a familiar script. Expressions of anguish, announcements of ex-gratia, and promises of inquiries, but the ministers concerned remained insensitive without as much as a statement accepting moral responsibility. This pointed to a pervasive culture of prioritising optics over accountability.

This grim panorama, however, is also a clarion call for the Opposition. At 230 seats, the INDIA Alliance collectively holds not just the right, but the solemn duty, to offer a united alternative.

The agenda is painfully clear – rural distress, staggering unemployment, corrosive inflation, and deliberate subversion of the social welfare safety net. The Opposition must move beyond fragmented rhythms and forge a united, policy-driven front leveraging issues that resonate across the spectrum. It must articulate clear alternatives on national security, federalism, economic regeneration and institutional integrity. That, essentially, was the mandate of 2024.

The writer is a lawyer, third term MP, former I&B minister

In 100 years, quantum physics has touched every aspect of our lives



J BHARATHI
KANNAN,
M S
SANTHANAM

A CENTURY AGO, in June 1925, the young German scientist Werner Heisenberg went to Helgoland, an island off Germany, to recover from hay fever. As he recuperated, he mused on a question that had been bothering him: How could a coherent framework to understand the microscopic world of atoms be constructed? His research laid the foundations for quantum physics.

Quantum physics is counterintuitive. In the words of American physicist Richard Feynman, "no one understand[s] it". Yet, it has touched every aspect of our lives. From nuclear power to semiconductors, computers, electronics, lasers, and medical diagnostic tools, all have emerged from the principles of quantum physics. Commemorating these achievements, the UN declared 2025 the Year of Quantum Science and Technology.

Heisenberg stood on the shoulders of those who had laid out the pieces of the quantum jigsaw, but failed to assemble it. In 1900, Max Planck was trying to describe the light emerging from hot objects. Having spent many unsuccessful times in this pursuit, "out of sheer desperation" rather than any rational logic, he postulated that light must be radiated in packets or quanta, like bullets out of a gun. This unusual idea, none believed in, was, however, successful in describing thermal radiation. In 1905, Albert Einstein picked it up to explain the photoelectric effect. In 1913, Niels Bohr applied it to decode the hydrogen atom. All these were quick-fix solutions without a coherent story. Heisenberg tried to put these pieces together into one cohesive framework.

Heisenberg refined his ideas and sent his draft to his mentor Max Born. The latter, cognisant that they could be better expressed through the mathematical language of matrices, took them to a former student, Pascual Jordan, and they produced a series of landmark papers in 1925-26 that established the foundations of quantum physics, and transformed Heisenberg's rough insights

into an elegant framework representing the first complete version of modern quantum theory. These papers are now regarded as defining milestones of 20th-century science.

Throughout the 1920s, other scientists worked to decode the quantum puzzle. In 1924, French physicist Louis de Broglie proposed in his doctoral thesis that material particles can behave like waves. This was so radical that his doctoral committee remained unconvinced, but finally yielded when Einstein stated that de Broglie had "lifted a corner of the great veil". In 1925, Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger developed a wave equation that now bears his name. This made it easier to apply quantum principles to subatomic particles and even the whole universe. Satyendra Nath Bose, then working in Calcutta, wrote to Einstein in 1924 about his method of counting photons. Einstein recognised the novelty and expanded its scope, leading to the prediction of a new state of matter, the Bose-Einstein condensate, which was observed decades later.

C V Raman's experiments with light in 1929 provided direct evidence of quantum effects in light-matter interactions, earning him the 1930 Nobel Prize. By 1927, as Paul Dirac declared, quantum physics was a "complete theory of dynamics". Thanks to these developments, semiconductors emerged in the 1950s, lasers in the 1960s, high-density hard disks in the 1990s, and sensing devices in the 2000s. This is a story of how investment in basic sciences returns dividends for over a century.

Quantum principles transformed our perception of the universe. So profound was this change that every religion, from communism and Buddhism to Vedanta, took positions on what quantum science means for its worldview. Heisenberg may not have anticipated this impact on technology and life, one that continues to unfold to this day.

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Khaleda Zia used a space given to her, but shrank it



ARJUN
RAMACHANDRAN,
KURIAKOSE
MATHEW

A STATESWOMAN in 20th-century South Asia was invariably dynastic. So was Khaleda Zia, who passed away in the early hours of 30 December. But the commonalities between the tallest South Asian stateswomen – Indira Gandhi, Benazir Bhutto, Sheikh Hasina, and Khaleda Zia – went much beyond the boundedness of their origins. While they all started off in the shadow of a man, each of them ended up reshaping the country in their own way.

It was the events set off by the massacre of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family that eventually catapulted Hasina and Khaleda into politics. The saga would come full circle with the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman, Khaleda's husband, after which she would enter politics with a vengeance. Khaleda made full use of her newly gained space, to the surprise of many who dismissed her as just another rich housewife. She expanded the BNP into a militant grassroots force, allying with anyone who could keep up with its militancy, except the Awami League. The military dictator, H M Ershad, was her singular focus.

In her three terms as Prime Minister, Khaleda would oversee a shift from a market-oriented economic policy, while also making radical gains for women's access to resources and power, cracking down on domestic violence and child marriage, and making primary education free and compulsory. Like Ziaur Rahman before her, she made compromises with religious extremists. Khaleda was no less authoritarian than any other leader of Bangladesh; Her regime was accused of repression, corruption, and attempts to rig elections. It was only a matter of time before she lost power and was punished for one or the other crime.

In her crusade against the military establishment and the Awami League, she built a terrifying dam of street power, it would build up into an extra-democratic structure within the BNP, culminating in the kleptocratic institution of Flava Bhaban. Street violence continues to be endemic to the BNP. A woman who took birth to an almost feudal and patriarchal institution. Like the other 20th-century statesmen, her life was prone to tragedy. The trauma of her husband's murder propelled her towards greatness. She was imprisoned in her old age by her rival marching, Sheikh Hasina. Her release from prison marked the Jylling uprising, though, gave her what might seem like a last laugh.

But it might yet turn that Khaleda Zia's passing coincides with the blossoming of revolutionary democracy and nationalism in Bangladesh. It is on her son, Tarique Rahman, to save the future of the country. In the hands of his and the BNP's enemies, as Walter Benjamin once quipped, not even the past is safe.

Ramachandran is research scholar at University of Hyderabad. Mathew teaches politics and international relations at PPSavani University

40 YEARS AGO

December 31, 1985



Martial law in Pak lifted

President Zia-ul-Haq announced the lifting of the eight-year-old martial law in Pakistan but warned that armed forces would intervene again if there were dissensions among the legislators. The announcement came in a nationally televised and broadcast speech to a joint sitting of the partyless national assembly and senate. Gen Zia was silent on the question of restoring fundamental rights and the freedom of the press and the judiciary.

Pak cabinet members quit

Members of the Pakistan Federal Cabinet on Monday tendered their resignations to

enable the Prime Minister, Mohammed Khan Junejo, to choose a new team. Political analysts feel that the unexpected move is aimed at getting rid of those ministers who were opposed to adopting Junejo's Muslim League (Pagarla) as the official party.

Rajneesh not allowed in Fiji

Rajneesh will not be allowed in Fiji islands if Interpol or police organisations of the countries where he had resided earlier send adverse reports on the activities of the group, the Fiji Home Minister has reportedly said. The Fiji authorities "have been inquiring about the exact place where the controversial 'bhagwan' plans to shift."



History doesn't end today, our old compass has run its course. Here's a new one for India



N K SINGH AND NICHOLAS STERN

TOMORROW, AS we begin the new year, we seek a new elusive compass. We have relied on a compass that had run its course. We were forewarned that "the old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born". Instead, after a long period of complacency, we now face fractured trade and supply chains, politicised finance, geopolitical tensions, and rudderless multilateral institutions. No rulebook commands universal trust.

This year's defining story could be the requiem of the post-Cold War order. Not through a single collapse, but through a thousand cuts. The leadership change in Washington supercharged great-power rivalries. As the ghost of mercantilism displaced multilateralism, India held on to its faith in a multilateral rules-based order and national interest as the compass of independent foreign policy.

Tariffs surged from a universal 10 per cent rate to country-specific duties of up to 50 per cent. We responded by pursuing FTAs with vigour, harnessing trade as an engine of growth. Allowing an orderly recalibration of exchange rates could mitigate loss of competitiveness. Notwithstanding recent export performance, India's current account deficit could widen.

Money, too, became overtly political. Parts of the Global South sought to reduce dependence on the dollar. China's reduction of US Treasury holdings to its lowest in 17 years was more than symbolic. BRICS advanced de-dollarisation as financial sovereignty acquired centre-stage. India promoted rupee settlement mechanisms, enabling trade in rupees with over 22 countries, and encouraged investment of rupee balances in Indian assets.

The US faced growing fiscal strain as the federal deficit reached 5 per cent of GDP. After an unprecedented shutdown, the Congressional Budget Office projects spending rising from 23.3 per cent of GDP in 2025 to 26.6 per cent by 2055, while revenues reach only 19.3 per cent. Kenneth Rogoff's book, *Our Dollar, Your Problem*, suggests many countries no longer accept the dollar burden. India reduced exposure by cutting US Treasury holdings by about \$50 billion last year.

War cast a long shadow, as Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan displaced over 12 million people.



India pursued cautious diplomacy: Prime Minister Narendra Modi crafted diplomacy to say India is "on the side of peace" in Ukraine, engaged with Moscow, called for a Gaza ceasefire, sent humanitarian aid, and espoused a two-state solution, while condemning terrorism in multiple forms and the loss of innocent lives.

Climate is existential, beyond fiscal, financial and development issues. Insured losses hit \$145 billion in 2025 and could exceed \$300 billion in the future. Besides losses from heat, desertification and rising sea levels, the past decade alone saw more than \$2 trillion in losses affecting 1.6 billion people. India accelerated its green transition, achieving 50 per cent non-fossil capacity five years ahead of Paris NDCs.

Multilateral institutions from the mid-20th century order grapple with multiple dilemmas as shareholder power clashes with 21st-century global needs. India continued its leadership of the Global South seeking decisive multilateral reforms to make institutions like the UN Security Council more representative.

That was the year we leave behind. A year of contradictions, uncertainty and incoherence. What should guide us into 2026?

First, we must accept that the era of grand global designs may be over. Coalitions will be ad hoc, agreements partial and temporary. For India, strategic navigation in a fragmented world demands flexibility, adaptability and resilience.

Second, the axis of global debate is shifting from democracy and development to, equally, de-

Coalitions will be ad hoc, agreements partial and temporary. For India, strategic navigation in a fragmented world demands flexibility, adaptability and resilience.

mography and development. By 2030, one in six people globally will be aged over 60. These seismic changes necessitate a new global compact. But who is best suited to deliberate on this: The G20, the United Nations' International Organisation for Migration (IOM) or other new regional formations? Migration is and will be a compelling issue. Demographic shifts give ageing differentials and the promotion of human welfare through productivity will be challenging in preserving the cultural ethos of sovereign nations. This will be so even as upskilling of millions of young workers advances through education and healthcare. India's youth bulge must become a source of strength rather than a liability. This is true both among and within nations. Some states have shown the way through greater appetite for labour mobility and partnerships with ageing economies.

Third, we should expect a world neither at war nor at peace. An unrefined United Nations, especially its Security Council, is effectively emasculated. The G20 is significant but not representative. The multilateral development banks are too focused on economic and social consequences, while the world have the appetite for a fresh rethink on credible global governance? India must continue its multi-alignment strategy. It should diversify defence acquisitions to enhance deterrence without compromising strategic autonomy. It can lead security dialogues and mediate conflicts in the Indo-Pacific and West Asia when big-power institutions fail.

Fourth, bond markets will discipline advanced economies with shrinking fiscal space. Deeper cooperation among central bankers, possibly through a broadened B20 forum, could propose a credible, consensus-based path for

India and the world.

India and the world.

reducing global debt. For India, low inflation has kept nominal GDP growth at 8.7 per cent, weakening tax buoyancy and making the 4.4 per cent deficit target harder to meet, underscoring the need to continue fiscal discipline.

Fifth, technology will inspire both hope and anxiety. With global AI funding reaching \$120 billion in Q3, India must seize this wave by scaling up investment in AI and quantum computing R&D. Even beyond Budget 2026, India should strengthen incentives for technology start-ups, expand digital skills programmes, and enhance partnerships in higher education, building on the flexibility offered by the NEP and the "Campus-Within-Campus" approach. India's timely AI governance guidelines must be backed by enforcement, data protection and international cooperation. Technology remains crucial in tackling congestion and pollution, which in turn affect productivity in Indian cities.

Sixth, India should align climate action with growth, through electrification, accelerating renewables, electric vehicles, and green hydrogen. Leading the International Solar Alliance can help countries of the South, including India, garner large productivity-enhancing investments in select renewable technology and human capital. This will mainstream climate strategy.

For India, today's constellations signal new opportunities. Insights from the LSE-India Advisory Board, where we serve as co-chairs, and a recent book, *The Growth Story of the 21st Century* (authored by Nicholas Stern), have directed the compass toward exporting value, harnessing the demographic dividend, deepening capital markets, bringing frontier technologies, and building sound and efficient infrastructure.

The way forward lies in sustaining macroeconomic stability. We must harness our extraordinary entrepreneurship by freeing land, labour, and capital through Centre-led reforms across states. Leveraging the multiplier effects of global capability centres (GCCs) is key. We should continue pursuing new, monitorable policies, including a more efficient legal system, to attract larger global investment. This will enhance capital availability and productivity, improving the incremental capital-output ratio.

History did not end in 2025. As 2026 begins, India must navigate without old maps, grasping its chance to shape the new world. The new compass must overcome the false hiatus between democracy, development and demographics.

Singh is president, Institute of Economic Growth and was chairman, Fifteenth Finance Commission. Stern is chairman of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment and member of the House of Lords

In its 12th year, Modi government set new benchmarks



AKHILESH MISHRA

AS 2025 draws to a close, Narendra Modi is in his 12th year as Prime Minister. In most democracies, such longevity signals consolidation, caution, and a gradual retreat into legacy management. In India's case, it has done something strikingly different. Each year carried a defining idea and left a lasting impact.

In 2014, he brought in the Jan Dhan Yojana, transforming the banking system and making it more inclusive. Next year, he laid the foundations of Digital India, followed by Startup India in 2016, promoting entrepreneurship. In 2017, GST was introduced, leading to economic unification and shared federal sovereignty. His next significant move was rolling out of Ayushman Bharat, the world's largest publicly funded health insurance programme.

At the beginning of his second term, his government abrogated Article 370, completing India's political integration. In 2020, during the global pandemic, he brought in the PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana to ensure food security for the poor. In the next few years, through PM Gati Shakti, AapnaPath, and the passing of the women's reservation law, his government contributed to remarkable transformation. In 2024, Lord Ram finally came back to his abode in Ayodhya after 500 years of exile.

In 2025, his government simultaneously delivered multiple structural decisions across the economy, energy, agriculture, security, labour, and governance. Through GST 2.0, rates were simplified, consumer burden reduced, compliance eased, and distortions corrected. Not through coercion, but through trust built over eight years of cooperative federalism.

Further, the SHANTI Act, opening the nuclear energy sector to regulated private participation, represents a leap that few nations have attempted. By replacing outdated legal frameworks and allowing private entities to build, own, and operate nuclear power plants under strict oversight, India has reimagined nuclear energy as a strategic growth sector. This will likely be seen as a turning point in India's clean energy journey.

Agriculture, long treated as a politically sensitive area, saw a similar shift. The PM Dhan Dhaanya Krishni Yojana does for agriculture what the Aspirational Districts Programme did for India's most backward regions. By targeting low-performing agricultural districts with focused investments, convergence of schemes, district-level accountability, and outcome-based monitoring, the government has moved beyond a one-size-fits-all farm policy.

Internal security marks another decisive transformation. In 2025, Left-Wing Extremism was finally contained. It was the result of a decade-long strategy combining security operations with the development of infrastructure, welfare delivery, administrative presence and an ironclad political will. Regions once described as "liberated zones" quietly returned to constitutional normalcy. Maoism now ceases to be a structural threat.

Further, Operation Sindoora redefined global deterrence. The significance lay not in the strikes alone, but in the message they conveyed to Pakistan. It signals a new operational paradigm: Terror is treated as an act of war, nuclear blackmail is rejected outright, and responsibility is fixed squarely on state sponsors.

Governance reform extended into areas that had long remained politically untouched. The Waqf (Amendment) Act, 2025, addressed one of India's most opaque land governance problems. By dismantling the doctrine of "waqf by user", mandating registration, and subjecting claims to transparent scrutiny, the law ended decades of unregulated and irreversible land capture.

Alongside these reforms came the implementation of the new labour codes, consolidating archaic laws into a modern framework that balances worker protection with enterprise flexibility. These reforms will shape hiring, formalisation, and productivity for years to come.

A host of other transformative achievements—from raising the tax-free income slab for the middle classes to Rs 12 lakh to FDI reforms in insurance to signing multiple FTAs—add to the record this year.

What makes 2025 politically unusual is not merely the volume of reforms, but their timing. Conventional wisdom suggests that popular leaders exhaust their capacity to introduce reforms early. By the 12th year, governments typically turn defensive, out of ideas as popularity wanes. PM Modi has done the opposite. His achievements in 2025 have managed to surpass records of the previous years.

The reform plans are already in place for 2026—from restructuring higher education to synchronising electoral cycles through One Nation, One Election. That his performance in the coming year may outdo even that of 2025 sets a new global benchmark for democratic governance.

The writer is CEO, Blakraft Digital Foundation and was earlier director (content), MyGov

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ukraine stalemate

This refers to the editorial, 'Stable peace in Ukraine is not yet in sight' (IE, December 30). Despite diplomatic efforts, deep disagreements over territorial sovereignty and security guarantees continue to stall any meaningful resolution. Wars rarely end on the battlefield alone; they require political courage, mutual trust, and respect for international law. The international community must push for dialogue that prioritises civilians and long-term peace over short-term strategic gains.

Tanmisha Sarkar, Siliguri



ANGELICA ARIBAM

LOFTAM RICHARD, Reinghampy Awungsri, Akha Saloumi, Nido Taniam, Anjel Chakma. These are some of the young lives cut short by racism. The discrimination people from the Northeast face is far greater than is covered in the news. The recent attack on Anjel Chakma began as racial slurs and escalated to a brutal stabbing that led to his death. The racism underlying such attacks has been evident for decades.

When I landed in Delhi as a 12-year-old in 2004, I didn't anticipate being treated as the "Other"—someone who doesn't belong in this country. I heard racial slurs like "chinky", "chinese", "chowmein", "momo", whether in the streets, classrooms, buses, or conversations between friends.

People from the Northeast flock across India in search of better education and job opportunities, and enduring racism is the price we pay. In 2012, thousands of northeastern people living in Bengaluru and Pune were forced to leave, and the central government

I am from the Northeast. We need an anti-racism law

In the past, authorities have woken up for a brief period after high-profile racial crimes, and then fallen back into slumber. An anti-racial discrimination law can serve as a strong deterrent

had to provide special trains to take them home. This was the result of multiple factors—incidents of violence against people from the Northeast and threatening text messages that were mass-forwarded, causing panic. Employers fired them and landlords evicted them without notice, while the government failed to instill confidence about security.

Although India is a signatory of the International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted in 1965, we still do not have an anti-racial discrimination law. Over the past two decades, civil-society organisations have been demanding such a law. The IPC has provisions for hate crimes against SC/ST individuals, but there is no safeguard for people bracketed in other categories. It ignores the diverse population of the Northeast. More often than not when crimes are reported, police say they have no evidence due to the lack of an anti-racism law—as happened when I faced severe racism online and reached out to the Delhi Police. This was during Covid, when many northeastern people faced racism across the

country. We were called "Chhinese" and "Corom", and denied access to basic services.

In the aftermath of the horrific Nido Taniam murder in New Delhi in early 2014, the UPA government formed the Bezwadu Committee seeking a report on how to curb such crimes. The committee travelled across the country and interacted with northeastern students and youth in different cities. In July 2014, it submitted its final report, which included legal measures, social awareness, police sensitisation, and reforms of existing structures. The NDA government promised action on a "priority basis". Eleven years on, the report lies forgotten.

In the past, authorities have woken up for a brief period after high-profile racial crimes, and then fallen back into slumber. An anti-racial discrimination law can serve as a strong deterrent. It is high time the government gave us what is rightfully ours—the basic protection guaranteed to every citizen of this country.

The writer is the founder of Femme First Foundation and the lead author of *The Fifteen: The Lives and Times of the Women in India's Constituent Assembly*



AISHWARYA KHOHLA

This refers to the article, 'I am an editor and in this age of AI, I miss "bad English"' (IE, December 30). AI is steadily curtailing human ingenuity. As the writer remarks, though AI-generated articles tend to be rhetorically accurate, human emotion, depth, and thought processes are wanting. Amid the heated debate surrounding the future of AI, one question remains paramount: Will AI ever truly mirror human creativity?

Anupriya Mishra, via email

Abhay Negi, Dehradun

Bad English

This refers to the article, 'I am an editor and in this age of AI, I miss "bad English"' (IE, December 30). AI is steadily curtailing human ingenuity. As the writer remarks, though AI-generated articles tend to be rhetorically accurate, human emotion, depth, and thought processes are wanting. Amid the heated debate surrounding the future of AI, one question remains paramount: Will AI ever truly mirror human creativity?

Abhay Negi, Dehradun

For Brigitte Bardot, liberation was never political

Brigitte Bardot's global stardom arrived overnight in 1956 with *...And God Created Woman*. Directed by her then-husband Roger Vadim, the film presented Bardot as a young woman who danced barefoot, pursued desire, and shrugged off social convention. Within a few years, Bardot was among the most photographed women alive. She made nearly 50 films, recorded hits with Serge Gainsbourg, and defined an aesthetic that became known as "the Bardot look". From the start, however, her liberation was aesthetic rather than political. She expanded how women could look and behave, not the structures that governed their lives.

In 1959, Simone de Beauvoir published *Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome*, arguing that by rejecting the discipline of tra-

ditional femininity, she disrupted the myths that governed women's lives. "As soon as one myth is touched, all myths are in danger," de Beauvoir wrote.

Bardot herself never identified as a feminist and framed her stardom as personal triumph. In 1973, at 38, she quit acting, a move widely read as an assertion of control.

She withdrew to Saint-Tropez and later founded the Brigitte Bardot Foundation.

From the start, however, her energy toward animal rights.

She will be remembered for helping dismantle constraints around female sexuality, while fiercely defending others

From the 1990s onward, she aligned herself with France's far right. Courts convicted her multiple times for inciting racial hatred. Muslims and immigrants were targets of her scorn. She dismissed the #MeToo movement as a witch hunt, defended Gérard Depardieu, who was convicted of sexual assault earlier this year, and declared on TV, "Feminism isn't my thing. I like men." When the interviewer suggested one could be both, she cut him off: "No."

Bardot's legacy is a paradox. She will be remembered for helping dismantle constraints around female sexuality, while fiercely defending others, particularly hierarchies of race, nation and power. She championed autonomy over equality and personal freedom over collective justice. Her

revolution was always a revolution of the self. In her death, Bardot leaves behind contradictions that illuminate a pattern in women's struggles. Across generations, movements of empowerment have produced new exclusions: Resistant women against "fallen" ones, Western women against immigrant women. Power, once gained, is frequently used not to dismantle hierarchies but to secure a safer place within them.

The French icon made women's desire visible and casual in an era of repression, and for that she remains a cultural landmark. But autonomy without solidarity is a dead end.

The writer is deputy copy editor, The Indian Express. ashwarya.khosla@indianexpress.com

ENVIRONMENT

A third of Delhi's PM2.5 load has a secondary source: ammonium sulfate

Sophiya Mathew
New Delhi, December 30

A SIGNIFICANT portion of the fine particulate matter that Delhi residents breathe is not emitted directly, but created in the atmosphere itself.

Secondary aerosols now contribute at least one-third of the city's annual PM2.5 pollution, intensifying exposure during prolonged smog spells and helping explain why air quality can deteriorate sharply even when local sources appear under control.

Primary pollutants emerge directly from factors such as road dust resuspension, construction activity, open burning, vehicle exhaust and industries. Secondary particulate matter, on the other hand, forms after gases are released into the air.

These gases, known as precursor pollutants, undergo chemical reactions influenced by humidity, temperature and sunlight. They eventually form microscopic particles that penetrate deep into the lungs.

Among the most dominant of these pollutants in Delhi is ammonium sulfate, a secondary inorganic aerosol. According to an analysis released this month by the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA), ammonium sulfate alone

accounts for nearly one-third of Delhi's annual PM2.5 load, rising sharply during the post-monsoon winter months when pollution episodes are at their worst.

How is ammonium sulfate formed?

Ammonium sulfate is formed from a gas called sulfur dioxide (SO_2), which is largely released by coal-fired power plants. Other SO_2 sources include oil refineries, heavy industries, brick kilns, diesel combustion and shipping.

The SO_2 gets oxidised in the atmosphere to form sulfate. This sulfate then reacts with ammonia, which is released mainly from agricultural activities, such as fertilizer use, livestock waste, sewage systems, landfills, biomass burning, diesel vehicles equipped with catalytic converters and certain industrial processes. The resulting compound becomes suspended in the air as fine particulate matter. It remains airborne for days, travelling long distances and contributing to transboundary pollution.

KEY CULPRIT: COAL

• Ammonium sulfate is formed when sulphur dioxide (SO_2) oxidises in the atmosphere and reacts with ammonia.

• India is the world's largest emitter of SO_2 , largely due to thermal power generation.

India is currently the world's largest emitter of SO_2 , largely due to coal-based power generation. In July 2025, the government exempted nearly 78% of coal-fired thermal power plants from installing flue gas desulphurisation (FGD) systems, weakening SO_2 control at the source. The government cited three studies that said SO₂ levels around plants are well within norms. Experts, however, say this is inaccurate.

According to CREA's satellite-based assessment in 2024, the highest annual contribution of ammonium sulfate to PM2.5 is in coal-dominated states such as Chhattisgarh (42%), Odisha (41%), Jharkhand and Telangana (40% each). The problem was not confined to a single airshed (the typical circulatory region for a body of air). High secondary PM2.5 shares were also observed in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal.

For Delhi-NCR, this has direct implications. Secondary aerosols formed from emissions hundreds of kilometres away can combine in the atmosphere and significantly affect the capital's air. This has been flagged as a concern by experts, as precursor pollutants significantly add to the PM2.5 burden. Delhi has consistently recorded some of the highest PM2.5 levels in the world, and was ranked the most polluted national capital globally, according to the 2024 World Air Quality Report by IQAir, with an annual PM2.5 average of 91.6 $\mu g/m^3$.

As the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) moves towards revision, experts have argued that secondary aerosol formation must be given focus, rather than PM10.

What are the key drivers of ammonium sulfate?

Humidity plays a critical role in this process. Moist air, fog and low winter temperatures accelerate chemical reactions, allowing gases to transform into particles within hours. This explains why Delhi's pollution often worsens during stagnant winter conditions, even without a proportionate rise in visible emissions. In India, according to CREA, ammonium sulfate contributes around 49% of PM2.5 during the post-monsoon period and 4% in winter, compared with just about 2% during summer and monsoon months. The findings suggest that Delhi's most severe smog episodes are driven not only by local sources but also by regional emissions and atmospheric chemistry.

SPORT

Women defined Indian sport in a year of pause; now time to hit play

After a quiet 2025, the coming year promises a flood of sporting events and sagas — a last World Cup clash for Messi and Ronaldo, Rohit and Kohli's defiance of time, Neeraj's CWG comeback chance and an overdose of T20 cricket



FOR A quiet sporting year, 2025 delivered quite a few scintillating stories. None more so than India's women's World Cup triumph, a fitting highlight in a year where the nation's women athletes kept the tricolour flying high.

From wrestling mats to boxing rings, shooting ranges to archery fields, and badminton courts to squash cages, a new generation of Indian women made their mark on the global stage.

This was a year that gave a glimpse of what the next 12 months — and beyond — could look like and where the major stories would come from. Most noticeably in cricket.

Harmanpreet Kaur & Co. showed the commercial and developmental promise of women's cricket. A T20 World Cup title in July, on the back of the ODI World Cup, would elevate the women's game into the stratosphere.

The Twenty20 World Cup will also be of equal significance for the men's team, who rode a rollercoaster. Shubman Gill's mid-year rise to Test captaincy contrasted sharply with his late T20 World Cup omission, leaving the red-ball squad under Gautam Gambhir in flux — more so after Rohit Sharma and Virat Kohli announced their Test retirements within a span of a week in May.

Yet, in ODIs, the only format they are active internationally, the ageing legends continued to defy time and talk of retirement. Kohli's hunger for runs remained undimmed, the three centuries this year a testament to it. Rohit, free from the grind of five-day cricket, looked rejuvenated. Together, even in transition, they remain central to India's present, proving that evolution need not mean irrelevance.

For many, 2025 was an "in-between" year, a pause after a whirlwind 2024, before the mega-event storm of 2026: the T20 World Cup, FIFA World Cup, Hockey World Cup, Commonwealth Games, Asian Games, Chess World Championship — and, for the curious, the first ever Enhanced Games, a multi-discipline event where performance-enhancing drugs will be actively encouraged.

T20s, T20s and more T20s

In the first six months of the year, 14 T20 games will be played on Indian soil. In contrast, there's just one home Test lined up for the whole of 2026.

Of these, 124 games will involve men's teams — five T20s between India and New Zealand in January, a warm-up to the 2024 T20 World Cup that will see a total of 35 matches across five venues in India (an additional 20 in Sri Lanka), followed by the 84-game Indian Premier League season, the largest ever. The Women's Premier League will have 22 games, the same as previous seasons.

It will all be very hectic and, dare we say, tedious.

India's chance to defend the T20 title at home



ILLUSTRATION: SURAJIT PATRO

NEW IN THE NEW YEAR



Chess prodigy R Praggnanandhaa; Indian men's hockey captain Harmanpreet Singh

HOCKEY: India will hope to end its 51-year wait for a World Cup title. Back-to-back Olympic medals have raised hopes of a strong showing at the tournament, sandwiched between the Commonwealth and Asian Games, to be hosted by the Netherlands and Belgium.

CHESS: The prospect of an all-Indian World Championship looms large as R Praggnanandhaa prepares to compete against seven other Grandmasters in the Candidates Tournament in March-April. The winner of the eight-player event will earn the right to challenge reigning champion D Gukesh, struggling for form, later in the year, with the dates and venue yet to be finalised.

For a nation that trips on T20 cricket, India's fixation has only sporadically translated into on-field consistency. After winning the inaugural 2007 T20 World Cup, they have reached the semifinals just twice and the final once. So, a World Cup at home gives the IPL nation a chance to assert its supremacy in international cricket.

The T20 World Cup will also serve as a litmus test for the under-fire Gautam Gambhir. A successful title defence — India won the 2024 edition under Raul Dravid — could overshadow the team's disappointing Test run under him, at least until the next series, and buy him some breathing space ahead of the 2025-26 over World Cup.

Once the T20 frenzy eases — though not completely, with the women's T20 World Cup in England in July — the rest of the mega-events will surge at breakneck speed, beginning with the FIFA World Cup in the second half of 2026.

Messi, Ronaldo and... Trump

The biggest sports story, arguably, will be the FIFA World Cup, which will be jointly hosted by the US, Mexico and Canada between June 11 and July 19.

With 48 teams, this will be the biggest-ever edition. There are fears that the bloated size will rob the tournament of the

element of jeopardy and render many group stage games pointless. But the thing about World Cups is they tend to find their own drama.

We are still six months away but Italy have kept everyone interested with their up-and-(mostly) down qualification campaign. The Azzurri are the only major powerhouse yet to qualify. They will feature in a playoff tournament in March and will have to beat two opponents — Northern Ireland and then either Wales or Bosnia — to ensure they don't complete the dubious hat-trick of missing three consecutive World Cups.

The main tournament itself is awaiting perhaps the clash of the generation. If the World Cup sticks to its script — it seldom does — Lionel Messi's Argentina and Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal should come face-to-face in the quarterfinals.

For that to happen, both teams will have to top their groups and then win their respective round of 32 and Round of 16 matches. For one of them, it could be the final international appearance, adding another layer to an already tasty match-up.

But there are fears that the farewell World Cup of the two giants of the modern game will be overshadowed by Donald Trump. The US President's policies — travel bans, strict visa rules and immigration crackdown — mean there is a strong political undertone to this World Cup and the stories from the stands (will ICE agents round-up diaspora fans, as they fear?) will be the supporters of a team get a smooth entry into the country? will be as compelling as the ones unfolding on the pitch.

CWG: Neeraj-Arshad showdown in Scotland?

Four days after the FIFA World Cup ends, the Commonwealth Games begin in Glasgow. The 11-day event — from July 23 to August 2 — will be one of the most down-scaled editions of the Games, with just 10 sports.

Most of India's go-to medal events — shooting, badminton, hockey, wrestling — have been axed. Still, there will be plenty of Indian interest. None more so than in athletics, where the 2018 CWG champion Neeraj Chopra and defending gold medalist Arshad Nadeem could meet each other after underwhelming World Championships for both.

The CWG will also be of importance to India as the country will host the 2030 edition, with the official handover to take place during the Games' closing ceremony.

Asian Games: The 100-medal challenge

In the build-up to the 2022 Hangzhou Asian Games, the 'ba ba, sau pa' campaign was ridiculed initially but proved prophetic eventually. India — whose previous best performance was 70 medals in 2018 — surpassed expectations to win 107 medals, including 28 golds. The bar for the Class of 2026 is higher even.

The Japanese games will be a test for the track-and-field athletes and shooters, who together accounted for 51 medals in Hangzhou. The individual storylines, too, promise to be compelling.

Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty came back strongly in 2025 after the Olympic setback. They have shown they have it in them to defend their gold.

Mirabai Chanu, fighting hard to stay fit, refuses to bow out despite multiple injuries. Her World Championship silver has raised hopes that 2026 could finally be the year when she ends her long wait for an Asian medal.

Vinesh Phogat is back on the mat, though the battles may not be confined to it. As she pursues a place in the Asian Games squad, expect a few off-the-mat bouts with the federation. Bet against her at your own risk.

SPORT

Short doesn't mean slow: How 5-ft tall Fraser-Pryce became a sprinting legend

Shivani Naik

Mumbai, December 30

JAMAICAN SPRINTER Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce is just 5 feet tall. But her achievements — three Olympic golds and 10 World titles — have elevated her to a level possibly surpassing other 100-metre Olympic champions from the nearly century-old history of women's sprinting.

When she retired after her last 100-metre race at the 2025 Tokyo World Championships, at age 38, she ended as the most decorated women's sprinter in the world. How did Fraser-Pryce, who won the 100-metre Olympic gold in 2008 and 2012, make such strides in a sport dominated by taller athletes and set the blueprint for track and field athletes such as Shelly Richards (five feet 11 inches)? The legend's secret lies in her methods.

A field of tall competitors

First, it is instructive to note the kind of

athletes that competed in sprinting before Fraser-Pryce came along.

Betty Robinson, the inaugural short-distance winner in 1928, was nearly 5 feet 6 inches. Wilma Rudolph, the champion at Rome in 1960, was 5 feet 11 inches. The 1986 winner, Helen Stephens, was 5 feet 11.5 inches. Somewhat of an exception was Gail Devers (5 feet 3 inches) who won gold at Barcelona 1992 and Atlanta 1996.

The last two Olympic champions leading into Beijing in 2008 — the year Fraser-Pryce won her first Olympic gold — were Marion Jones in 2000 (5 feet 10 inches, gold medal later forfeited) and Yulia Nesteretskaya in 2004 (5 feet 8 inches).

Lightning fast

At the Bajaj PUNE Marathon earlier in December, Fraser-Pryce recalled her earliest motivation to run. An earthquake had struck Jamaica and she ran from her school to her home. The daughter of a sprinter mother, she was all of four at the time.



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science of jumping — for how she won races ahead of a field that tended to be almost always taller than her.

She counted her steps as everyone did. "I know my steps. The race had to be completed in 54 steps or below. We worked hard on pimetrics. Once you put your mind to it, there's no limits, certainly the height factor never once bothered me," she tells *The Indian Express*.

Ever since the time of Devers (5 feet 3 inches), cutting-edge pimetric training has helped shorter sprinters chow down more metres of the track, and not lose energy in limbs flailing off. This has gone some way in reaching the simplistic notion that longer limbs equal greater speed. Fraser-Pryce knew her race was going to kaput if she felt she was "popping up" — jumping too high in her stride. That was like a plane crashing often. "It's like a roll, it's like a roll, it's like a roll," she laughs. "Or magically add to it." The strides just need to be big and long," she says.

Fraser-Pryce credits pimetrics — the science of jumping — for how she won races ahead of a field that tended to be almost always taller than her.

Once I got off the blocks, I needed to ensure that my steps, the jumps in the strides were not popping up. I was moving forward — in the horizontal plane, not too high in the vertical one. Us short sprinters, stay compact," she explains.

It was like a plane taking off from a runway — it doesn't seek altitude right away, but builds acceleration by pushing forward. "I mimicked a plane often. That was the science," she says. So, off the blocks, she would lean forward as much as she could, without toppling forward. "Start low and — I can't repeat enough — move forward, not up," she says.

Fraser-Pryce also worked on her core — once her weakness — to gain the strength and stability to stay centred. "It's like a rolling, rolling ball of force rumbling forward. If the core isn't strong, you can drift sideways and lose speed — because, remember, the aim was to move forward," she says.



CONTRAPUNTO

You throw the sand against the wind,
And the wind blows it back again

- WILLIAM BLAKE

Aravalis UnDeserted

In doing welcome course-correction, SC also indicates what dangers still loom over our mountains

The sigh of relief came not just from Aravalis, but also Himalayas, Vindhyas, Western Ghats...India's billion old mountain ranges have never felt as fragile as today, with 'development' pillaging them mindlessly. When an SC bench led by then CJI Gavai accepted environment ministry's proposal of a 100m definition for Aravalis last month, experts were unanimous that the key outcome would be diluting the hills' hard-won protections, which by the way haven't actually prevailed against illegal mining and other ingressions. This coincided with North India's horrible winter smog. It's only getting worse, and now came a judgment that could worsen it exponentially. So, a vacation bench led by CJI Surya Kant taking up the issue suo motu and then putting the Nov 20 judgment on hold, is a super welcome close to the year.

It's got fine symbolism. That our institutions can do course-correction, our mountains can be stabilised, our rivers can be cleaned, maybe even our air. But it's also indicative of just what kind of challenges all this is up against. If a new high-powered expert committee will comprise "domain experts", the technical committee that pushed through the 100m definition was dominated by bureaucrats—not geomorphologists, ecologists, conservation biologists, hydrogeologists. If only 9% of Aravali hills in Rajasthan meet this definition, it "creates a structural paradox wherein the geographical scope of protected territory is significantly narrowed". If the 100m are further to be measured "from the local relief" rather than an objective sea-level like criteria, alarming "regulatory gaps" open up in the "ambiguity".

Remember, since SC first raised eyebrows against Rajasthan's 100m definition in 2010, various states have taken a 'nod and wink' approach to it. In 2018, the court was shocked at the FSI finding that 24% hills sampled in Rajasthan had disappeared completely: "Have people become Hanuman that they are running away with hills?" Yes, people are also involved. We want houses, in Faridabad, Gurgaon. But not with polluted aquifers and toxic air. Erasing low-lying hills really raises PM10. Good governance means we should never get such bad bargains. In 2025, let's put these behind us. Nullify the stayed judgment permanently. Shut the Pandora's box where Himalayas are defined by height and Ganga by depth. Even colonial taxonomists didn't commit such sacrilege. And guess who doesn't get a voice at all but must be heard? The tigers, leopards, sloth bears, deer, desert foxes, hyenas, wolves, jackals, crocodiles, who call Aravalis home.

Lesson On Unnao

Politicians wield immense power in their turf. All the more crucial for courts to be alert to judicial missteps

Supreme Court tactfully stayed Delhi HC's order that had suspended Kulip Singh Sengar's life sentence, while SC hears the case, Jan 20 the next date. He was also found guilty of orchestrating custodial killing of the survivor's father. SC noted the case's 'peculiar circumstances' to stay Delhi HC's order. Indeed, circumstances Delhi HC should have decided.

SC has questioned Delhi HC's interpretation that an MLA is not a 'public servant'. The immense power netas wield over the public is not a secret. Criminal cases fall through all the time because of the toxic politician-police-official nexus that uses bribery, intimidation, blackmail, coaxing and even murder to derail the victim's fight for justice. Against this backdrop, a literal reading of the law—that MLA isn't mentioned as a 'public servant'—does less than justice to context and circumstance.

Sengar's family, on its part, misread SC's order to allege they were not heard. But SC has already spoken on this—that it normally doesn't stay a bail order without hearing the accused, but Sengar's case involved 'exceptional circumstances' since the convict remains behind bars, doing time for the father's death, in which also a bail plea is pending, with orders reserved. As his case is heard in court—a high-profile convict whose files seem to move relatively swiftly—Sengar's daughter has also alleged trolling. This must be condemned. It is no better than bulldozer justice SC has so strongly censured.

As for the case in court, SC's stay of HC's order shows consistency and stability in court decisions and assurance of fairness. In cases such as Sengar's, this fosters public confidence in judiciary. Simply put, justice applied evenly is what makes a victim a survivor.

Wring out the old

Bads and fads of 2025 to be dumped in 2026

Bachi Karkaria

- A: AQI (poor); Akhlaq-ing; AI autocracy; 'Anti-national'.
- B: Bigotry; Bulldozer justice; Ban-wagon; 'Bro'.
- C: Cyber crime; Christmassacre; Cold brew; Coorts.
- D: Development (colonial); Delayed flights; Digital arrests; Deep fakes; Doom scrolling; Dubai chocolate.
- E: Endangering species; Egg-against-holes; 'Epic'.
- F: Free-range fruits; Flying, fear of; Fat-checking; Food vloggers.
- G: Gen Z takeover; Gig-economy; Worker exploitation; Girls unschooled; Gemini AI scare; Ghosting; Grilled cheeses.
- H: Hate speeches; Homogenised culture; History saffronised; Hindutvites; High Network individuals; Heirloom rice.
- I: Influencers; Infra (manic); Isabgol-burgers; 'Inmersive'; 'Iconic'.
- J: Joblessness; Jams; 'J' for 'just joking' and its ilk.
- K: K-Pop/food/films; Kangana Rani; Kefir.
- L: Life coaches; Leopard sterilising; Lock Sabha; Live-in outing.
- M: Mines erasing mountains; Mahagathblunders; Messed-up events; Mandani mooning; Moringa Margaritas; Magnesium pills.
- N: Nepo-babes; especially Neta-babes; Nicobar 'development'; North-east/ easterners alienated; Nouns 'verb-ised'; 'Neo'.
- O: Optics; Ozempic; OTT-censoring; 'Organic'.
- P: Pollutipops; Popcorn patriotism; Potholes; Processed foods/ 'Processed' embargos; Pukka.
- Q: Proteins-enriched; Pakistan.
- R: Reposts; Bangalore Rant; Ravana; It's Newton's apple.
- S: Sarkari spying; SIR; suicides; Sloths (empty at full volume); 'sustainable'.
- T: Terrorists; Toxic posts; Turnstile latte; 10,000 steps.
- U: Unemployment; Unsportmanship; 'Urban Naxals'; 'Underwears'.
- V: Vande mataram debate (masuled) Vande trains.
- W: Weddings unlimited; Washing machined leaders; Walking yoga; Wearables.
- X: Should revert to Twitter; Exes shouldn't be followed on X or anywhere.
- Y: Yogis (fake); Yoga sirsarana-ed; Youth potions 'Yadda, yadda, yadda'.
- Z: Zelensky ping-ponged; Zoos as last refuge of endangered; Zzzz speeches.

Alec Smart said: "Wishing you a year of 20 sixers."

SCREEN THE IDEAS

2025 ends with *Homebound* and *Humans In The Loop* in the 2026 Oscar race. *Ramayana*, *Toxic*, *Jailer 2*, *Drishyam 3*, *Mysa...* set for box office fight next year. What will pull audiences to theatres? Originality, not risk-aversion, and out-of-the-box promotion, not generic marketing

Anna M M Vetticad

Mega-budget, megastar-led Indian cinema is making a concerted, carefully strategised effort to achieve mainstream global success in 2026. Among the most prominent of these films is director Geetu Mohandas's *Toxic – A Fairy Tale for Grown-ups*, which has been shot both in Kannada and English, with multiple markets including its home base in mind. *Toxic* should reach theatres early in 2026. Part 1 of Nitesh Tiwari's *Ramayana* is scheduled for a Diwali 2026 release, and Part 2 in early 2027.

Since the last decade, Indian films are eyeing one of the world's biggest platforms for cinema, *Homebound*—India's entry for the Best International Feature-Oscar race—is now on the shortlist of 15 out of eligible submissions from 96 countries, while a low-profile Indian indie is also

valiantly aiming for the Oscar spotlight. *Where have all the women gone?* The question arises because the marginalisation or erasure of women has become rampant in films backed by India's wealthiest producers. A majority of 2026's high-cost releases have underlined their men-centricity and violence in promotions. For instance, in a four-minute teaser announcing the Rajinikanth-starrer *Jailer 2* (Tamil), sequel to the superhero *Jailer*, the only visible female presence was a cleavage-baring woman in a photo. Other films in this club include H Vinoth's *Jana Nayagan* (Tamil), which is Vijay's last bow as an actor before he switches completely to politics. *SiddhARTH Anand's King* (Hindi), stars Shah Rukh Khan with Akshay Kumar and Deepika Padukone.

Josephine, *Drishyam 3* (Hindi) and *Mysa...* (Malayalam) starring Mohanlal inhabit a gentler universe, unsullied by the gore and decibels intrinsic to most men-centric Indian thrillers and action flicks today. Though *Drishyam 3* &2 propagated the conservative notion of a man as

the real world. A spate of countrywide screenings at educational institutions and cultural centres in 2024-25 eventually drew the attention of the influential producer-director Kiran Rao, who reportedly facilitated its theatrical run and Netflix deal, both of which are hard to come by for indies in India. After recently receiving a privately backed distribution grant in US, and having met the Oscars' eligibility criteria (such as a US release), *Humans In The Loop* is now investing its limited resources in a campaign focused on getting a Best Original Screenplay nomination. It's a long shot, but for an outlier that's barely known even in India, at the very least, it's a bold move, coming this far in its first year.

Neeraj Ghoshvan's *Homebound*, produced by Karan Johar, is vastly more high-profile and financially privileged. *Homebound* is a courageous, compassionate account of friendship between a Muslim and a Dalit. Hollywood icon Martin Scorsese liked it enough to go on board as an executive producer, an endorsement that should carry considerable weight with Oscar voters.

The Oscar nomination (mainly the first two categories) with the announcement in end-Jan. The lowliness and significance of *Homebound* and *Humans In The Loop* do not need a stamp of approval from abroad, but an Oscar is worth aspiring to nevertheless, because the resultant visibility can do wonders for any film, and the careers and causes involved.

Irrespective of the outcome for these films, their journey is a lesson for Indian producers seeking a magic wand in 2026 to bring audiences back to theatres in this post-pandemic, politically difficult, economically challenging time. There is no magic wand, but originality, brave choices and faith in your creation combined with out-of-the-box promotions sans gimmickry can go a much longer way than the piste-driven, risk-averse, imitative filmmaking, generic marketing and noise that are the present norm in Indian cinema's most moneyed quarters.

Vetticad is author of *'The Adventures of an Intrepid Film Critic'*

SCARS AND STRIFES FOREVER

The Eagle, the Bear, the Dragon and the Elephant. A year-end farmyard fable for our times

Jug Suraiya

Once upon a now, in the centre of a vast farmyard stood a stately white mansion. Inside, in an oval-shaped room was a large, corpulent individual with startling orange-glo hair, ensconced behind the desk on which was spread an enormous jigsaw puzzle, which was a representation of the farmyard in its totality.

The orange-headed person, whom we can call Carrot Top for the purposes of this fable, was only a temporary tenant of the mansion, but was devising stratagems to become a permanent resident.

Carrot Top stared at the jigsaw. Unlike ordinary jigsaws, which remain static, this jigsaw kept moving and changing through some mysterious kinetic energy.

Before the advent of recorded time, the jigsaw had not moved; in fact, there had been no jigsaw at all, just an unendifferent openness.

Then, springing from the seeds of tribalism had been born a concept called nationalism which partitioned the openness into different, and often conflicting, divisions called communities.

To distinguish itself from the others each community had an identifying banner bearing an emblem. Amongst the most ancient of the communities were those which flew the banners, respectively of the Elephant and the Dragon. To the north lay the commune of the Bear, known for its tendency to bully its neighbours.

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After great bloodshed, the side that wanted the chained to be free won the

The commune presided over by Carrot Top featured a Bald Eagle on its banner. The eagle was the symbol of the chieftaincy of communes, the Eagle had established itself as the most powerful and self-important of all communes on the principle that while all communes are equal, some communes are more equal than others. Indeed, Carrot Top's commune had famously killed itself as the only indispensable commune in the farmyard.

The Eagle commune had been 'discovered' by accident. A ship in search of Carrot Top's commune had mistakenly dropped anchor off the coast of this pre-commune terrain of majestic forests and pristine rivers. It was the inhabitants of this commune who were the colour of their skin.

In short order, incursive hordes followed in the wake of the vagrant voyager, and having dispossessed the indigenes of their habitat through force of arms, cut down the great forests, and fouled the waterways and the air with the toxic waste products of their twin temples, Progress and Profit.

While the majority of these new arrivals came by choice, huddled masses yearning to be free, many were brought in captive chains from distant regions of the farmyard.

These captive, whose inhuman banditry and savagery of the Eagle's claim of being the land of the brave and of the home of the free, became the cause of a murderous internecine war within the commune.

After great bloodshed, the side that wanted the chained to be free won the

day, though the newly emancipated remained shamed by discrimination on the basis of something more than the colour of their skin.

The Eagle spread its predatory wings to soar over the length and breadth of the farmyard, to impose its will and its ways on far-flung communes from rain-drenched paddies to arid deserts, from icy mountains to lush, tropical islands.

That such ventures invariably turned out to be misadventures for all concerned seemed not to matter to the Eagle, which sought dominion over the entire farmyard.

The Eagle lived off the fat of the land. All manner of goods from clothes to cars, phones to pharmaceuticals, came from other communes to fill bursting the storehouses of the Eagle, which consumed more of the farmyard's resources than did all the rest of the communes put together.

The insatiable hunger of the Eagle was such that nothing seemed to satisfy it; the more it devoured the more it demanded. This led to the Eagle holding a massive amount of IOUs that it repaid in its fist currency of glass beads called wampum.

To get rid of its debt burden that was causing a drain on the supply of wampum, Carrot Top conceived a master plan, which required that all communes

selling their goods to the Eagle would have to pay a heavily inflated Trump-off, an apologize-off fee.

The most affected by Carrot Top's scheme was the Elephant commune that had 50 Trump-offs levied on it as a punitive measure because of the Elephant's purchase of produce from the Bear, which purportedly facilitated the Bear in beating up its neighbour.

The Eagle and the Bear had long been adversaries when the two had rallied each other as the only super-communes in the farmyard.

But when the Bear, from being a grizzly, dwarfed into a sloth bear, the era of confrontation, known as the Frozen Light, ended through mutual suspensions lingred.

The Trump-offs, hailed by Carrot Top's *Gaga Brigade* (Greed, Aggression, Gangsta Attitude), caused great convulsions and upheavals in the jigsaw which represented the farmyard, and which fell apart.

However, slowly, but surely the disarrayed pieces of the jigsaw began to form their own patterns elsewhere. The imposing white man that had been the centre of the farmyard left a desolate isolation, ascribed with the letters USA, which might have stood for Utterly Senseless Anarchy.

And blowin' in the wind came a haunting refrain: 'Bye-bye, my American pie, this'll be the day that I sigh, this'll be the day that I cry...'

Sacred space
And now let us believe in a long year that is given to us, new, untouched, full of things that have never been, full of work that have never been done, full of tasks, claims, and demands.

Rainer Maria Rilke



From Compliance To Joy: A New Year's Reminder

Sivakumar Sundaram

There is a peculiar kind of tiredness that has nothing to do with physical work. It arrives when suddenly promotes you into the role of 'in-charge'. A parent, elder or mentor is no longer around to steer the ship. And what used to feel like routine now feels like 'heavy weightlifting'.

In such moments, people don't just feel responsible. They feel watchful by responsibility. Rituals and traditions must be followed. Even grief and joy are expected to behave. And when someone offers praise it leaves a bad taste in the mouth as a burden.

This is where the confusion between societal compliance and individual joy tightens its grip. Religion at its best is a civilising rhythm. It creates shared practices: festivals, prayers, fasting days, and rites of passage. These collective patterns keep communities aligned, give families continuity and offer the restless mind a framework. They also create a common language for values, gratitude,

restraint, and belonging. In that sense, religion helps society cohere.

But religion is also, inevitably, about the rule. The mind stays bound and we call freedom. Spirituality begins where the need for compliance ends. Spirituality is neither rebellion against religion, nor disdain for rituals. It is simply recognising that the Divine is not an account auditing ledger of attendance, pronunciation, and procedure.

The Divine does not need your perfectly recited shlokas, your cooling and flawless punctuations. The Divine does not get offended if you miss a day, forget a step, or fumble a mantra. If the infinite had expectations of your performance, it would no longer be infinite; it would be merely another institution.

We perform rituals not because God demands them, but because we sometimes need them like scaffolding. Useful for many, necessary for some, comforting for most but

never the destination. And here lies the key difference: religion keeps society together; spirituality sets the individual free.

Enlightenment is not geographical; it is psychological. It is not running away from action; it is acting without 'doership'—inner claim of 'I am the doer; control' I must be praised; I must control.'

The deepest spiritual teaching is strangely simple: work, roles, and duties happen but the ego need not claim ownership. Manage rituals, but don't become 'the saviour of tradition'. Hold the door, but don't turn yourself into 'the only competent adult in the house'. Let action flow but refuse the identity that action or society tries to impose.

Praise or no praise, smile or not because you are anchored in inner steadiness. Spirituality is the art of discovering inner refuge that does not depend on anyone's mood, approval, or protection. The strange

mercy of spirituality is this: you are never alone, because you were never meant to carry life as a project. The Divine is not a distant supervisor; it is the quiet presence you can lean into, in the middle of a mess. This does not mean merely sitting and doing nothing. It means you act from joy, not fear; from clarity, not compulsion; from love, not the hunger to be recognised.

So yes, light the lamp if it brings peace. Chant if it steadies you. Follow tradition if it connects you. But remember: these are for the mind's training, for the Divine has no expectation from you. The only invitation: be present in life, be free.

And if years and feels like heavy weightlifting, it may simply be life teaching you the final ritual: moving from 'I am responsible for everything' to 'everything is happening, and I am held.' As the year turns, may we draw the curtain not only on 2025 but also on the illusion of burden, returning to sakshi bhav, the quiet witness doing what must be done with joy, humility, and inner abundance.



THE SPEECH TREE

Caveat Commuter, Make Moving Easier

Decongestion and smart planning can de-stress

A spectre is haunting urban India — the spectre of ‘communism’. Time to travel between a place of residence and of work is climbing. We are talking about some of the fastest-growing cities in the world. The issue is compounded by the density of cities and state of urban infrastructure. Limited choices and over-utilised transit systems add to congestion. The burden of commuting is compensated either as higher wages, or in improved housing. Yet, the commuter is worse off. At the top of the ladder — reaching work in your own car — can add up to the second-biggest chunk of household expense behind housing. At the bottom, services available on overcrowded public transport networks can lead to high levels of stress and, consequently, diminished productivity. The notion of the ‘30-min city’ stays tantalisingly out of reach.

Taller cities are better at handling population density.

They also cost less to build as they use land efficiently. These require less energy to run and benefit from concentrated infra. Vertical is the way to go to avoid urban sprawl and environmental degradation. Buildings can be constructed to be net carbon negative, which works in conjunction with lower vehicular emissions in tall cities. But vertical cities trade efficiency and cost against comfort and habitability.

Another approach is by increasing consumer choice. This involves combining working and living activities in smaller urban pockets, while expanding mass transport options. Individuals should have a choice in deciding whether they want to live a cycle ride away from their office, or a long train ride into the country. Urban planning tends to prioritise one over the other, not both equally, leading to congestion. Indian cities will keep growing upward and outward. This should not happen asynchronously. Getting a handle on the commute problem is key to ensuring productivity growth during the rapid urbanisation the economy is undergoing. Our cities must have a clear vision of the shape they'll grow into over the next quarter century, starting tomorrow.

Hyperdocumentation Vs Common Sense

The main aim of public policy is to make life easier for citizens. In India, its purpose often seems quite different: to test stamina, stamina and common sense. Or perhaps it functions as bureaucratic pilates — keeping the vast government machinery limber through constant paperwork. Consider this. From early 2026, Delhi government will replace pink paper tickets for free women's bus travel with a 'Pink Saheli' smart card. The stated goal is greater transparency and efficiency in a scheme that benefits nearly 2 cr Delhi residents every month. Girls and women above 12 who are Delhi residents must apply for the card using their Aadhaar at designated counters, and then tap the card on e-machines to travel free.

Such costly plans are Kafkaesque. Why turn something as basic as boarding a bus into a procedural hurdle? How exactly does a smart card improve matters when simply getting on board by dint of showing one's Aadhaar — and being a woman — would have done the job? It's not as if women from Gurgaon or Noida will invade Delhi buses. And even if a few 'slip in', what would have been the crisis? The larger public goal is to get more women outdoors, workforce included. Cheap, frictionless mobility helps. Forms, counters and proof-of-residence checks don't.

This obsession with documentation is no longer confined to big-ticket schemes like endless OTPs, repeated bank KYC, to SIR. Hyper-documentation is the new neurosis of digital India. Every odd citizen seems 'one document short', and every system assumes bad faith by default. With the new year, one hopes for a modest resolution: fewer counters, less suspicion, a little more trust. Benefiting from a scheme need less feel like an endurance sport. Sometimes, common sense is the most efficient tech.



Why go through the self-defeating rigmarole of self-improvement at all?

New Year Resolution No. 13: No Resolution

Dear readers of this paper who are in perpetual pink of health, it's the last day of the year, and we bring you the final entry on our legendary 2025 HETLOR — Honest ET List of Resolutions: ignore new year resolutions entirely. Let's face it, resolutions are the world's most polite form of self-sabotage. They are promises muttered to ourselves at midnight, only for us to be mugged by reality before breakfast: 'I will quit sugar,' we declare with the passion of a teenager on the first day of college... and then rue our declaration the very next day as we enter a staring contest with a January jaibei. So, why go through the rigmarole? Enough with all that jazz. Treat resolutions with the seriousness of a rubber chicken at a board meeting. Imagine the freedom: no guilt when you skip gym. No shame when you eat pizza shaped like a hexagon. No hyperventing existential crisis when your gratitude journal devolves into doodles of politicians. This year, there's no need to become 'a better person' or to 'optimise your potential'. It's far better to simply raise your glass when the time comes tonight — preferably filled with something irresponsible — to the only resolution worth keeping: ignore resolutions the way a post-resolution revolution brushes the revolution under the carpet. After all, nothing says self-improvement like refusing to improve.

SWAMISPEAK Even if a sharp US slowdown is likely, India should fare well in 2026

Trumpism Won't Triumph



Swaminathan S Anklesaria Aiyar

Trump has triumphed over his critics, including me, in 2025. His state of the union message in January forecast a sharp rise in tariffs, and dismantling of the global rules-based economic system as well as the US role as global policeman that had driven the fastest economic growth in post-WW2 history. Then came his 'Liberation Day' in April, when he threatened tariffs that went up to 150% for China, and up to 30% on major partners, inviting retaliation and perhaps a global trade war into a deep recession. Markets crashed in India, and everywhere else.

In fact, the US and the US have grown at high rates that seemed fantasies 12 months ago. The US has just recorded 4.3% growth in the last quarter, and India has registered 8.2%.

How so? US tariffs have turned out to be far from a disaster. The US has had to take pre-emptive action of US presidents very seriously. But Trump soon proved that he was more a real estate salesman than a statesman, starting with ridiculously high rates and bargaining down to modest ones. TACO — Trump Always Chickens Out — was a good name for an policy. China's hold on rare earths turned out to be so powerful that Trump could not get through.

Initially, experts feared that Trump tariffs would rise to an effective 28% on imports. In practice, they have turned out to be closer to 10%. Moreover, China, India and other countries have managed to



Ready to get jumka?

evade high tariffs by routing them through third countries.

Many US importers stocked up on imports in an anticipation of high tariffs, and so held high inventories that enabled them to keep import prices lower than expected for several months. Of the new tariffs, some were absorbed by importers, and only one-third was passed on to consumers. This kept US inflation in check — the November figure was 2.7%, down from 3% in October.

Fast growth and low inflation encouraged the US Fed cut rates, fueling stock markets further.

So, Trump's first year has ended in triumphal victory.

Will what will happen in 2026? Let me stick my neck out a little: it's a far likelier if AI suddenly ceases to look as promising as investors currently think. We could see a collapse in 2026 if this does not happen in 2025, it will surely happen during Trump's term, muddying his legacy.

Rising prices led to Joe Biden's downfall in 2024. Will it be a repeat in 2026? Maybe. But a slowdown is far likelier. If AI suddenly ceases to look as promising as investors currently think, we could see a collapse in 2026 if this does not happen in 2025, it will surely happen during Trump's term, muddying his legacy.

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Begum Khaleda

Bangladesh loses tall leader at a critical juncture

KHALEDA Zia's death has created a huge political vacuum in Bangladesh less than two months before the trouble-torn country goes to the polls. The former Prime Minister and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader shaped an era that was defined by her fierce rivalry with Awami League supremo Sheikh Hasina. She epitomised nationalist pride and resistance to one-party dominance, especially during times when democratic space seemed to shrink. However, her rule was marked by governance challenges and the rise of hardline elements within the BNP-led coalition. What is undeniable is that she strengthened the BNP as the main counterweight to the Awami League and ensured that the two-party system survived in Bangladesh. Over the past decade and a half, she not only acted as the Opposition spearhead against the Hasina regime but also battled corruption charges. She was convicted and sentenced to jail in 2018, but was granted a presidential pardon and released a day after Hasina was ousted from power in August 2024.

The epic battle of the Begums is now a thing of the past. Hasina has been living in exile in India — her return to Bangladesh is ruled out after a special tribunal sentenced her to death for "crimes against humanity". The ban on Awami League's activities has put the BNP in pole position to win the upcoming polls. Having lost a towering leader, the Pakistan-friendly BNP is banking on Khaleda's son and heir apparent Tarique Rahman, who recently returned home after having lived in London in self-exile for the past 17 years. Rahman has made a positive start by seeking the support of all stakeholders to build a prosperous and safe nation.

Delhi-Dhaka relations came under strain during Khaleda's reign over cross-border insurgency and the use of Bangladeshi soil by militant groups, besides her government's strategic alignment with Pakistan and China. The future of bilateral ties will hinge on whether Dhaka's next-generation leaders choose cooperation over confrontation.

How India banks

Consumer protection must remain priority

THE Reserve Bank of India's report on the performance of banks provides a feel-good vibe for the sector going into 2026. The gross non-performing assets (NPAs) declined to 2.1 per cent by September this year — the lowest level in many decades — indicating that fewer loans are turning bad. Deposits and credit grew in double-digit percentages during 2024-25, a sign of more saving and lending. The near-term economic outlook, it says, is positive with inflation at multi-year lows. Bank profits remain high. Amid these encouraging indicators, the Central bank's emphasis on the need for vigilance in consumer protection ticks the right box. Miselling of financial products continues to plague the banking system, even as it struggles to tackle the onslaught of cyber-enabled frauds. The planned norms on marketing and sales face a tough efficacy test.

The report sounds a cautionary note on the rising number of customer grievances despite an improvement in banking services and tightening of regulatory controls. Fair treatment and an efficient redressal mechanism must remain a policy priority, it has correctly stressed. The high cost of operating automated teller machines (ATMs) in the face of rapid digitisation of payments has led to a fall in their numbers. That said, bank branches have risen by 2.8 per cent. It shows the complex interplay of how India banks — physical interaction is as vital as online clicks. Though the targets include more digital infrastructure and ethical AI guidelines, a customer must not be made to feel unwelcome if not conversant with technology.

Despite safeguards, fraudsters continue to game the system. The number of bank frauds may have fallen, but the amount involved has gone up. Card and Internet frauds account for 66.8 per cent of the cases. Improving operational efficiency is a daily challenge.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

LAHORE, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 31, 1925

Congress session

THE 40TH session of the Indian National Congress, which opened its sittings at Cawnpur (Kanpur) on December 26, concluded its labours on the 28th, after having passed a number of resolutions on a variety of subjects. The subjects were not so numerous as in some past years, and the procedure followed was on the whole businesslike. As far as the telegraphic report before us shows, no unpleasant incident marred the harmony of the proceedings after the unsuccessful attempt of a number of Ajmer-Marwar Congressmen, whose election as delegates had been voted by the All India Congress Committee, to force their entrance into the *pandal*; and the dignity and self-restraint that are common features of the deliberations of the Congress were not wanting in this year's proceedings. The number of delegates compared unfavourably with those days when there was no restriction on the number that a province could return, and fell short even of that allotted to the provinces under the present rules; but the total attendance was nearly as large as in any past year if we exclude a few sessions in which the Congress for special reasons attracted an unusually large audience. It's usual at the end of each session of the Congress to ask if it has been a success. The answer invariably depends upon what the public expected the Congress to do and whether and how far it has succeeded in doing it. Judged by this test, this year's session can scarcely be said to have been a great success, if, indeed, it can be said to have been a success at all.

Terror keeps India on its toes

Despite setbacks in the security arena this year, New Delhi did well on the geopolitical front



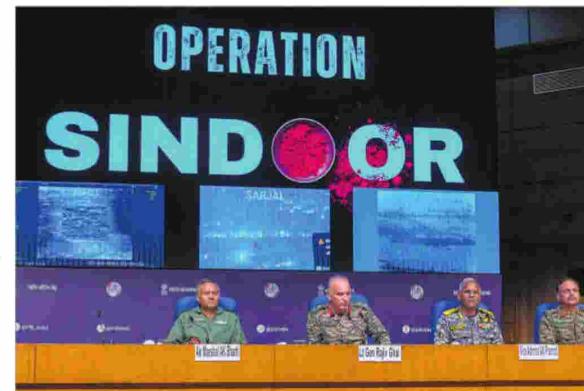
MANOJ JOSHI
DISTINGUISHED FELLOW, OBSERVER
RESEARCH FOUNDATION, NEW DELHI

THE year 2025 was not the best one for India's security. The country suffered ghastly terror attacks in Pahalgam on April 24 and New Delhi on November 10. The former led to a short war with Pakistan. Fortunately, hostilities ended soon, but as Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared, they have only been suspended. Terrorism clearly remains a challenge, as does the fact that normalcy in Kashmir is a far cry even six years after the abrogation of Article 370. However, a plus point was the elimination of key Maoist leaders in central India.

Despite the setbacks in the security arena this year, India did well geopolitically. New Delhi's rift with the US led to the 'rediscovery' of the virtues of strategic autonomy. By standing up to the US, maintaining stable relations with the European Union and strengthening ties with Japan and Russia, India was an island of stability in an otherwise turbulent world.

Fortunately, relations with China regained an even keel after the two sides worked in accordance with the border patrolling agreement they had reached in October 2024. In the Indian Ocean Region, too, there was relief as New Delhi's ties with Sri Lanka and Maldives witnessed an upswing.

What does 2026 have in store? Unfortunately, India-Bangladesh ties have not yet bottomed out. The situation in the neighbouring country has deteriorated sharply following the



OP SINDOOR : The four-day war in the wake of the Pahalgam terror attack exposed Pakistan's vulnerability. PTI

recent assassination of student leader Sharif Osman Hadi. The return of Bangladesh National Party (BNP) leader Tarique Rahman is a positive development, but the potential for further worsening of ties remains, given the forces at work to block Bangladesh's recovery as a stable, democratic entity.

Bangladesh borders four northeastern states of India. In the past, it has served as a platform to support separatist movements in Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Assam. It was also used to send Pakistani terrorists into India. Not many know that Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar first entered India in 1994 through Bangladesh on a forged Portuguese passport.

The downfall of Sheikh Hasina has been used by Pakistan to re-establish itself in Bangladesh both through official and Islamist channels. More than half a dozen Pakistani military delegations have visited the country in the year since Hasina's exile. These include clandestine visits by the ISI top brass. In addition, there

have been visits by Lashkar-e-Taiba leaders like Ibtisam Elahi Zaheer. The Islamists led by the Jamaat-e-Islami have a substantial institutional network; they have expanded their street presence and are bidding fair to win the next election, taking on their erstwhile ally, the BNP. They have no love lost for India and the single item on their

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

Terrorism has no religion, no nationality and no humanity. —Manmohan Singh

Gajar ka halwa and the hungry culprit

SANTOSH JATRANA

IN North India, the real sign that winter has arrived isn't the drop in temperature, it's the flood of juicy red carrots in the market and the familiar aroma of *gajar ka halwa*. If you are not making *halwa* when the first chill hits, are you even doing winter right?

In our home, *gajar ka halwa* was not just a dessert; it was a full-blown family show, led by my eldest brother — the undisputed king of the kitchen — with military precision. A hardworking science teacher by profession and a passionate cook by choice, he took this annual culinary project seriously. After all, he had a reputation to uphold, and winter was his time to shine.

The preparation began early: he would be out before sunrise, milking our buffalo with the kind of dedication that would make a dairy farmer weep with pride. Then came the carrots — washing, peeling and grating mountains of them by hand (he didn't believe in shortcuts like food processors). The kitchen would fill with the rich aroma of carrots roasting slowly in homemade ghee, then carefully stirred to prevent burning, and finally folded into milk, sugar, cardamom and dried fruit. His *halwa* was nothing short of a masterpiece, pure winter happiness. Given the monumental effort involved, my brother would, quite rightly, claim the lion's share when it came to eating. As a small tax for the *halwa*'s chief chef, we all agreed.

One winter afternoon, after completing his masterpiece, a glorious, gassy mound of *gajar ka halwa*, he set it aside to cool before slicing it into perfect scientific squares only a science teacher could achieve (presentation mattered, too, you see). Proud and exhausted, he stepped away to rest.

It was a big mistake. While he rested, destiny (and our dog) had other plans.

Our family dog, a mischievous little bandit and a master of opportunistic crime, with a sixth sense for unattended food, saw its chance. Before we knew it, half the tray had vanished, and there it sat, with a suspiciously bloated belly, tail wagging, tongue lolling in pure, unapologetic bliss. All those hours of effort, reduced to a sticky mess and a very satisfied dog.

My brother, heartbroken, could only stare at the scene of the crime while the rest of us tried (and failed) to suppress our laughter. Years later, we still remember the lesson he learned the hard way: you can master Newton's laws of motion, but you can't outsmart a dog when dessert is on the line.

As the saying goes, the early bird gets the worm, but in our house that winter, the fastest creature got the *halwa*. The experiment was conclusive and replicable: leave *gajar ka halwa* unattended and it will disappear quickly.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

and while Munir may be the de facto ruler, this is because its most popular politician (Imran Khan) is in jail.

As for China, there seems to be no immediate threat since India continues to match the Chinese build-up along the LAC. However, in 2026, India needs to work on the second leg of its eastern Ladakh policy by pushing for de-escalation. There are aspects of disengagement that need to be completed, such as the dissolution of the no-patrol zones created during 2020-22 in four areas where the Chinese had blocked Indian patrols. De-escalation would target the additional forces that both sides have brought near the LAC in the region.

India also confronts another kind of a challenge from its rift with the US. For more than 20 years, the US formed an important geopolitical pillar of India's global security outlook. But the developments of 2025 have undermined the trust on which this was based. The US has a new National Security Strategy which has little to say about India except as an economic partner. America's ties with Pakistan and China suggest abundant caution not to rely on the US too much.

Indeed, 2026 should be the year in which India must work out a new geopolitical orientation to replace the one lost with the US. Besides emphasising multi-polarity, it also needs to take steps to boost the country's defence expenditure in keeping with trends around the world.

Multipolarity needs to be backed by a more robust self-defence capacity, and the Modi government must walk the talk in this area instead of relying merely on grand announcements.

There are bound to be unexpected twists and surprises in 2026. But given the fact that the Indian economy is thriving and the country is politically stable, India does have resilience that will be proof against them.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Trampling on common sense

Refer to 'Let us resist attempts to weaponise ignorance'; there was a time when mottoes like 'Knowledge is power' were hung in classrooms. But the tragedy of these times is that power has gone into the hands of the ignoramus and they hold the mike. This juggernaut of irrationalism tramples on all traces of common sense. Therefore, hoping that a poorly-paid, ill-equipped and ignorant teacher can singlehandedly redefine the purpose of education and activate critical thinking is hoping against hope. Where ignorance is bliss, everybody minds their bread and butter. The liberating function of education has become extinct. Perhaps, AI will alter the situation and produce a new teacher-less classroom and a 'classless' society.

MOHAN SINGH, AMRITSAR

Formal education has limitations

Apropos of 'Let us resist attempts to weaponise ignorance'; education, these days, is mostly focused on minting money by getting a job by following the herd mentality of self-proclaimed market leaders. The contemporary formal education can, at best, convert curious minds and working hands into fulfilling mechanical tools and not blooming flowers. Our children need to be taught how to appreciate the extraordinary in the ordinary. Let us develop our education ethos in such a way that inspires the kids to fill one pocket with money or material and the other one with feelings and sentiments.

RAKESH MOHAN SHARMA, PATHANKOT

Congress needs a people's issue

Refer to 'Congress in a bind'; the debate triggered by Digvijaya Singh's words of appreciation for the RSS has once again reduced the Congress's crisis to a simplistic question of organisation versus ideology. History shows that organisation alone does not guarantee political relevance. Despite its discipline, the RSS remained marginal for decades until emotional mobilisation — most notably around the Ram Mandir — gave it mass traction. If the Congress is to revive, it must rediscover an issue that resonates deeply with citizens and rebuilds vigour within its ranks.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

Simple infections can become fatal

Refer to 'Avoid self-medication'; the easy availability of drugs at local pharmacies without a valid medical prescription has fostered a culture of "pill-popping" for even minor ailments. Indiscriminate use of antibiotics is the primary driver of antimicrobial resistance, rendering life-saving medications ineffective against common infections. While systemic issues like high private consultation fees and overcrowded government facilities push many toward self-diagnosis, the long-term cost is devastating. When we bypass professional medical expertise for quick Internet searches or over-the-counter purchases, we contribute to a future where simple infections could become fatal due to untreatable superbugs.

BALBIR SINGH KAKKAR, JALANDHAR

SC's self-corrective measure

Apropos of 'SC puts its own Aravali redefining order on hold'; the apex court's decision deserves wide appreciation from all stakeholders. By keeping its November 20 ruling in abeyance and constituting a new high-powered committee, the Court has demonstrated rare judicial sensitivity to ecological uncertainty and public concern. The acknowledgment that ambiguity in definitions can lead to regulatory gaps and irreversible ecological damage reflects a mature understanding that environmental governance must be guided by caution, clarity and inclusiveness. The interim restraint aligns with the principle that development must be need-based, not greed-driven, and that natural resources must be used ethically, sustainably and responsibly.

MM GOEL, KURUKSHETRA

Optimism, adversity on same side

As 2025 draws to a close and we stand at the cusp of the new year, everybody looks forward to attaining more in their professional lives and also bring in changes in daily routines. The weight and pertinence of optimism and idealism is akin to melancholy and adversities which make us brim with intensity and vigour. Let us all make a resolution and commitment to empower the needy and underprivileged masses, apart from fanning our personal desires and ambitions.

VASUDHA PANDE, PAONTA SAHIB

Letters to the Editor, typed in double space, should not exceed the 200-word limit.
These should be cogently written and can be sent by e-mail to: Letters@tribunemail.com

The flag bearer of democracy in Bangladesh



RASHIDUL HASAN
SENIOR REPORTER,
THE DAILY STAR

MOHD AL-ASLAM
MOLLA
MULTIMEDIA
JOURNALIST

KHALEDA Zia has left behind a nation that she helped shape—first as a reluctant icon of democracy, and later as an enduring leader in a fiercely contested political sphere. It was only after the assassination of her husband in 1981—with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leaderless and fractured—that she stepped into the void.

What emerged from her personal tragedy, her husband's death, was a leader of startling resolve. On the streets of Dhaka in the 1980s, Khaleda became the "uncompromising leader," a moniker earned by her refusal to negotiate with the military regime. It culminated in the 1991 general election, where she led the BNP to a stunning victory, becoming Bangladesh's first woman prime minister.

Khaleda made one of her most significant political compromises by joining forces with her arch rival, Sheikh Hasina, in 1990. She agreed to a strategic liaison to

oust General Hussain Muhammad Ershad. Khaleda presided over the transition from presidential to parliamentary government, a structural change intended to anchor democracy.

Khaleda's administration in 1996 navigated a volatile political impasse to institutionalise a fair transfer of power. She passed the 13th amendment to the constitution which formally embedded the caretaker government system into law. Then she promptly dissolved the parliament and resigned, only to run for re-election under the very neutral authority she had just empowered. That election brought the Awami League, not the BNP, to power. Still, Khaleda won all the seats she contested. Khaleda, a three-time prime minister, remains the only political leader in the country's history to have won every parliamentary seat she contested.

Her administration's most enduring structural legacy was its pivot toward economic liberalisation and social equity. Guided by her finance minister, M Saifur Rahman, Khaleda introduced the value-added tax (VAT) in 1991, a difficult reform that permanently expanded the state's revenue base.

Recognising that development was impossible without women, her government launched a nationwide stipend pro-



UNCOMPROMISING : Khaleda Zia refused to negotiate with the military regime. REUTERS

gramme in 1994 that made secondary education free for girls in rural areas.

In 2001, Khaleda orchestrated a stunning political comeback, this triumph was a rejection of the incumbent Awami League as well as a validation of her controversial strategic pivot—an electoral coalition with conservative Islamists parties.

Her legacy is not without deep fissures. Her career was defined by a bitter, decades-long duel with Hasina and the Awami League, a rivalry that often paralysed the state.

Her last tenure was punctuated by the intervention of an army-backed government in 2007 that saw both of them jailed.

Khaleda presided over the transition from presidential to parliamentary form of government.

By late 2006, the country's democratic machinery had ground to a violent halt. As Khaleda's third term ended, a deadlock over who would head the interim caretaker government split onto the streets, turning Dhaka into a battleground.

In January 2015, Khaleda found herself in a siege-like state, her Gulshan office barricaded by police trucks loaded with sand. It was during this enforced isolation that she received the devastating news of the death of her younger son, Arafat Rahman Koko, in Malaysia. Her personal tragedy was compounded by the politics of the moment.

The trajectory of Khaleda's final decade was tragic, yet

ended with a twist of historical irony. In 2018, she was sentenced to prison on corruption charges involving the Zia Orphanage Trust—charges many decried as a politically motivated tool to keep her away from elections.

For over two years, beginning in February 2018, Khaleda was the sole inmate of the abandoned Old Dhaka Central Jail. Cut off from the outside world and battling cascading health issues, she spent 760 days in this emptiness.

In those years, it seemed her story would end in a prison cell, her voice absent from parliament since 2014. Even after a conditional release in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, she remained confined to her home in Gulshan, a shadow of the figure who once commanded millions.

But the wheel turned one last time. Following the massive student-led uprising in 2024 that toppled Hasina's regime, Khaleda saw her political image resurrected. She was completely freed in August 2024 after Muhammad Yunus took over as the country's interim leader. She witnessed the fall of the government that had jailed her.

In the days following the dramatic collapse of the Awami League government in 2024, Khaleda's most defining political act was perhaps her silence. She refrained from issuing a single public statement of personal gloa-

ting or vindictiveness against the woman who had jailed her. Even in her first public address after six years of silence—delivered via video link from a hospital bed—she notably avoided mentioning her rival's name in anger. Instead, she urged the nation to reject the "politics of vengeance" and destruction.

Khaleda's health had been in steep decline for years. By the time she was last admitted to Evercare on November 23, 2025, with heart and lung infections, she was already navigating life with a pacemaker and the scars of previous stenting procedures.

Khaleda's eldest son, Tarique Rahman, remains the undisputed heir apparent to her political dynasty, serving as the acting chairman of the BNP from London, where he was in exile since 2008. The fall of the Hasina regime in August 2024 led to his acquittal in multiple high-profile cases and he returned home.

While the interim government signalled a willingness to facilitate his homecoming, Tarique's delay, attributed to lingering security concerns and strategic timing for the upcoming elections, created a poignant backdrop to his mother's final battles.

Khaleda may have lost her health to the struggle, but she died having secured her indelible place in history.

Courtesy: *The Daily Star, Bangladesh*

Indian elections plagued by Hobson's choice



MANOJ KUMAR JHA
RAJYA SABHA MP,
RASHTRIYA JANATA DAL

INDIAN elections are routinely celebrated as a festival of democracy, characterised by reasonably robust voter turnout and peaceful polling in most regions. The sheer logistical scale of conducting elections for nearly a billion people is invoked as proof that India remains a vibrant democracy.

The tagline of the Election Commission of India (ECI)—"free and fair elections"—is repeated with ritualistic pride. However, beneath this procedural poll, there lies a deeper unease and discomfiture. For an increasing number of citizens, elections are becoming increasingly reminiscent of a Hobson's choice: the freedom to choose, but with no meaningful alternative to choose from, and a gradual erosion of their agency.

Hobson's choice is not the absence of choice; it is the compulsion to accept what is offered or opt out altogether. This metaphor captures the contemporary Indian electoral experience with unsettling accuracy. Voters are not denied the vote—at least not yet—but they are often denied genuine

political alternatives that challenge dominant economic models or question the concentration of power. The same applies to rising income inequality and the anxieties of the most marginalised.

At a formal level, Indian elections continue to meet constitutional criteria. Multiple parties contest campaigns are held, polling is conducted, and at times, governments change. However, democracy is not sustained solely by procedures. Its vitality depends on the range, depth and credibility of choices available to the electorate.

If elections are reduced to binary contests between highly centralised parties with similar policy frameworks and identical electoral strategies, the democratic choice ultimately shrinks.

One of the most visible contributors to this narrowing is the growing asymmetry of power between ruling parties and the Opposition. Access to financial resources has become wildly uneven.

Electoral bonds, before being struck down by the Supreme Court for being patently unconstitutional, created a system of opaque political funding that overwhelmingly favoured the party in power. Even after their abolition, the structural advantage enjoyed by the ruling dispensation remains intact through state power, corporate patronage, quid pro quo arrangements and informal channels of influence.

According to a recently published report, 82 per cent of the total donations went into the pocket of the BJP while other political outfits shared the rest. In such a scenario, Opposition parties may exist, but they compete on an uneven playing field where survival itself becomes the primary objective, not the articulation of alternative visions.

This imbalance is reinforced by the increasing use of investigative agencies, such as the Enforcement Directorate, the Central Bureau of Investigation and the Income Tax Department, as political instruments.

It is no one's case that corruption must not be addressed, but the selective deployment of these agencies, often coinciding with elections or defections, creates a climate of coercion. Again, if the Opposition leaders are preoccupied with legal and financial survival, democratic debate is bound to be impover-



FREE & FAIR : Democracy is not sustained solely by procedures, but on choices available to the electorate. FILE

ished. Elections then become contests of endurance rather than ideas.

The media landscape compounds this problem. Large sections of the mainstream media no longer function as neutral platforms for scrutiny or debate. Instead, they amplify dominant narratives, marginalise dissenting voices and reduce complex political questions to emotive and polarising spectacles.

When electoral discourse is shaped less by policy failures, such as unemployment, income inequality, a deteriorating environment, public health issues, and more, by manufactured outrage, hyper-nationalism or identity-based polarisation, voters are deprived of the information necessary to make informed choices.

Grassroots leadership, ideological training and collective

decision-making have given way to a politics driven by charisma. Voters often find themselves choosing between individuals imposed from above rather than representatives organically rooted in their constituencies.

Besides, Hobson's choice of Indian elections is also produced through the careful orchestration of religious polarisation.

Even as elections are conducted under the banner of being "free and fair," the moral and ideological terrain on which voters are asked to choose is systematically narrowed. Most political parties, while publicly professing secular commitment, struggle to maintain a principled distance from this polarising logic.

Let us now consider unemployment, one of the most pressing concerns for Indian youth today, more so than ever before in our history. Despite repeated promises of job creation, data from official and independent sources reveal persistent underemployment, the informalisation of labour and a consistent decline in wages.

Yet this issue rarely dominates electoral campaigns with the seriousness it deserves. Similarly, agrarian distress, evident in farmer protests, stagnant incomes and rising indebtedness, is often reduced to episodic attention.

As structural issues are sidelined, elections become referendums on personality, symbolism or are driven by fear rather than governance.

When, on the very eve of elections, cash is transferred directly into the bank accounts of voters, and the ECI responds with studied silence, the promise of "free and fair" elections is hollowed out from within.

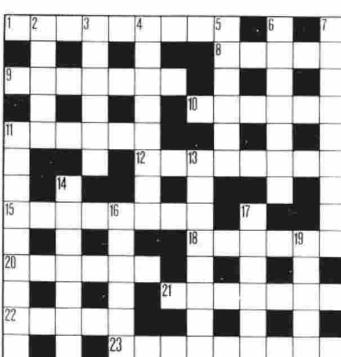
Importantly, Hobson's choice does not affect all citizens equally. Marginalised communities experience it most acutely. Faith in democratic remedies erodes when electoral promises of social justice coexist with everyday realities of discrimination, violence and exclusion.

None of the concerns mentioned above implies that Indian democracy is dead or that elections are meaningless. But there is a danger that lies in the transformation of elections into rituals that legitimise power without genuinely contesting it. Thus, reclaiming democratic choice requires more than electoral reforms, though those are essential as well.

As we struggle for transparent funding, independent institutions and media accountability, we should also demand a fresh and brave political imagination: parties willing to speak uncomfortable truths, rebuild grassroots connections and articulate alternative futures.

Democracy thrives on possibility, which is enacted through participation. Until then, Indian elections may remain free and fair in form, yet constrained in substance. They offer citizens the right to choose, but deny them the power to choose differently.

QUICK CROSSWORD



CROSS

- 1 Complete defeat (9)
- 2 Flinch (5)
- 3 Made as integral part (5-2)
- 4 Small-time (6)
- 5 Made possible (6)
- 6 Temporary disease (8)
- 7 League (8)
- 8 Contemptibly small (6)
- 9 Lex (6)
- 10 Tableland (7)
- 11 Lustre (5)
- 12 Of inferior quality (5-4)

DOWN

Yesterday's Solution

- Across: 1 Picasso, 4 Stiff, 7 Vent, 8 Stickler, 10 Turn of mind, 12 Divide, 13 Twinge, 15 Hand in hand, 18 Measured, 19 Poll, 20 Argue, 21 Bazaar.

- Down: 1 Pivot, 2 Contrive, 3 On time, 4 Second wind, 5 Idle, 6 Fortune, 9 Good nature, 11 In favour, 12 Dilemma, 14 Adverb, 16 Delve, 17 Bang.

SU DO KU



EASY

YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

DECEMBER 31, 2025, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 10
- Posh Parvishi 17
- Shaka Paksha Tithi 12, up to 1:48 am
- Sadhya Yoga up to 9:14 pm
- Krithika Nakshatra up to 1:30 am
- Moon enters Taurus sign 9:23 am

FORECAST

SUNSET	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	17:33 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN	07:19 HRS
Chandigarh	20	08	
New Delhi	23	08	
Amritsar	17	07	
Bathinda	19	07	
Jalandhar	19	07	
Ludhiana	17	06	
Bhawanipuri	18	06	
Hisar	21	06	
Sirsa	19	08	
Dharamsala	18	06	
Manali	12	05	
Shimla	16	09	
Srinagar	07	01	
Jammu	14	09	
Kargil	02	-08	
Leh	02	-08	
Dehradun	19	07	
Mussoorie	19	07	

TEMPERATURE IN °C

CALENDAR

DECEMBER 31, 2025, WEDNESDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Posh Shaka 10
- Posh Parvishi 17
- Shaka Paksha Tithi 12, up to 1:48 am
- Sadhya Yoga up to 9:14 pm
- Krithika Nakshatra up to 1:30 am
- Moon enters Taurus sign 9:23 am

Banking for growth

More operational freedom needed for growth with stability

A highlight of the Indian economy in recent years has been the strengthening of the balance sheets of banks. The banking system came under stress in the years following the global financial crisis of 2008. This coincided with excessive leverage in the corporate sector, and the resulting twin balance-sheet problem posed serious constraints on economic growth. However, the situation has changed markedly since then owing to policy interventions and improved management. The continued improvement was again highlighted in the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI's) 'Report on Trend and Progress of Banking in India 2024-25', released this week. Gross non-performing assets (GNPAs) in scheduled commercial banks are estimated to have declined from about 8.5 per cent in 2020 to a multi-decade low of 2.1 per cent (September 2025). Net NPAs also declined from about 3 per cent to 0.5 per cent during the same period. Fresh slippages have reduced while recovery has improved. In financial performance, the return on assets has improved while the return on equity has remained stable. The banking system is adequately capitalised and is in a position to support growth.

While banking is stable and resilient, it needs to evolve and adjust to the changing dynamics of the Indian financial system. As has been noted by the RBI, banks will continue to face competition from non-banking sources in lending to the commercial sector. Further, loan growth has outpaced deposit growth, pushing up the credit-deposit ratio. Thus, banks could face challenges not only in deposit mobilisation but also in the credit market. The data shows that nearly half the financial flows to the commercial sector are coming from non-banking sources, including market instruments. As the debt market deepens over time, it is likely that large, better-rated companies may raise resources directly from the market, and banks would be servicing smaller firms, which could increase risks and costs.

On deposits, the increasing exposure of Indian households to the capital market would mean banks need to offer better returns to attract deposits. Thus, competition on both deposits and lending could put pressure on interest margins and profitability. Banks need to carefully adjust to this change. It may also need regulatory support. In this context, one of the important aspects of banking is worth highlighting here. Banks are expected to ensure that a portion of credit flows to priority sectors, including agriculture, small and medium enterprises, education, and social infrastructure. The data shows that GNPs in the priority sector at the end of March 2025 were 4 per cent, significantly higher than the overall level. Further, the share of the priority sector in GNPs increased to 64.7 per cent in 2024-25, compared to 58.2 per cent in the previous year as non-priority sector NPAs declined.

However, this also suggests lending standards are comparatively weak in these areas. While the objective of supporting certain sectors or sections of society, which otherwise may not have access to credit, cannot be faulted, there is perhaps a need to review priority-sector norms. Banks are commercial enterprises and compete for business not only among themselves but also with other sources of credit. Thus, a more enabling environment with greater operational freedom would help achieve growth with stability.

Disclosure: Entities controlled by the Kotak family have a significant holding in Business Standard Pvt Ltd

The hills are alive

Review of Aravalli verdict must be objective

The Supreme Court's decision to stay its November 20 verdict upholding the definition given by an expert committee (of the government) for the Aravalli range offers opportunities for a much-needed corrective to a deeply flawed approach to environmental protection in India. A three-judge vacation Bench of the court, headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, has chosen to take *suo motu* cognisance of the issue following sharp protests from environmental and civil-society groups. The review reflects an acknowledgement that legal taxonomy may not necessarily be compatible with environmental protection, which has emerged as a critical element of green policy worldwide.

In November, the Supreme Court had accepted the government's recommendation of a uniform definition for the Aravallis as hills that were 100 metres or more above local ground and hill clusters, and slopes located within 500 metres from each other. This is in spite of the fact that the Forest Survey of India data had earlier indicated that such a definition would place over 90 per cent of the terrain historically recognised as the Aravallis, which stretches from Gujarat to Delhi, outside the purview of legal protection and therefore open to mining and quarrying. In adopting this definition, the Supreme Court contradicted its earlier views. The definition it mooted corresponded to the criteria applied by the Rajasthan government, which the Supreme Court had rejected in 2010. Instead, the court had directed the Forest Survey of India to carry out satellite imaging of the entire range, not just those above the 100 metre cutoff, and detect illegal mining. The survey revealed that 31 of the 128 Aravalli hills in the state had disappeared as a result of mining and quarrying. A court-directed Central Empowered Committee (CEC) had also concluded that given conventional and local wisdom, employing only slope and elevation criteria to define the Aravallis would lead to "inclusion errors" since not all Aravalli terrain in the 34 districts over which it spreads is hilly.

Perhaps the apex court should have gone further in its review. Following its orders, the government has issued a complete ban on all new mining licences across the entire Aravalli range. But given the visible environmental degradations already inflicted here, a ban on all mining and quarrying would have been better. The Bench proposes to constitute a high-powered committee to analyse whether "sustainable mining" in the newly demarcated Aravalli areas would result in adverse ecological consequences. The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education has been asked to identify sensitive areas where mining is strictly prohibited and those zones where it can be undertaken under "scientifically justified" circumstances. The intention may be to balance the concerns of ecologists with those of mining companies, but evidence thus far does not augur well for such a plan. Despite serial bans, the Aravallis have been degraded by unregulated and proliferating mining for decades. The deleterious impact of this sustained activity has been the rapid conversion of the cities in the north Indian plains into dust bowls, which add to year-round pollution, creeping desertification, and the marginalisation of local communities, which derived their livelihood from the region. Legally altering the taxonomy or establishing "no go" zones will achieve little in sustainably protecting this ancient ecological resource.

Making digital marketing click



AMBI PARAMESWARAN

I belong to the era of television and print advertising. I cut my teeth doing media planning on television and print, using the National Readership Survey data. To stay on the curve, if not ahead, I enrolled for an online digital marketing course almost a decade ago. I learnt a lot through that course so that I could ask my brand coaching clients the right questions. But the world of digital media is constantly changing. Reading *Click Here* was a good refresher and also got me up to date on the subject.

The author is Alex Schultz, the chief

marketing officer of Meta (owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp). His book comes with some heavy praise ("Alex is one of the small handful of people that I can say without his work our community would not have connected more than 2 billion people around the world," wrote Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg).

The three foundational pillars of marketing are segmentation, targeting and positioning (STP). It was good to see that Alex has not dismissed them as old wives' tales. We find STP appearing often in the book.

The book has four sections. The first, titled "The Basics", covers the key role of digital marketing/advertising. Mr Schultz starts by asking, "What is the North Star?" and "What is the Marketing Funnel?" For Facebook, the North Star was "Connect the World Online". And the metric for Facebook was monthly active users (MAU); a consumer was considered "monthly active" if she logged into the service at least once in the last 30 days. We are then taken back to the AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire and Action) model that all of us learnt in B-School. How do you measure conversions? Is it just acquisitions or is it a combination of new acquisitions, churned users and requested users?

In targeting, we are introduced to behavioural targeting and demographic targeting. In the TV and print era we only had demographic targeting, but with digital media we can do behavioural targeting. Concepts such as retargeting, targeting and data quality are explained. Which creative will work better and result in a click? We learn about the four new Ps of creative: Prominent, personal, persistent and performant. We are reminded of David Ogilvy's words: "If it doesn't sell it is not creative."

The second section of the book is on infrastructure. Digital marketing is all

about the art of measurement. Goodhart's Law says that any observed statistical regularity will tend to collapse once pressure is placed upon it for control purposes. Digital marketing is all about metrics, measurement and experiments. The author quotes Javier Oliván: "In theory, theory and practice are the same; in practice, they are different." The importance of research on investment and measuring comprises a full chapter. How do you build a digital marketing organisation? Hire the right kind of people and the right kind of agency partners. Not everything can be done internally and Mr Schultz stresses the importance of having good agency partners.

The third section is dedicated to the many channels that a digital marketer needs to use. The first set of channels are product-led channels. Then there are partner-led channels. These need to be treated differently. Then there is search. Search consists of search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM). The author spends time explaining the importance of selecting

keywords and search terms. How to evaluate the supply of them and the bidding for them? Should you bid on your own name? Conventional wisdom is that you better do so since your competitor may be bidding for them. But in the book the advice is not so straightforward, but I will leave you to find out more. Given the fact the author is from social media, I thought social channels would account for the lion's share of the book. But his coverage of social channels is quite muted.

The last section of the book is a summing up of the first three sections with some questions about artificial intelligence (AI) and how it will shape the future of digital marketing. I particularly liked the quote attributed to Benedict Evans: "If the internal combustion engine gives humanity access to infinite horses (horse power), then AI gives us access to infinite interns."

Here are some sane words from the author: The basics matter (STP), be clear about your goal and metrics (don't confuse the two), own that come, a little technical skill can go a long way, good marketing cannot fix a bad product (why is this so difficult to understand) and direct response marketing is a game of inches (or a thousand cuts).

It was gratifying to see a modern-day marketer refer to all-time classics such as *Scientific Advertising* (Claude C. Hopkins), *Ogilvy, Profile of Future* (Arthur C. Clarke), *Scoring Points* (Clive Humby) and *Reality in Advertising* (Rising Reeves). Read *Click Here* cover to cover. Read it again and make notes... I certainly plan to do that.

The reviewer is a best-selling author. His latest book *Marketing Mixology* is about four essential skills for marketing success

Fixing India's air in five years

From vehicular pollution to construction dust, coordinated solutions exist. What's needed now is the will to act

ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

and (b) levy other fees on polluting industries such as brick kilns.

And fifth, the central government can implement accelerated depreciation of, say, 20 per cent so that the capital costs of new ZLP assets are fully compensated for within five years.

Together automobile exhaust, industrial chimneys, construction dust, road particles (or dust), biomass burning and poor waste management are responsible for the bulk of the particulate pollution impacting North India. A combination of explicit orders supported by financial support and technology interventions spanning both the private and public sector can address almost all of these.

Consider the question of how to reduce automobile exhaust, where two-wheelers, commercial vehicles, and four-wheelers all are significant emitters. Fortunately, for two- and four-wheelers and even buses, electric vehicles (EVs) and hybrids are attractive alternatives. But what would make large automobile companies stop selling fossil-fuel vehicles across North India in five years? A combination of mandates and accelerated depreciation could provide both the necessary target date and the financial support for the changeover.

Then, there is the large number of fossil-fuel vehicles already on the roads. Here as well, a hard five-year timeline for current users to switch to ZLP vehicles would accelerate the transition to EVs. An exchange initiative or a tax break for owners of older fossil-fuel vehicles may also need to be introduced.

Second is the construction dust. Many construction sites have started placing a plastic or cloth cover over such sites. Spraying water over all construction sites is also a relatively low-cost solution. Moreover, since government projects account for a large share of construction projects, this would be easy to institute as a precondition for all contractors and private partnerships.

Third is the problem of road dust. This includes small particles of dust, carbon black and rubber from tyres, and particles from auto exhaust. While moving towards low- or zero-carbon vehicles would reduce the latter, tyre and dust particles will never go away. This means we need a mechanism for the daily washing or vacuuming of all major roads and thoroughfares. This would lead to higher costs for local governments, which they can easily recover by rationalising property taxes, at least for all new properties. Open garbage dumps are another case where local governments will need to get their act together.

Fourth, many small, medium, and large industries burn biomass or fossil fuels. These include thermal power plants, brick kilns, and chemical plants. Many of them can be converted to electricity-based processes. For units that cannot be converted, there is no reason they cannot be shifted to other parts of the country where winds are stronger through the year.

Finally, a major polluter in the aggregate is the informal sector—biomass burning for heat and the tandoor, for example. These are by far the most difficult to change. However, like all parts of the economy, even informal businesses conform to the environment in which they operate.

We need to start believing that we can fix this.

The author heads CSE Research Foundation.

The views are personal



There are easy problems, there are complex problems, and then there are the wicked problems. The easiest problems are those where we know the precise issue, we know the solution, and it is easy to assign accountability. The wickedest of all problems are those where the problem is ill-defined, and, therefore, so are the solutions. But North India's pollution problem is neither. While it is easy to measure and fix accountability, multiple stakeholders work against one another.

Fortunately for us, the political parties are explicitly unified on reducing pollution. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had "halving Delhi's AQI (air quality index) by 2030" as an election promise. And, even more fortunately for everyone concerned, the techno-economic policy solutions to pollution are well known. So, then, where is the problem? Simply confusion on what to prioritise and how to do so.

There are two ways to solve any problem: The first is to analyse the causes and work from the bottom up by eliminating each of the underlying causal factors. The other is to identify the technological solution and determine how institutions and incentives can be aligned to enable the full rollout of the tech solution. This lays out a method for the latter.

Broadly, the pollution process is as follows: Economic activity gives rise to many emissions such as dust, nitrogen or sulphur compounds, and particulate matter. These interact with weather conditions such as temperatures, humidity, and winds to increase, reduce, persist, or be removed from our immediate environment.

All cities and towns create pollution. Delhi seems worse than many other cities because of its unique weather conditions. In jest, a Muskin solution would be to place large jet engines at a height of 500

metres, sucking up the pollution over cities like Delhi and throwing it upwards to be blown away by stratospheric winds. But unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—that's not possible.

We can't just throw away pollution; we need to limit it, or the winter gas chamber created over North India will become worse as population and economic activity increase. I repeat what we all already know: The more we delay action, the worse this problem will get.

Source apportionment studies have now identified many different sources that add up to the total air pollution in Delhi. These differ by location, hour, day, month, and even year, but it is clear that to address pollution, we will need to address each source. That is, like Chanakya's sticks, it needs to be treated as a collection of smaller challenges and addressed individually. Moreover, pollution does not respect state boundaries, and a large share of pollution over a region emanates from the regions around it.

Our objective, therefore, is to create a zero- to low-pollution (ZLP) economy. First, as much as possible, we need to create cooperative solutions, where all of society, government, and industry come together towards a common target. Second, it needs to be a regional solution, in that pollution over Haryana is impacted by actions in Punjab. Therefore, the solution has to be implemented across as many states as possible. Third, the government will need to explicitly announce a timeline—simply an election promise will not be enough. A complete changeover with a five-year horizon would make for a great target and will help align all government, civil society, and industry to a common goal.

Fourth, we will need additional funds for this. For that purpose, state governments will (a) need to tax fossil fuels extra (since they cause the most pollution) together towards a common target. Second, it needs to be a regional solution, in that pollution over Haryana is impacted by actions in Punjab. Therefore, the solution has to be implemented across as many states as possible. Third, the government will need to explicitly announce a timeline—simply an election promise will not be enough. A complete changeover with a five-year horizon would make for a great target and will help align all government, civil society, and industry to a common goal.

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IYOTI PARIKH & RAJIB K MISHRA

The missing link in 24-hour clean energy

Recently, tenders for 40 gigawatt (Gw) of solar power were not awarded due to market conditions and surplus energy during daytime hours. This has raised alarm among the renewable energy (RE) community, which includes project developers, investors, and energy planners. Electricity has to be provided 24 hours a day, as and when needed. Due to the lack of storage, any extra RE generation beyond demand has to be balanced, while evening and night-time demand is met through coal-based power or wind power.

To avoid curtailment and promote RE even further, the storage capacity for RE needs to expand from the current 200 megawatt (Mw) to 30,000 Mw by 2032, to store RE when solar power is available and use it when it is not. This is a huge challenge. A steady policy of planning storage for every additional Gw of RE power is needed. The grid-scale storage goals need to be announced along with the goals of RE power. The RE storage can be a mix of short-term grid-scale battery energy storage systems (BESS), which can provide up to four hours of storage, and pumped hydro power storage for a longer timescale, extending to nighttime or winters.

Fortunately, the landscape of BESS technology has evolved rapidly over the past two years globally and in India. Through competitive bidding, storage has transitioned from conceptual or pilot projects to commercial-scale deployments in India. Between 2023 and 2025, there has been a sharp decline of 30 to 35 per cent in global lithium-ion battery prices. Moreover, a search for better project designs, sizes, new materials, and contractual risk allocations is progressing rapidly. With the growth in storage capacity, capital expenditure

may reduce due to economies of scale.

Battery storage projects are now increasingly defined by the magnitude, extent, and frequency of battery cycling. Systems designed for multiple charge cycles per day deliver a lower effective cost per unit of energy, because the same investment provides more energy units over time. Revenue maximisation needs to be balanced against maintaining long-term performance over 12 to 15 years.

First, non-monetary benefits help. Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Company Ltd offered cheaper land to developers and 33 Kv connectivity at the substation level. This resulted in a tariff of around ₹1.65 lakh per Mw per month. Thus, the state and central governments can be proactive in facilitating the reduction of execution risks in a variety of ways.

Second, bring innovation to power purchase agreements (PPAs). Currently, RE PPAs are offered with a 100 per cent guaranteed purchase over their lifetimes. As more producers enter the market, power availability only during specific times cannot be purchased. Therefore, the prices in the power market vary from ₹0.3 to 3 per Kwh during the day and ₹8 to ₹1 per unit in the evenings.

About 15 per cent of power is traded, while 85 per cent is supplied under predefined PPAs. The new PPAs may be offered with less than a 100 per cent purchase guarantee, say 80 per cent to start with, so that parties may have the freedom to benefit from the market prices, as they fluctuate. The buyers can rearrange the load for some period and buy at a more convenient time to save on bills. The sellers can decide to sell at

higher prices at peak-load times. Both parties may have some freedom to decide for their benefit.

Third, expand the production-linked incentive (PLI) scheme to include battery manufacturing, Battery-pack integration, raw material processing, and component manufacturing to build a resilient domestic supply chain that reduces import dependence and shields the sector from global price fluctuations.

Fourth, permit the entry of battery power as standalone power. These prices point to the need for charging BESS regularly at certain times or summoned at peak times. The difference between peak and off-peak power prices ensures economic feasibility. Technological advances have brought down battery costs to ₹1.5 to 2.8 per kWh.

Fifth, access to transmission should be ensured for grid-scale installation—whether generating units or storage. That need not necessarily be free access. Modest charges for a reliable transmission service need to be factored in.

Sixth, emphasis on domestic cell manufacturing and recycling, and research and development efforts for solid-state batteries are crucial for long-term energy security and to reduce dependence on imported cells and critical minerals, the main strategic gap. However, battery pack assembly, power conversion systems, inverters, transformers, control software, containers, and balance-of-plant equipment are mostly manufactured or integrated within India.

The expansion of RE needs to be accompanied by growth in storage as RE is available for limited hours. With timely action on the storage front, we can still cover the lost ground fast.

The authors are with Integrated Research and Action for Development, New Delhi



Click Here: The Art of Digital Marketing and Advertising

By Alex Schultz

Published by Hachette

400 pages ₹699

Here are some sane words from the author: The basics matter (STP), be clear about your goal and metrics (don't confuse the two), own that come, a little technical skill can go a long way, good marketing cannot fix a bad product (why is this so difficult to understand) and direct response marketing is a game of inches (or a thousand cuts). It was gratifying to see a modern-day marketer refer to all-time classics such as *Scientific Advertising* (Claude C. Hopkins), *Ogilvy, Profile of Future* (Arthur C. Clarke), *Scoring Points* (Clive Humby) and *Reality in Advertising* (Rising Reeves). Read *Click Here* cover to cover. Read it again and make notes... I certainly plan to do that.

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DECCAN Chronicle

31 DECEMBER 2025

Democracy back in Bangla will be tribute to Khaleda

Khaleda Zia, Bangladesh's first woman Prime Minister, passed away at a time when her Bangladesh Nationalist Party is in pole position to win the polls ordered for February 12, 2026 by the transitional government advised by Muhammad Yunus. Prime Minister for two full terms, Khaleda was the wife of the first of Bangladesh's two presidents. She was a key figure in the turbulent swings from democracy to rule by military chiefs in its 54-year existence as an independent nation since it broke away from Pakistan in 1971.

The anarchy protests involving the public, but driven principally by restive students, had brought about was instrumental in the regime change that saw the ouster of Khaleda's rival Sheikh Hasina Wazed in August 2024 and her exile in India. The road back to the people choosing their ruler may be marked with a degree of uncertainty now in the wake of anti-India protests this month, but it was on the cards that Khaleda's BNP would be back in power in 2025, and with a vengeance again in the bitterest imaginable politics of Bangladesh.

It is tragic that her life would ebb out because of protracted illness at this juncture. Her return from treatment in London had symbolised a moment of hope and resilience for her party which will, of course, be actively run by her son Tarique Rahman who himself returned to Dhaka after 17 years of a self-imposed exile to escape the clutches of Hasina's regime that had tormented his mother and him with political迫害. The letters and messages sent to him more often by military regimes.

The partisan politics of the two ladies whose decades-long rivalry saw them go head-to-head in a clash of diametrically opposed dynasties of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman that had led to several political assassinations may not end with Khaleda's death. It is interesting that Hasina is even accused of changing her name from Khaleda to Khatun on August 15 in order to make her very tragic date in the life of the family of Mujibur Rahman, seen as the liberator of Bangladesh, a day of celebration.

The one commonality they shared was in 2006 when both were imprisoned by an interim government backed by the military charged them with corruption, a theme that runs like a red thread across the fabric of Bangladesh's party politics. The one great difference in their approach was that Hasina was prepared to give in to the Islamists and took an anti-Islamic stance while Hasina tried to adapt a far more secular outlook and actively sought to rein in the religious zealots who were pro-Indian.

What Bangladesh needs most is for a stable government to emerge from free, fair and open polls. Khaleda's commitment to polls-based democracy often wavered with her party boycotting polls including the one held in January 2024 in which Hasina had power cleared with BNP, the main opposition to the Awami League, withdrawing from the fray. The turnout must end along with the interim government if the economy is to recover to the levels both Khaleda Zia and Hasina had shaped in their time as PMs.

SC's twin course corrections

The Supreme Court's decision to keep in abeyance its November 20 judgement on the definition of the Aravalli hills is timely and prevents an ecological disaster in vast areas of northern India, including the National Capital Region of Delhi.

The apex court had last month approved a definition suggested by the government's expert panel that mining should be banned in the Aravalli hills, which have an elevation of 100 metres, and in hill clusters, slopes and hillocks located within 500 metres of each other, triggering massive criticism from civil society.

The Aravallis are among the world's oldest fold mountains, aged between 150 crore years and 250 crore years. They are much older than the supercontinents Pangea and Gondwana and are part of the global ecological heritage. They act as a physical barrier, stopping the Thar desert from expanding into populous regions such as Delhi, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

Given the important role that the Aravallis play in the northern climatic ecosystem, any responsible authority must be disturbed by such a hasty and disturbingly political decision. The central government's committee failed to convincingly put forth arguments in support of resuming mining.

While it is heartening to see the common man and woman standing up for the protection of the country's ancient mountain range, the infiltration of pro-mining interests at various levels of the government is worrisome. Had the people not raised their voice, the Supreme Court's verdict would have caused irreparable damage to the country's ecology. The government must therefore inquire into how such a lopsided report, which led to the Supreme Court's decision, was prepared.

With the Supreme Court effecting two course corrections on the same day — keeping the Aravalli order in abeyance and cancelling the Delhi high court's relief to Unnati rape convict Kuldeep Singh Sengar — it is appropriate for the judiciary to reflect internally on the processes that shape its judgments. The judiciary must remain beyond reproach.

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M.P.
Nathanael

Deputy superintendent of police Rishikant Shukla, the police officer of Unnao (UP), was arrested on Monday after a investigation team probe revealed he had amassed assets of over ₹100 crore by extortion in league with a lawyer and 11 other police personnel.

A senior manager of Indian Tourism Development Corporation was caught red-handed accepting a bribe of ₹40,000 from a complainant in New Delhi last month to clear his pending bills.

On December 26, Justice Prashant Shah of Rouse Avenue court in New Delhi, while sentencing 13 accused to imprisonment ranging from two to five years, commented: "In a civilised society, corruption is a cancer-like disease which, if not detected in time, is sure to malign the polity of the country leading to disastrous consequences." The 13 accused had duped the Delhi Development Authority and Registrar of Cooperative Societies by falsifying documents to defraud a defunct housing society after over two decades.

Violence in our society has seemed in to an extent that it is almost impossible to get any work done in government agencies without having to grease a few palms. It is considered a normal way of life. Any resistance to offer bribes is frowned upon; often people say it is better to bribe once and get the work done rather than pay the office repeatedly and face harassment and avoidable expenditure in commuting.

Unsurprisingly, though it may sound paradoxical,

while the people crave for a clean administration, they are the ones who are most corrupt and keep bribes. This often right from the top, when cash and freebies are doled out to the gullible. The candidate's clean image notwithstanding, the votes are cast in favour of those who satisfy the desires of voters. Criminals stand to gain and enter into the portals of Parliament and the state legislatures. According to a report by the Association for Democratic Reforms on the 2024 elections, as many as 80% of the candidates were accused of crimes against women, including rape. It also stated that criminals stood a better chance of winning than those with a clean image. Corruption thus pervades the highest policy-making bodies of our republic.

Being a universal phenomenon, efforts to root out corruption across the globe are a constant, ongoing endeavour, though with little success. While Transparency International rates the Corruption Perception Index (CPI) at 40, it is interesting to note no country can boast of being a completely corruption-free nation. On a scale of 0 to 100, with 0 being most corrupt and 100 the cleanest, Denmark, with a score of 90, emerged as the best with least corruption followed by Finland with 88, last year.

With a score of 38, India ranks 96, while our close neighbours Pakistan and Bangladesh, with scores of 27 and 23, trail at 97 and 151 spots respectively. With a dismal score of 8, South Sudan, the most corrupt country, is at the 189 spot. While strict measures

are taken by most countries to curb corruption, it would be interesting to see if it is to be minimised or completely. Top leaders of several countries have been held in prison on charges of corruption, but that has not deterred others. Eight top officials, including a general known to be close to President Xi Jinping, were sacked on corruption charges in China in September. Misgovernance coupled with corruption has been the bane of our neighbouring countries — Nepal, Myanmar, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. While the former three are in political turmoil and unrest resulting in a change of governments.

It is acknowledged that corruption cannot be rooted out completely due to the mindset nurtured in the years, efforts need to be made to minimise it. The process of online applications and processing has ameliorated the plight of many ordinary citizens.

Yet there are several fields where personal appearance is necessary to ward off redundant activity. The police, the judiciary and the departments could go a long way in curbing corruption.

In India, from the time the RTI Act 2005 has been enforced, 74 whistle-blowers have been killed and 164 assaulted for daring to expose corruption in the government and the private sector. The Whistle Blowers Protection Act 2014 must be strengthened and implemented to shield them from those who are hesitant to expose the corrupt.

There are instances of overlap in the duties of the anti-corruption bureau and the vigilance department

and at times even the CBI, as has happened in the case of suspected bribe to HCL Technologies, the top officials demanded a sum of ₹90 lakh from a complainant. The court reprimanded the Vigilance Bureau, as the CBI was investigating the case. There ought to be clearly demarcated fields of jurisdiction to avoid a tussle between these organisations.

Speedy disposal of cases relating to corruption would save the government exchequer doing out salaries or substance allowances to officials facing investigations. According to a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, in 2024, 60 cases of departmental inquiries pending against 60 officials of the CBI, of which 39 were against Group A officers, as on December 31, 2024. Twenty-two of these were pending for over four years.

Large vacancies in the CBI have led to inordinate delays in investigation of cases of corruption. As many as 1,502 vacancies against a total strength of 7,292 in the CBI have been pending, affecting the efficiency of the agency and in curbing corruption. The delay in prosecution sanctions by the concerned states and departments stall departmental proceedings against errant officials, giving them the opportunity to continue with their nefarious activities. Two hundred cases were pending with the CBI for want of departmental clearance. Those stalling the clearance need to be taken to the task for the delay.

The writer is a retired CRPF IGP

Subhani

CARRY PROPER DOCUMENTS... S.I.R. IS IN FULL SWING



2025: Conflicts unresolved amidst global security drift



Syed Ata Hasnain

The central lesson of 2025 is simple: Not every crisis requires a response. For India, the test lies ahead in acting only when order and stability demand it, and not when we are under pressure to do the same.

moral posture; it was a strategic necessity.

Third, the architecture of institutional global order continued to fray. International organisations, once a source of cohesion, were either under- or over-escalated. Coalitions formed without consensus, interventions occurred without closure, and peacekeeping increasingly became a burden without mandate. Stability, where it existed, was beyond the immediate horizon.

Taken together, these trends produced a world in which power existed — but was constrained, force was available — but carefully rationed; and conflict was managed, but periodically recalibrated. It was a year defined less by outcomes of recurring issues than by the demand for a solution at the outset; this assessment does not catalogue operations or events. It examines strategic trends of 2025 — and what they mean for India.

From Europe to West Asia, from the Indo-Pacific to South America, the lack of closure of global security in 2025 was the absence of closure. Military power was applied, but episodically. Diplomacy functioned, but periodically. States that react mechanically eke out advantage. India's experience reinforced the importance of choosing when and how to respond, rather than allowing adversaries to dictate the tempo.

2025-2026

Lessons from 2025: One of the clearest lessons of 2025 was that having military power is not enough. What matters is when it is used, and when it is shown. Ambiguity is beyond the reach of military strategy.

Power under constraints

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LETTERS

DON'T SELF-MEDICATE

The Prime Minister's warning on antibiotic misuse is timely, but awareness alone will not suffice. Easy access to drugs, high consultation costs, and weak enforcement continue to push people towards self-treatment. What is needed is stricter pharmacy regulation, affordable primary healthcare, and clearer guidance on safe self-care. Pharmacists must be made accountable, and doctors encouraged to prescribe rationally. Schools and colleges can help spread basic health literacy, especially among youth.

ABBHARNA BARATHI
Chennai

CHANGE CAME IN 2014

A dispassionate assessment into various happenings in the country will spell out the truth that it is only after the BJP assumed power at the centre in 2014 that India has been able to make a difference on matters of health. The engagement with China remained cautiously optimistic. On the western front, India showed that while international security rules out direct confrontation, it will still remain measured and responsive.

In today's world, influence depends less on alliances and more on being reliable. Nations that act with consistency and firmness are taken seriously. India's role beyond its borders. To India's credit, its autonomous foreign policy adds great credibility.

Looking ahead to 2026: What, then, should guide India's national security strategy in 2026? First, clarity of purpose. Ambiguity in decisions invites testing. India's red lines are now better defined. Second, capability development must continue without doctrinal rigidity. The future will not conform neatly to plans or theory. Placing a premium on decision-making and integration across domains will matter more than perfect organisational symmetry. Third, engagement must remain consistent. Not every crisis demands intervention; not every threat requires a response.

Another under-appreciated dimension is internal cohesion. Hybrid conflict seeks fracture as much as physical damage. Narrative manipulation, social polarisation and disinformation are often used as multipliers for adversaries. Managing public expectation, maintaining societal resilience and sustaining institutional trust are now integral to national security — not peripheral concerns.

Finally, the capacity to respond must be comprehensive. Military readiness remains essential, but must be complemented by cyber-resilience, information management, industrial drift and crisis decision agility. In 2025, India strengthened these capabilities, but the more important achievement was setting the right direction for

The writer, a retired lieutenant general, is a former

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com



Last year's words belong to last year's language.
Next year's words await another voice.
And to make an end is to make a beginning

TS
Eliot

INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.
—Rammath Goenka

VIOLENCE ON MIGRANTS A FAILURE OF SOCIAL CONSCIENCE, GOVERNANCE

A nation perennially on the move cannot afford to turn on migrants. In that light, the lynching of Anjel Chakma, a student from Tripura, in Uttarakhand is not just a crime—it's a grim verdict on the erosion of civic conscience. That the state's chief minister felt compelled to personally assure Chakma's family of justice and remind the country that Uttarakhand has "traditionally welcomed students from across India" exposes the fragility of the national compact. A young life was not lost to chance or misfortune, but to suspicion shaped by identity, appearance and the dangerous normalisation of othering.

Incidents reported in recent weeks confirm that this was no isolated rupture. In Odisha's Sambalpur, 19-year-old Jewel Sheikh, a migrant labourer from West Bengal, was lynched on the suspicion that he was an "illegal Bangladeshi immigrant", a claim later dismissed by the police. In Kerala, long held up as a model of social progress, Ram Narayan Baghel, a construction worker from Chhattisgarh, was beaten to death within days of arriving in the state. Across states and contexts, the script barely changed through 2025. An 'outsider' is identified, a rumour is weaponised and a mob steps in where the law retreats. To dismiss this as fringe violence is to wilfully ignore the pattern. This is a systemic failure of governance and civic restraint.

The violence is especially grotesque because it collides head-on with India's economic reality and constitutional guarantees. India runs on migrant labour—last year, 60 crore Indians were identified as internal migrants. States such as Kerala depend on them for nearly a quarter of their workforce. The contradiction sharpens further when we look at Indians in the world. According to the RBI, Indians constituted 6 percent of all global migrants in 2024, a number that has nearly tripled since 1990. In a country where remittances sustain lakhs of families, we cannot be violent on those seeking jobs or education in another state.

We loudly celebrate our demographic dividend. Yet, within our own borders, those who move for education or work are denied safety, dignity, the right to equal opportunity and sometimes life itself. Mobility is not India's threat; mistrust is. At the very least, the country must guarantee that no one should die for where they come from.

DOPING MENACE SHAMES INDIA, TROUBLES EVENT BIDS

INDIA sprinter Dhanalakshmi Sekar made a comeback this July after testing positive for a banned steroid in 2022 and serving a three-year ban. But weeks after she won three gold medals at the inter-state athletics nationals in August, she failed another dope test and is now facing a ban of at least eight years. She is not alone. For quite some time, a slew of positive dope tests have threatened the joy of clean sports in India. It was an embarrassing and worrying moment for the country when the World Anti-Doping Agency published its testing figures for 2024. To put things in perspective, though India failed to win medals in double-figures at the Olympics, no other nation came close to it on doping fails. For the record, the National Anti-Doping Agency (NADA) tested 7,113 samples for the global agency in 2024, out of which 260 or 3.6 percent returned positive. In-competition positives were even higher, at 5.82 percent. Among the blood samples analysed, four tested higher during competitions and three at other points of time. Once again, athletics topped this dubious list, followed by weightlifting and wrestling.

The Athletics Federation of India, NADA and the Sports Authority have brought in measures to penalise coaches for such offences, too. So it came as a shock when a junior national athletics coach was suspended earlier this year for alleged 'complicity' in aiding doping and trying to evade detection at a training camp. What's even more perturbing is that there were at least a few positives in all major disciplines. With more and more money coming into sports along with lucrative job offers, athletes try to find easier means to achieve success. It's like a gamble for some. However, with NADA widening its net, hoodwinking dope control officials has become more difficult. Perhaps it's time for the authorities, including employers, to bring in stricter penalties for doping. It would be prudent to even take away awards or prize money once an athlete tests positive. At a time when India has entered the dialogue phase for hosting the Olympics in 2036, this is a major blemish. Even the International Olympic Committee has flagged this issue to the Indian Olympic Association. It's time for India to wake up before it's too late.

QUICK TAKE

PUTTING EYES TO PAPER

FTER Kerala and Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh has become the latest state to insist on regular newspaper reading at school. Last week, the UP government asked all schools to set aside 10 minutes during morning assemblies for readings from Hindi and English papers. The order also asked for newspapers to be made regularly available to students. Research recently highlighted by this newspaper shows that reading from a printed page—rather than a screen—improves cognitive development in the formative years. It also helps stretch the attention span of students suffering from hyperactivity disorders. In the age of unverified claims on social media, other states should also consider such a move to bring up a well-informed citizenry.

We have just completed a quarter of a new century. Twenty-five years that feel less like a milestone, more like a quick look at the clock while in the midst of a long march through exhaustion—war-torn, punctured by instability, marked by an unrelenting sense of uncertainty. All around is a landscape of rubble and unrest: Bangladesh dangerously combustible, Gaza flattened, Ukraine bleeding, Afghanistan erased from the global conscience, Sri Lanka economically battered, Pakistan politically paralysed, Myanmar crushed under military boots. Some societies lie in devastation, others struggling merely to crawl out of it.

The world itself appears directionless. It lurches between technological euphoria and existential dread—between dreams of space colonisation and the looming reality of ecological collapse, pandemics and war. We are no longer sure where humanity is headed: utopia or catastrophe. Either could be of its own making.

The disorientation runs deeper. Even language, once a stable anchor of identity, has become unsettled. Only artificial intelligence has no identity crisis. At least it admits it is still learning! Human societies, by contrast, often pretend certainty while hollowing out meaning.

Words that once bound civilisations—moral, ethical, constitutional—sound increasingly archaic. Old ideas are dismissed as inconvenient or elitist. In their place stand shock and silence. Children are killed in conflicts with numbing regularity—in Gaza, in Ukraine, in Sudan—and the world debates semantics rather than accountability. Both words and bullets open fire on unarmed civilians, mow down holiday crowds or worshippers. Things like that barely disrupt the news cycle. Fear exists but selectively, or fleetingly.

There is nothing politically incorrect anymore. Human trafficking has not disappeared; it has simply moved into darker, more sophisticated corridors of power. Girls are still trafficked, though repackaged as networking tools in elite circuits. Robots, it turns out, do not suffice everywhere. All forms of flesh and blood labour cannot be replaced. From Silicon Valley barons to online marketing tsars, from presidents to academics to royalty—no sphere of power is morally insulated. The comforting belief that some institutions are inherently civilising has collapsed.

Against this bleak global backdrop, it is telling that organisations rooted firmly in last-century ideas have reached defining moments. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh has completed 100 years. It is a moment of celebration for its adherents. The RSS has not merely survived; it has moved from the periphery to entrench itself at the centre of Indian

politics. Meanwhile, what it considers its ideological opposite, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), struggles to retain control even in its last remaining stronghold, Kerala.

History's ironies deepen. Russia—once the ideological patron and financial supporter of Indian communism, over whose loyalty the Indian Left split in 1964—is today among the BJP government's closest international partners. President Vladimir Putin did not even meet the Opposition during his India visits. Moscow's diplomatic attention is firmly focused on Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Strategic pragmatism has replaced ideological pragmatism, and no one pretends otherwise.

The RSS has flourished partly because it operates with an advantage: it draws its power not from reason but emotion. Identity speaks its own primal language; it is largely impervious to the realm of *tarka* or argumentation. National asser-

tion, civilisational grievance, cultural revival, ideas like these can be turned over to an instrumentalist use for political mobilisation in an unproblematic way; they seem non-negotiable. So while it plays its long, patient game, political parties appear as if they keep recalibrating around their core principles.

The Indian National Congress presents a contrasting story. It began as a petitioning organisation seeking incremental rights from colonial rulers. It transformed into a mass movement demanding *Purna Swaraj* under Mahatma Gandhi. Post-independence, it reimagined itself as a socialist republic party, and later as an economic reformist democracy under P V Narasimha Rao and Manmohan Singh. Its foreign policy pivoted from Soviet alignment to an Indo-US strategic partnership, eventually embracing open relationships with Israel—once unthinkable.

SILENT SCOURGE RAVAGING OUR FOOD

JUST a month ago, COP30 placed extreme heat, collapsing harvests and rising health risks at the centre of global climate negotiations. For India's farmers, the summit delivered urgent lessons and a narrowing window for action.

At Bélem, the focus shifted decisively towards people—not just the planet. It was a long-overdue acknowledgement that climate change is no longer a distant environmental threat but a daily stressor eroding livelihoods, productivity and well-being. Nowhere is this more visible than in agriculture, where extreme heat is emerging as the most pervasive and least insured climate risk.

Scientific assessments show how heat stress is quietly but relentlessly reshaping agri-food systems. Labour capacity is declining, livestock productivity is falling, perishable produce is spoiling faster and staple crop yields are suppressed as night-time temperatures rise.

This reality is already playing out in India's farms and mandis. Over the past decade, heatwaves in the country have become longer, hotter and more geographically widespread. Wet-bulb temperatures—where heat and humidity combine to threaten human survival—have approached dangerous thresholds across Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu and coastal Karnataka.

Heat-related declines in wheat and rice yields are no longer anomalies. Irrigation costs are surging as soils dry faster. Milk production has dropped in heat-stressed districts. Farmers increasingly report dehydration, kidney strain, dizziness and cognitive fatigue—symptoms consistent with global research on chronic heat exposure.

A recent national assessment shows that more than half of India's districts now fall under high or very high heat risk. Heat is no longer an episodic shock; it is a structural threat to food security and rural incomes. What COP30 discussions only began to capture—and what Indian policy still underestimates—is the gendered nature of the stress.

The M S Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF) highlighted how extreme heat disproportionately affects women in agriculture, particularly in the southern states. Women agricultural labourers often work longer hours in the open and perform physically demanding tasks such as transplanting, weeding and harvesting.

SANJAY K SRIVASTAVA
S Radhakrishnan Chair Professor,
National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru;
former Chief of Disaster Risk Reduction at UNESCO

Heat stress is not only affecting women's health but also reducing workdays, incomes and nutritional outcomes—deepening the existing inequalities. Yet, these impacts remain largely invisible in official statistics, insurance products and heat action plans.

Smallholder farmers—who constitute over 85 percent of India's agricultural workforce—are the most exposed and least protected. Many have shifted labour to early mornings or late nights to avert lethal heat, but this comes with trade-offs: lower pro-

ductivity, safety risks and household strain. Formal agricultural workers and migrant labourers face even harsher realities.

Adaptation tools exist, but they are not being deployed at the speed or scale required. Across India, farmers are experimenting with heat-resistant crop varieties, mulching, adjusted sowing calendars and soil-moisture conservation. Community-led adaptation models in Maharashtra, Odisha and Karnataka show that local knowledge, when combined with scientific advisories, can reduce losses.

Financial protection is where India now has a chance to leapfrog. Traditional crop insurance has struggled to capture heat-related losses. Recognising this gap, productivity safety nets and household strain. Formal agricultural workers and migrant labourers face even harsher realities.

Tamil Nadu's recent move toward parametric insurance for climate disasters marks a critical policy shift. By linking payouts to measurable climate thresholds rather than damage assessments, parametric insurance can deliver predictable relief. Equally pioneering is Self-Employed Women's Association's (SEWA) heat-stress-linked insurance for women workers. By explicitly recognising heat as an insurable risk affecting income and health, the model reframes adaptation as social protection. These innovations show that climate finance can move beyond post-disaster relief toward anticipatory, people-centred resilience.

Here are some imperatives for India to translate recognition of heat risk into a coordinated national response.

First, heat-risk management must be embedded into agricultural planning. Climate and heat forecasts should inform district advisories, crop calendars, extension services and labour safety guidelines.

Second, India must institutionalise early action. Forecasts should trigger automatic responses—irrigation advisories, livestock protection measures, work-rest protocols and targeted cash or insurance payouts.

Third, we need heat-health data for rural and informal workers, disaggregated by gender. Without it, policies will continue to underestimate heat's true cost.

Fourth, financial resilience must evolve. Parametric insurance, heat-linked safety nets, and social protection for women workers should become core pillars of adaptation policy, not pilot experiments.

Finally, local institutions—panchayats, farmer producer organisations, women's self-help groups and cooperatives—must be empowered to decide on resources.

Heat resilience is economic policy. Delay will deepen losses, widen inequalities and undermine food security. India has the science, the institutions, and now the policy innovations to act. What remains is political urgency. For India's farmers, the time for incrementalism has passed.

(Viveks are personal)
Full article on newindianexpress.com

But in reinventing itself repeatedly, the Congress lost sight of a fundamental democratic truth: governance is not a political position. Power is not purpose. Organisation, cadre-building and continuous engagement with people matter as much as policy positions. The Congress grew accustomed to being in office and mistook administration for ideology. When power slipped away, there was emptiness.

The RSS, by contrast, invested relentlessly in cadre discipline and a sense of undiluting 'brotherhood'. Proximity to power accelerated its reach, but the groundwork was laid across decades. Atal Bihari Vajpayee once famously sent VHP leaders Ashok Singh and Giriraj Kishore to Sathy Sai Baba, hoping spiritual counsel might temper the Ayodhya mobilisation. The godman reportedly advised softness of tone around matters of devotion. It changed little. Godhra followed, and Indian politics was permanently altered.

One consequence of ideological clarity—however contentious—is loyalty. BJP leaders rarely defect. The same is largely true of the Left. Jyoti Basu may have sulked when his party denied him the prime ministership in 1996, but he never abandoned the CPI(M). Congress leaders, by contrast, drift across parties with ease, having confused power with political belief.

The seeds sown in 2025—political, economic, ecological—will bloom or wither in 2026 and beyond. What is beyond doubt is that neither India nor the world will return to familiar certainties.

As political elites obsess over electoral arithmetic, ordinary citizens struggle for breathable air, potable water, affordable healthcare and dignified livelihoods.

Even economics mirrors this moral drift. Gold, silver, copper and rare earths have become speculative chips rather than civilisational resources. Markets celebrate growth while lives remain precarious. Reform is invoked endlessly, but justice rarely features in the conversation.

A new year, however, demands more than despair. If the past 25 years have shown how power can operate without shame, the next must ask whether politics can rediscover responsibility. Democracies do not collapse overnight. The erosion happens incrementally, through fatigue, silence and surrender. The antidote lies not in nostalgia, but in rebuilding political engagement beyond elections. Institutional power can only come later.

The year ahead will test whether citizens remain spectators or choose participation. History, as this quarter century reminds us, does not move in straight lines. It turns when societies decide they have had enough of shock—and begin, once again, to speak.

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MAIL BAG

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Justice prevails

Ref: Justice cannot fail rape survivors (Dec 30). The Supreme Court's assertion that technical readings cannot eclipse justice, or survivors' rights send a powerful message. For perhaps subservient justice over procedural lapses, the judiciary has reaffirmed that nothing stands in the way of accountability or human dignity.

Muhammed Yazeed, Kozhikode

Industrial emissions

Ref: Pollution fight needs broader Odisha effort (Dec 30). Pollution is no longer confined within large metropolises. Industrialisation must only be ensured through proper planning and enforcement. Emissions in small towns should be warning alarms before the costs in human health become irreparable.

Shruthi S Mair, Bengaluru

Panchayat supervision

Ref: Fertile politics, failed debate (Dec 30). The MGNREGA argument has become an ideological noise ignoring ground realities. Work quality and timely wages matter more than the binary of cash and labour. Strengthening panchayat oversight and updating wage rates can preserve rights.

S M Jeena, Chennai

Rare-earth challenge

Ref: SC stays its Nov 20 fiat on Aravallis (Dec 30). The will of the people and media has prevailed for a good outcome. But India must look for eco-friendly alternatives to mine rare earth minerals, to counter China's monopoly.

C P Rabindranath, Madurai

Judicial scrutiny

The legislature or the executive may formulate policies in haste. But the judiciary should analyse issues through the lens. That the Supreme Court has held its order on the 100-metre definition for the Aravallis in abeyance suggests it had not analysed the issue through.

S Ramakrishnasayee, Chennai

Headless colleges

Ref: Blow to TN govt (Dec 30). The tussle is negatively impacting higher education in the state. Backing away from norms accepted by the Constitution is the real problem. We need a dialogue for the benefit of universities operating without a vice-chancellor for four years now.

S Shamugam, Tirunelveli



“ Today, he (Shah) said that infiltrators only enter from West Bengal. If that's the case, did you carry out the attack in Paigam? Who was behind the incident that happened in Delhi? ”

MAMATA BANERJEE
West Bengal Chief Minister



In cricket, you have to start from zero. The scoreboard is always zero for zero. It's never what you've done in the last match. Internal expectations for me in all three formats are very different

SMRITI MANDHANA
India's vice-captain



We daily prostrate at the sacred feet of Bharat Mata... Does that make us anti-Tamil? No. If the nation is one eye, the other eye is our mother tongue Tamil, who can separate them? ”

CP RADHAKRISHNAN
Vice President

A welcome correction

It is not very often that the country's top court reverses its own order, that too on a *suo moto* basis. And, it is particularly rare for a Supreme Court Bench to stay the decision of an earlier Bench of equal or higher bench strength. The recent move by the SC Bench, headed by Chief Justice Surya Kant, staying an earlier order on the Aravalli Hills issue is truly unprecedented. It is particularly significant that the latest decision was not based on a conventional review petition by any aggrieved party but came as a *suo moto* case. The earlier order of the apex court, issued on November 20, had accepted the 100-metre height definition for the Aravalli Hills. This has now been set aside by the CJI-led Bench, citing "public dissent and criticism arising from ambiguity and lack of clarity". The court has also directed the constitution of a high-powered expert committee with domain experts to resolve all critical ambiguities. The November 20 order, issued by the three-member Bench headed by former Chief Justice of India BR Gavai, gave its nod to the new definition for the mountain range proposed by the Ministry of Environment and Forests. As per this definition, any landform that is at an elevation of 100 metres or more above the local profile will be considered as part of the Aravalli Hills, along with its slopes and adjacent land. This is seen by the environmentalists, social activists, and local people as a big blow to the conservation efforts.

This elevation-based definition could potentially leave more than 90% of the forest range vulnerable to mining and construction. The 100-metre benchmark and the use of local profile — the immediate surroundings of a hill — as the measuring base rather than a standardised baseline such as the State's lowest elevation, would result in a very significant part of the Aravalli range not being counted as Aravalli anymore. According to the Forest Survey of India's internal assessment, the new definition would cover only 1,048 of the overall 12,081 Aravalli Hills that are 20 metres or higher. The latest *suo moto* intervention by the apex court highlights how the top judiciary is committed to its role as a guardian of the country's environment and has earned public appreciation. The fact that the SC felt it necessary to constitute a new expert committee to review not only the findings of the earlier committee but also to clarify other issues suggests that the earlier report was prepared in haste. The *suo moto* cognisance also means that the government's public response was not convincing. Over decades, several hillocks of the Aravallis, India's oldest mountain range, have vanished due to illegal mining and deforestation, leading to a loss of an ecosystem that is most crucial for the survival of not just mankind but also for wildlife.

SC's decision to form a new expert committee to review the Aravalli suggests the earlier report was hastily prepared

Philippine President's visit marks a shift from symbolic engagement to substantive strategic cooperation



MARTAND JHA

The visit of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr to India in August marked the establishment of a strategic partnership between the two nations. The visit assumed a greater importance as the last time a Philippine president made a state visit was in 2007. The two countries signed 13 memoranda of understanding and agreements, covering areas such as culture, defence, digital technologies, science, space cooperation, and tourism.

It has been almost 75 years since both countries established diplomatic ties in 1949. However, meaningful bilateral engagement was recalibrated after India adopted its Act East Policy in 2014. After its independence in 1947, India did not pay much attention to its eastern neighbourhood and instead focused overwhelmingly on its western front. This led to an attention deficit in India's foreign policy circles towards the Indo-Pacific region.

Interestingly, in 2011, Hillary Clinton, then the US Secretary of State, during her visit to India, urged the country to "act east" instead of merely "looking east." She underscored the need for India to play a proactive role in the Asia-Pacific region. Policymakers in the Ministry of External Affairs took note of this appeal and in 2014, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj declared that India was now ready to "Act East".

Indo-Philippine Ties
The increasing intensity of bilateral cooperation between the two nations signifies India's larger ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. India seeks to shed its status as an emerging power in the international system and aims to become a rising power. For this to happen, New Delhi has decided not to look at the Indo-Pacific and Oceania as 'peripheral' concerns but as areas of immediate concern. For a long time, India re-

garded this region as peripheral due to the Cold War geopolitics and the vast geographical distances between its main landmass.

Today, India cannot afford to look away from this region and has, therefore, come up with initiatives such as SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region), which has now evolved into MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions). The Hindi word *sagar* means sea, while *Mahe* means ocean. These acronyms reflect India's increasing maritime interests in the region.

These interests came into sharp focus during President Marcos' visit when the Philippines and the Indian navies conducted their first-ever joint exercises in the South China Sea, within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone. India deployed its three warships — INS Debad, INS Kiltan and INS Shakti — while the Philippines fielded its two warships — BRP Jose Rizal and BRP Miguel Malvar. The exercises demonstrated a mutual effort to counter China's assertive behaviour in the South China Sea region.

People Power
Indo-Philippine bilateral ties are no longer merely ceremonial. India's efforts towards joint naval patrols, the supply of BrahMos missiles, and the strengthening of joint working groups on counter-terrorism indicate a sustainable and long-term strategic vision rather than a symbolic diplomatic alignment.

New Delhi's growing engagement with the Philippines, and possibly in future towards other Southeast Asian nations, is guided by its vision to counterbalance China's influence in the region. Any Indian initiative in the Indo-Pacific today inevitably takes China's presence into account. India needs to

intensify its presence in the region, especially as a new international order takes shape under the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States. Strong allies and all-time friends in the Indo-Pacific are crucial for India to balance China while enhancing its own strategic power.

India recognises that deeper partnerships are sustained through strong people-to-people ties. Millions of Indians travel to destinations such as Manila, Bali, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur, underscoring the importance of tourism in strengthening regional engagement. This explains New Delhi's growing focus on tourism cooperation with the Philippines.

However, India's partnership with Manila should not be viewed just as a measure to counter China. Instead, it must evolve into a robust and enduring relationship. For the Philippines, acquiring the BrahMos missile system from India significantly enhances its maritime defence capabilities, particularly under its Comprehensive Archipelago Defence Concept. These missiles strengthen the Philippines' land-based anti-access, area denial capability, which is critical for defending its archipelago. President Marcos' visit was substantive, elevating India to the rank of one of the Philippines' five major strategic partners, alongside Japan, South Korea, Vietnam and Australia.

From defence cooperation to maritime security, New Delhi and Manila are aligning more closely as the Indo-Pacific undergoes a strategic churn

Shared History

India views the Philippines not only as a strategic partner but also as an important member of ASEAN. The Indo-Philippine diplomatic relations, which started on 26 November 1949 — the day India formally adopted its Constitution — have reached a turning point. In hindsight, this coincidence appears symbolic of the depth of ties the two countries can cultivate. While relations have been elevated to a strategic partnership, they hold potential for deeper cooperation.

The rise of China and the reluctance of the United States to play its traditional leadership role are reshaping the global order. Old alliances shift, new partnerships are emerging. India should seize this moment to enhance its regional stature. India and the Philippines have shared a history of strong defence ties, and it has been a pillar of strong bilateral cooperation between the two countries. This was highlighted by the delivery of the first batch of the BrahMos missile system to the Philippines on 19 April 2024.

However, India's large consumer base also presents opportunities for expanding economic ties. Stronger trade relations would reinforce cooperation across multiple sectors. While defence and strategic dialogue remain priorities, it is ultimately people-to-people engagement, supported by rising trade, that will sustain long-term ties.

President Marcos' visit has opened new strategic conversations in both countries. This may pave the way for India and the Philippines to evolve from strategic partners into close allies, and possibly enduring friends.

(The author is a PhD from School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)



Beyond symbolism

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Supreme Court's reset reclaims justice

By initiating corrective action on important judicial rulings, the Supreme Court has reinstated justice in two diverse cases with underlying common themes of State, society, and public scrutiny. One involved its own order that accepted a new definition of the Aravalli range, which would have exposed large sections of the hills to mining and commercial exploitation. The other action was in response to the Delhi High Court's order suspending the prison sentence of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, a former BJP MLA from Uttar Pradesh, in the Unnao rape case, and granting him bail. The public had an emotional stake in both cases, as seen in the protests organised against the rulings by activists and civil society.

In the Aravalli case, the Court revisited, *suo motu*, its ruling of November 20 on the definition of hills in the range, and placed the order in abeyance. It has decided to constitute an expert committee to assess concerns over the elevation-based definition of the range, the ecological continuity, and permissible mining in view of the environmental importance of the hills. The redefinition of the hills based on their height had triggered a controversy, as it excluded most parts of the range from its scope. It also varied from a slope-based definition approved by a committee the Court had appointed earlier. The apex court has done well to bring the matter to a pause and put it to further scrutiny. This is an important intervention, considering that the government appeared to be in a hurry and less persuaded by the environmental implications than by other considerations. It must now stop all construction and mining in the Aravalli region, pending closure of the matter by the Court.

On the High Court's order in the Unnao rape case, the Court stayed the ruling which would have enabled the former legislator, found guilty in multiple cases, including a criminal sexual offence, to roam free and ultimately, undermine the ends of justice. The High Court's decision was based on a narrow and technical interpretation of the term "public servant". Sengar's benefiting from this textual interpretation was widely seen as a subversion of justice, especially because he had wielded his power and authority in committing a heinous sexual crime, harassing and persecuting the survivor, and even conspiring to kill her father. Justice prevails when its miscarriage is prevented, too. Both judgments are remarkable because they are in line with public sensitivities on the issues involved. Here, judicial thinking also responded, rightly, to popular concerns.

The Court prevents subversion of justice by reversing missteps in the Aravalli and Unnao cases

Road safety cannot be an afterthought

The devastating bus fire on National Highway 48 near Chitradurga on December 25 is not just another accident; it is the predictable outcome of a transport system that treats safety as optional. A private sleeper coach was hit head-on by a container truck that reportedly jumped the median near Gorlathu Cross in Hiriyur taluk, and was gutted within minutes. Seven people were killed and several others seriously injured, most of them trapped in their sleep as the vehicle turned into a furnace. Investigations have revealed that the bus was carrying inflammable oil cans, which may have intensified the blaze and hastened its spread. This underscores how little has changed since the Kurnool tragedy barely two months ago, where nearly 20 lives were lost after illegally transported smartphones triggered lithium-ion battery explosions. That disaster was supposed to be a turning point. Instead, the Chitradurga incident shows that lessons remain unlearnt.

Uncomfortable questions persist: are buses designed and operated with passenger safety in mind? What are they permitted to carry in their luggage bays? And why are violations repeatedly discovered only after lives are lost? It has emerged that this particular bus had undergone surprise inspections, with its documents, fitness certificate, and even emergency exits found to be in order. That, however, offers little comfort. Compliance in one instance does not absolve a system where many sleeper buses continue to operate with blocked exits, flammable interiors, and unauthorised structural modifications. The standard response after such disasters follows a tired script: blame overspeeding, fatigue or driver negligence. While these factors matter, they obscure a larger truth. Highway design itself can be a silent killer. The Bengaluru-Mysuru highway is a textbook example. It has seen over 200 deaths and more than 1,500 accidents since opening. Unscientific entry and exit points, weak medians, poorly marked black spots, and water stagnation causing hydroplaning are common features on highways, which often slice through villages without safe crossings, creating conditions where one mistake can become fatal.

The solutions are obvious. Strict enforcement of the Centre's fire detection and suppression rules for sleeper buses must become non-negotiable. Rigorous physical inspections should be conducted, and illegal transport of hazardous materials in passenger vehicles must attract severe penalties. Dangerous highway stretches must be audited and redesigned instead of merely being plastered with speed-limit signs. Above all, the government must act before, not after, another tragedy. Chitradurga is not an aberration. It is a warning, and ignoring it yet again would amount to wilful negligence.

Two months after Kurnool, the Chitradurga bus fire further exposes failures in safety enforcement

POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Two elections, one threat that blurs borders

As Bangladesh and West Bengal go to vote, divisive poll narratives risk fuelling cross-border animosity

LT GEN BHOPINDER SINGH (RETD)

The elections to the West Bengal Assembly are expected to be held in March-April 2026. They could coincide disconcertingly close to the general elections in Bangladesh, which are to be held on February 12. This sets up a platform, dangerously, for an expression of West Bengal's issues historically intertwined with the former East Bengal.

The cross-border interplay is particularly relevant to certain political forces in India to polarise the societies, just as they are relevant to similarly religious-minded forces in Bangladesh, in the run-up to the elections there. Ironically, both these political forces seeking electorally convenient polarisation are on opposite sides of religious denominations. It is a case of opposite, yet like-minded bigotry, which seeks to posit a divisive and divisive agenda of religiosity over more important issues such as socio-economic development, education, employment, and agrarian distress.

West Bengal is a state trying hard to overcome its anti-industry image owing to ideological/political choices, trade unionism, and conflicts over land acquisition. Bangladesh, with its rising tensions/protests, political instability, and communism, is suffering a perception challenge that could derail its "economic miracle" trajectory from the last couple of decades. On both sides of the border, there is a dire need to debate and discuss hard data on employment opportunities, infrastructure, social harmony, and long-term development. But the reality is that the politics of reimagined identity, backed with half-begging, fear, and faith, is poised to dominate the elections.

As political scientist Christopher Jaffrelot insists, "When identity becomes the primary political currency, issues of livelihood, health, and education are pushed to the margins." A spill-over of toxic religiosity from the Bangladeshi electoral hustings is inevitable. It is likely to be appropriated and repurposed for inflammatory

narratives of othering in West Bengal. The sad failure to deliver economic security on both sides of the border will not lead to a necessary questioning of the same by the masses. Instead, identity politics will be valorised, and symbolic victories will be misread as material progress. The ensuing Bangladeshi tumult is already fodder for West Bengal politics as a cautionary tale, marked with conversations of a "takeover" by illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, and consequences of "ap-peasement" of certain faiths.

These are not unfair conversations, as India can ill-afford any more refugees/illegal immigrants, as they are an unsustainable burden on the economy



and a security threat. But the problem starts when the partisan framework of "them-versus-us" is not framed in an Indian-versus-Bangladeshi context, but in a Hindu-versus-Muslim frame. This simplistic outlook slots people of specific religious faiths into one country and not the other. In the bargain, many of our own become "them". So the familiar narrative of the West Bengal dispensation going "soft" on illegal immigration gains currency, though border management and the protection of territorial integrity are Central Government subjects.

Paradoxically, the creation of Bangladesh punctured the "Two-Nation Theory", which premised that religion ought to be the basis of nationalism. Bengal was in what was once called East Pakistan insisted that culture, language, and good governance triumphed over the inherent pretensions of co-religiosity. But as the Bangladesh of 2026 is looking increasingly different from what was conceived in 1971, many underlying principles of politics – in

Bangladesh and West Bengal – will be rewritten, with religiosity at the core.

A recipe for polarisation

Narratives that initially centred on the weakening of democratic institutions, nepotism, and economic frustrations have been hijacked by religious parties in Bangladesh. The initial trigger to the Bangladeshi youth uproar was the controversial and partisan High Court decision to reinstate 30% job quotas for descendants of the liberation war freedom fighters. But now, that frustration among the youth has given way to the anchorage of anti-India and religiously charged sentiments that have nothing to do with the foundational issues.

With the relatively moderate Awami League banned from contesting the forthcoming elections, the choice India has will be between the bad and the worse – the return of the Bangladesh National Party led by Tarique Rahman, or more worryingly, a coalition of religious parties led by the Jamaat-e-Islami. Either way, the road to Jatiya Sangsads, the Bangladeshi parliament, will be paved for the political side that sounds shriller about India. This regrettable clamour amongst the two principal blocks in the Bangladeshi electoral fray to sound more nationalistic and pious will provide ammunition to the national/regional parties in West Bengal to stretch their respective spires, bereft of introspection or insight on the real issues of the state. Religion will override real issues, yet again.

To hold some of our minorities to the politics and passions of our neighbouring countries, be it Pakistan or Bangladesh, is to short-sell the idea of India, which was always in sharp contrast with the concept of religion-drivenhood, when defined Pakistan at inception, and seemingly Bangladeshi now. Care to not fall for the short-termism of an electoral victory and risk a larger polarisation in India with its myriad minorities is the crying call of the hour. However, these are different times. In the era of the freedom struggle, India's leadership had a noble and inclusive bearing, in contrast with the leadership of Pakistan (and Bangladesh) today. That separation of moral grounding no longer exists.

(The writer is a former Lt Governor of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Puducherry)

SPEAK OUT

Many people identified as Bangladeshi have been found in West Bengal. This affects native Indians by impacting culture, taking away jobs, consuming resources, encroaching on land, and disturbing social harmony. **Satish Chandra Dubey**, Union Minister

The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.

John F Kennedy

TO BE PRECISE



IN PERSPECTIVE

Seasonal fixes can't clear Delhi's air

The smog crisis calls for long-term strategy, science-backed enforcement, and unwavering political will

B K SINGH

The causes of air pollution in Delhi have been known for about 25 years. In 1999, a group of 200 scientists from different parts of the world, led by atmospheric scientist V Ramanathan, identified and traced the 'Asian Brown Cloud', a massive haze covering the Indian subcontinent

were directed to transition to cleaner energy. Wherever there were bottlenecks in developing solar energy at speed and scale, the industries were relocated 400 km away from the city. The government invested heavily in revamping the public transport system, significantly improving accessibility. People were encouraged to cycle. Aggressive promotion of electric vehicles was crucial in the long-term strategy. The authorities also coordinated with counterparts in the adjoining areas on measures to check regional pollution.

Delhi has the option of taking the Beijing route. The priorities and methods have to be aligned with a long-term vision – there is no alternative to stringent controls on biomass and coal burning, and the consumption of vehicular fuel. Temporary solutions will not work. China took two decades to remove its winter haze; Delhi must make a start now to ensure that the National Capital Region is in line with the Viksit Bharat agenda by 2024.

Extensive greening of the Delhi-NCR region needs to be prioritised. The capability of trees to bring relief by absorbing pollutants has largely remained under-explored in our policy statements.

A year ago, the Government of Haryana, with the support of the Union Environment Ministry, came up with a proposal to create a tree wall all along the Aravalli range, from Gujarat to Delhi. The states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Delhi, during the monsoon of 2025, commenced planting an area of around 1.15 million hectares. The programme was set to be completed by 2027.

The Ministry's elevation-based redefinition of the Aravalli hills and the Supreme Court's initial acceptance of the move had created a stir, raising concerns that large portions of the Aravallis would be opened up for mining and real estate. The ruling, which threatened to aggravate the winter haze, stands stalled, with the apex court keeping its original order in abeyance.

Apart from checking the spread of the Thar desert towards the Delhi region, the Aravallis have protected aluvial valleys of the northern plains from the Westerlies. The degradation of these hills over a long period has also led to an extension of urban areas on Delhi's outskirts, aggravating pollution.

Delhi's pollution warrants coordinated, multi-pronged action to tackle biomass burning in households and industries, stubble burning in farmlands, industrial and vehicular pollution, and dust from construction sites and roads across states within a 250-km radius. The Aravalli ruling may defer greater degradation of the range, but the pause should not take the authorities' eyes off the big picture. (The writer is a former head of Forest Force, Karnataka)

RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE

A bottle of rum, none too glorious

After all my efforts, the bottle was too small even for a money plant

NAGRAJ RAO

It is Christmas time. How could I not remember my encounter with the Christmas (Plum) cake? About four decades back, we were residing in a comparatively conservative (at that time) part of Bengaluru. My wife decided to bake a plum cake. One of the important ingredients, rum, was not readily available at home.

Well, the rum essence could have served the purpose but she wanted the "real" thing and that too immediately. So we had to buy it from a wine store in the neighbourhood. Asking my wife or daughters to go and fetch it was ruled out so the task had fallen on yours truly. But then my daughters

had serious misgivings about my going because it happened to be found loitering anywhere near the bar by any of their class mates, the next day while school will be awog with the news that their dad goes to the bar ("Ekkbar" could easily be interpreted as "bar bar").

One ingenious suggestion that came my way was that I could go there with my face covered. But I put my foot down about this atrocious suggestion and refused to go in a fancy dress.

But the task had to be done. It was approaching dusk so I was less likely to be recognised. I took my chance, hopefully unobserved, to the wine shop. After entering the shop, I asked the counter to give me a bottle of rum. That bloke had seen me at the nearby bakery a number of times but never at his bar. He gave a meaningful look as if to say, *nevu kudithera antha got thirilla* (Did not know that you also drink!). "Sir, illebeka?" (roughly translated to

do you want to have it right here?), he asked. I looked at him blankly and then the rum dropped. He wanted to know whether I wanted to gulp it down standing right at the counter. I shuddered to even imagine myself doing so. Then he picked a bottle from the shelf and showed its label to me for my approval. I snapped, "My wife wanted only Old Monk." He gave a startled look.

It was irritated but asked him to pack it quickly. I rushed home with my booty covered in an old newspaper, fervently hoping that I managed to get home without being spotted and placed the packet triumphantly before my wife. She eagerly opened it and her face dropped, disappointment writ large on her face.

She face-palmed and blurted, "Ayyo, idu tumba chikkusu suzu. Idaralli moneyplant kudithaka aagala." (This is too small a size. One cannot plant a money plant in it). So much for all my efforts.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The shrinking space of belonging

Across the country, an incessant chain of harassment, intimidation, and targeted violence has created an atmosphere the nation has rarely witnessed. The repeated targeting of Kashmiri shawl sellers in Himachal Pradesh and Haryana is not an isolated development, but part of a wider pattern where identity itself becomes a trigger for suspicion, abuse, and public humiliation. For decades, these vendors lived and worked peacefully, yet today their own country feels narrow and suffocating to them. This was followed by the brutal attack on Angel Chakma from Tripura in Dehradun, who later died despite identifying himself as an Indian. Tragically, those from whom he should have felt belonging and protection turned into threats to his life. When such violence is normalised and accountability weakens, the very idea of equal citizenship begins to erode.

Kyamudin Ansari, Mumbai

I refer to your editorial 'Where mobs fan flames of hate' (Dec 30). The latest incidents of mob violence, rooted in prejudice, highlight a dangerous divide within our society that we cannot ignore. Though tougher legislation is required, our schools, workplaces, and communities must also work to combat casual racism. Social media may feed intolerance, but the tolerance of bystanders allows it to flourish unchecked. The concept of Indian unity is undermined when our domestic migrants are met with suspicion rather than solidarity. Shrunthi Sudheer, Bengaluru

As the editorial 'Where mobs fan flames of hate' (Dec 30) rightly points out, repeated incidents of religious, regional, and racial violence are deeply concerning and show how weak our civic education has become. Values like unity in diversity are often spoken about, but people are rarely taught what they mean in daily life: respecting difference and living peacefully with others.

Pooja Shekar, Bengaluru

Enforcement vs. empathy
Apropos 'After demolition, some damage control' (Dec 30), while the

government has the right to reclaim public land, executing demolitions at dawn creates a humanitarian crisis that outweighs the legal objective. A fair legal process should provide families with enough notice and support to relocate, rather than forcing them out when they are most vulnerable. While offering new housing is a positive step, it does not undo the loss of dignity and belongings. True governance must balance the enforcement with empathy.

Dhatri B, Bengaluru

Our readers are welcome to email letters to: letters@deccanherald.co.in (only letters emailed – not handwritten – will be accepted). All letters must carry the sender's postal address and phone number.

The Beijing model

In the 1990s, Beijing faced a similar air quality emergency, pushing the Chinese government towards some tough decisions. Coal- and wood-consuming industries

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Mitch Pugh
Executive Editor

Chris Jones, Editorial Page Editor

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EDITORIAL

2025 in review

The nation and the world through Tribune editorials

President Donald Trump begins a second term (was it that recently?) and Joe Biden leaves the stage. The Gaza conflict rages on as does Russian aggression. Five rounds. Los Angeles is a heaving metropolis. Boris Johnson is a British prime minister.

In this final look back at our editorials in 2025, we focus on our nation and world.

JAN. 7
Elon Musk rails against the grooming scandal involving the rape of thousands of poor English girls by organized gangs of mostly Pakistani and Bangladeshi men. The editorial board applauds his casting of light.

On Monday, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, a former prosecutor with personal involvement in some of these old cases from around 2010 to 2015, was forced to squirm in front of the cameras as he tried to explain why the British establishment had failed so many of these girls. Starmer defended his prior actions as head of the Crown Prosecution Service and said to reporters that those now calling for a national inquiry on the so-called grooming gangs were seeking to "jump on a bandwagon of the far-right" by which he mostly meant Musk.

It was a pathetic and frankly hopeless defense, given that many of the victims, then as young as 12 and 13 but now adults, simultaneously were all over the British media saying they were not protected and have not received adequate justice. Starmer can rail against the "far right" all he likes (a spokesperson walled the comment back a little on Monday), but it's not "far right" to stand up against child abuse.

JAN. 12
Fires rage in Los Angeles. We send hope from another city familiar with fire.

Here in Chicago, historians see a fire in which one-third of people in this city lost their homes and at least 300 died as a unique catalyst for growth and reinvention, although it is often forgotten that the city got a lot of help from people outside its borders. Within little more than a year, a visitor to Chicago could not see many visible signs of the prior destruction, and the roaring city had gained a fierce and lasting reputation for resilience and new opportunity.

Once the fires are out and losses mourned, LA will have a similar chance to look hard at the changing environment in which it lives, improve its services with the benefit of bitter experience and build back better.

For now, though, we stand with its people through the painful slog of recovery.

JAN. 19
President Joe Biden makes his exit. The editorial board considers his legacy and his palpable reluctance to leave the stage.

Timing one's necessary exit from power is, of course, one of life's most vexing conundrums and Biden hardly is alone. Blowing them off, Biden had a 43-year career sweep beginning in 1972 when he became one of the youngest people ever elected to the U.S. Senate and ending as an 82-year-old president. Incredibly, neither his presidency nor his total service to the American people should be defined exclusively as an old man allowing personal objectives and defensiveness to overtake everything. In the end, we came to know that the last-minute flurry of executive actions were unlikely to be coming from the man himself but rather from staffers trying to shove through their favored stuff at the eleventh hour. But it's reasonable to assume that this was not the case until the latter part of his term.

Overall, there were palpable achievements, not a few of which involved reminding Americans of the importance



of core structural values as the maverick extremes of political discourse exploded in their influence. "I know that believing in the idea of America means respecting the institutions that govern a free society," Biden said in his Wednesday farewell address. "Our system of separation of powers, checks and balances — it may not be perfect but it's maintained our democracy for nearly 250 years." Indeed it has. And Biden was right to affirm its importance.

FEB. 26
The U.S. votes against a United Nations resolution criticizing Russian aggression. For shame, says the editorial board.

Let's not forget that if tyrants are allowed to send tanks rolling across borders, not their own without invitation and with expansionist ambitions, the world must rise up in support of their quarry, lest small nations decide a few more borders could not fall with the right kind of political coaxing.

The MAGA crowd may be conscious of the movements of unauthorized migrants, why must they be so enabling of Putin's far more dangerous excursions? It defies logic.

So when the U.S. voted with Russia against a United Nations General Assembly resolution Monday that was criticizing Russia for its aggressions against Ukraine of three years ago, we say "for shame." All peace-loving people should want to an end to this war, and the realities of Realpolitik means that will come with a price we will have to swallow, but it's a bridge way too far for the U.S. to formally balk at the notion that Putin started this war.

APRIL 23
Trump lays the groundwork for federal enforcement action in major American cities. The

As the head of the church, Pope Francis exhibited leadership that was critical in maintaining the faith's relevance and importance. In a world where people increasingly are less likely to attend church, they still listened attentively to the pope's message. Among his most remembered quotes is a call for compassion: "A little mercy makes the world less cold and more just."

Indeed, compassion was one of Pope Francis' core tenets. So was unity: "Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same Earth, which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all."

JUNE 1
The editorial board expresses frustration with Trump making it harder for international students to come to the U.S.

What American argument could possibly be made for prohibiting international students, at least beyond the tiny percentage employed as some kind of spy? The benefits flow both ways: loyalty to America from such graduates has long been a major source of U.S. soft power and, of course, their full tuition, typically which boosts the local economy and often subsidizes low-income domestic students. And who beyond a xenophobe could possibly believe that one's education is not enhanced by a classmate from elsewhere in the world, a truth that applies to kindergartners just as much as Harvard?

JUNE 17
Trump lays the groundwork for federal enforcement action in major American cities. The

Can it happen again next year for the 250th? Yes. The American people can come together to demonstrate their resilience and work toward a more perfect union. If that sounds impossible, consider how impossible it sounded in 1976.

JULY 10
The Justice Department tries (and fails) to dampen down the Jeffrey Epstein scandal. We lament how famous names slither away.

Any fool knows that many powerful and well-known men were joining in Epstein's sex trafficking activities at his homes in the U.S. Virgin Islands and elsewhere. Their names came up in the many civil cases surrounding Epstein, especially the one brought by Virginia Giuffre, who killed herself at her home in Neergaby, Western Australia, on April 25.

None of these men have admitted their guilt. Of all the men, only Prince Andrew has suffered notable reputational consequences, but even he has insisted on his innocence and remained uncharged and at liberty. Everyone else, often with the help of powerful lawyers and crisis PR firms, has been allowed to keep silent on the matter and quietly slip back into their normal lives. In some cases, the very newspapers that reported on Epstein in tones of moral outrage have then published flattering pieces about some who several victims have claimed were within Epstein's orbit.

AUG. 21
Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett praises her peers for their collegiality in a speech.

Here was the part of her remarks that most hit home with us: "We know how to argue, but we also know how to do it without letting it consume relationships."

The legal profession has long operated this way. That it continues to do so despite mounting partisan pressure is an example worth noting for the rest of us. Coney Barrett, of course, is no stranger to vitriol. The justice, who joined the high court in October 2020, was called a "religious bigot" and a "monster" during her confirmation hearings. Her family, too, has endured attacks — from criticism of her adopted children to a bomb threat against her sister earlier this year. Point is, she's dealt with fierce criticisms and personal attacks directly. Yet here she stood, speaking with all sincerity about the importance of respectful discourse.

OCT. 3
Hamas rejects a peace proposal for Gaza. We say that Hamas must end this war.

The Trump plan has a lot going for it, and we think it is important for our readers to understand at the outset that it is different from Trump's prior musings about U.S. control of Gaza or fanciful talk of Trump-branded resorts. This plan is legitimate.

Even those who despise Trump in general and are protesting his broader immigration policies should consider this plan, clearly the work of Trump's capable special envoy Steve Witkoff, on its own terms. Not every crucial message has an ideal messenger.

Now to the 20-point plan, which clearly states that Gaza is to be redeveloped for the benefit of its people "who have suffered more than enough," which is the right core goal, the right description of Gaza's suffering — and maybe even a portal for Hamas to claim victory. The plan also says that, on acceptance by Hamas, the war will immediately end.

As it should. There is no viable argument otherwise.

OPINION

2025 IN REVIEW

A look back at the Chicago region's transit crisis through op-eds

By Colleen Kujawa
Chicago Tribune

When the General Assembly met in late October for its veto session, one of the most critical matters on its agenda was passing legislation to pull the Chicago region's mass transit system back from the brink and modernize its operations.

Although the collective fiscal cliff the CTA, Metra and Pace were facing was downgraded in early October to about \$200 million, the painful eye-popping \$771 million, the Regional Transportation Authority continued to warn of significant service cuts in 2026 without new state funding. CTA riders in particular would have felt the impact of reductions in, and in some cases elimination of, bus and train routes.

State lawmakers had to go back to the drawing board when a funding plan for transit considered during the spring session — which proposed a new \$1.50 fee on retail deliveries, among other things — passed in the Senate but failed to get a House vote.

"No funding without reform" was a common refrain throughout the year during debate over transit funding. Tensions over who gets to control the system's future — renewing a tug-of-war between the city and the suburbs — also dominated the conversation.

That conversation played out on our pages. Here is a look back at the transit crisis through our op-eds.

MARCH 20
Sen. Seth Lewis, "Just trust Chicago? Not when it comes to public transit"

There was a time when Chicago understood its responsibility to the entire region.

Decades ago, city leaders recognized that a thriving metropolis depended on a strong partnership with the suburbs. Public transit was designed to serve everyone, ensuring that suburban commuters — the workers who power the companies filling the Loop — can get to their jobs, that customers traveling from the suburbs can spend their dollars at local businesses and that the entire region — city and suburbs alike — can thrive with the help of affordable, reliable transportation.

That cooperative spirit made Illinois a transportation powerhouse, driving regional growth, attracting businesses and keeping the economy competitive. Chicago's success is directly tied to the strength of its suburban communities. A balanced, cooperative relationship benefits both — and that is particularly true for their public transit system.

Illinois' public transit system is a shared resource, and its governance must reflect that reality. Chicago and the suburbs are economic partners, and both deserve an equal say in shaping its future. A system that sidelines suburban communities' non-cooperation is a power grab that threatens regional stability.

APRIL 20
Rep. Kam Buckner, "The RTA is running ads while riders and legislators are running out of patience"

There's a \$750 million campaign running across northeast Illinois right now — from WGN to radio to billboards — asking the public to "Save Transit Now." The Regional Transportation Authority says it's meant to raise awareness about the \$1.5 billion funding gap threatening our transit system's future. But here's the thing: We don't need more awareness. We need leadership.

Let me be clear: The funding gap is real. As a legislator who has been working on this specific issue for two years, I know how critical this moment is. Chicago is a world-class city. Northeast Illinois is a global economic engine. And our transit system is the connective tissue that holds it all together. We've lagged behind other states for so long in both funding and foresight. The so-called fiscal cliff isn't new; it's the result of years of



Demonstrators march July 12 in the Loop after a rally calling for legislators to address statewide transit funding. JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS



State Reps. Kam Buckner, left, and Eva-Dina Delgado address reporters after meeting with a House committee on a transit funding plan at the Illinois Capitol on Oct. 29 in Springfield.

delayed decisions and deferred maintenance. This work should've started long before the pandemic. It didn't. So here we are.

But to cry broke with one hand and drop three-quarters of a million dollars on a PR campaign with the other is wrong, and frankly, it's irresponsible.

People don't want more marketing. They want more buses that come when they're supposed to. They want trains that feel safe, are clean and run on time.

MAY 9
Joe Ferguson, "How Chicago transit is governed requires reform before the state rescues it with cash"

As lawmakers negotiate on governance reform before the end of the spring session this month, we urge them not to waste this moment with incremental improvements that tinker at the margins. We need a new regional agency and a new brand to bring back riders. The final landing place must be consolidation of the three oversight boards into a single, new governing board with full power over decision-making and planning related to fares, schedules, administration, capital planning, investment, equity and procurement.

It is also critical to fix the structural flaw that has crippled innovation under the current governance structure. Decisions must be approved by a supermajority of the CTA Board. Since the board is evenly split among appointees from Chicago, Cook County and the collar counties, the veto power of any one group of appointees ends up effectively paralyzing it. As a result, the existing structure incentivizes the Metra, Pace and CTA boards to make decisions grounded in maintaining their individual fiefdoms — with no contemplation of their relation to the entire Chicago region.

MAY 22
Leslie S. Richards, "Philadelphia's transit faces deep cuts. Chicago can still avoid this fate"

Philadelphia and Chicago have much in common. Both operate legacy transit systems that serve millions of riders across dynamic and diverse regions. Both are navigating

post-pandemic ridership trends and rising operating costs.

But here's the key difference: Chicago still has the time to act before damage is done.

The Regional Transportation Authority and transit advocates are calling for \$1.5 billion in new annual operating funds — not just to prevent service cuts but to modernize and expand service across the CTA, Metra and Pace. The agency is also proposing governance reforms to improve coordination, efficiency and accountability across the system. These changes would bring Chicago more in line with thriving global transit systems and unlock better service for riders throughout the region — if Illinois lawmakers provide the tools and funding needed.

Philadelphia's experience is a cautionary tale. One recent estimate suggests that home values near transit could fall by nearly \$7 billion; that means a slashing of tax revenue that funds schools, parks and public safety. More cars on the road will mean more traffic, more pollution and more stress on working families.

AUG. 13

Karen Tamley, "Don't let Chicago's transit crisis erase decades of progress for people with disabilities"

The disability community has fought for decades to access public transportation across our nation. As a teenager, I was unable to ride the public bus in my hometown with my friends because every bus had stairs and lacked elevators. Accessing most rail systems anywhere in the country was virtually impossible due to a consistent lack of elevators to platforms.

Everything began to change in 1990 with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, whose 35th anniversary we celebrated on July 26th. This milestone anniversary also coincided with the opening of four newly renovated CTA stations along the Red Line that are now accessible with elevators, making them available to people with mobility disabilities for the first time since the stations were constructed more than 100 years ago. This is such an important milestone, yet we still have more than 80 stations between Metra and CTA need an elevator access and even more stations needing other

accessibility improvements.

Unless our state leaders act, the progress we've achieved and the work to be done toward greater transit accessibility and better service on the CTA, Metra and Pace will stall. The transit systems that give independence to hundreds of thousands of people living with disabilities will be severely diminished. Some may be cut off from the system entirely.

SEPT. 29

Denise Barrett, "Where are the Black voices in the transit debate?"

Black people deliver the most transit services in the Chicago area. They make up 73% of the employee base of the CTA, the largest of three transit service boards.

So while Black people disproportionately deliver the services we all benefit from, their voices and contributions are almost invisible in the transit discourse. Look no further than the recent opening celebrations of the Red and Purple Line Modernization (RPM) rail stations on the North Side when dignitaries across all levels of government were profusely thanked with one notable exception.

Barack Obama, the 44th president.

The first phase of the RPM project that opened four new accessible rail stations would not have been possible without an eleventh-hour grant agreement signed by President Obama's Federal Transit Administration in January 2017. Yet during the celebrations, not one official thanked him or his administration by name.

The omission of Obama as a key figure making that project possible is indicative of the ways in which Black voices are overlooked at best or downright silenced at worst in the ongoing transit discussions in our state and nationally. Two patterns locally that stand out to me are the weaponization of the lack of transit usage against Black elected or appointed officials and the overindexing of the feelings of white transit users and suburban politicians versus the date and facts.

OCT. 28

Kirk W. Dillard, "The real consequences of not funding transit in Illinois"

Three years ago, the Regional Transportation Authority warned that Chicago's regional transit system was heading toward a fiscal cliff. Since then, every other major state with a large urban transit system has stepped up to fund their systems, which are all facing similar crises — except Illinois.

The problem isn't one of mismanagement. It's chronic underfunding. Illinois ranks last among peer states in state support for public transit, covering just 17% of costs while most states fund 40% to 50%. Since 2014, Springfield has cut more than \$400 million in transit resources even as the state budget has ballooned by \$20 billion.

The consequences are real. The state reimburses just 4% of the RTA's \$250 million annual cost for Americans with Disabilities Act paratransit service and less than 20% of the \$100 million for free and reduced fares for seniors and people with disabilities. Those unfunded mandates make up a large portion of the fiscal gap facing our region's transit system.

Transit isn't a Chicago issue — it's an Illinois issue. The RTA's six-county region drives 74% of the state's economic activity, supports 175,000 jobs and generates \$1.66 billion in annual state tax revenue. Every \$1 invested in transit returns \$4 to the Illinois economy. Without Metra alone, the state would need to add 26 expressway lanes to handle the same commuter load — something no one wants to pay for or sit in.

NOV. 12

Lester L. Barclay, "Transit funding was secured, but the CTA paid a price"

This is a victory for riders, workers and businesses across Chicago and the region. The backbone of our city's transit is secure, at least for now.

But as we celebrate this moment, we must be honest with the people of Chicago: This funding victory comes with a price for the city of Chicago and the CTA. And it's fair to ask: What did we give up in exchange for this historic investment?

Alongside new funding, the bill introduces sweeping regional governance reform meant to improve coordination and accountability among agencies. The bill establishes the Northern Illinois Transit Authority, a 20-member board that will oversee the CTA, Metra and Pace.

Chicago's mayor will appoint only five members. The rest will come from the governor, Cook County and the collar counties. Under this new structure, practically all policies and operational decisions that previously received final approval from the CTA will now be subject to the final board — something that, while designed to promote coordination, risks diluting the local accountability and autonomy that have been essential to delivering responsive, community-centered service. The CTA — and by extension, Chicago — now faces limits on how we can acquire property, procure goods and services for our daily operations, lead construction projects and manage programs that have long driven economic growth. Those changes may seem technical, but they have real implications for how we serve our riders.

For one of the nation's largest and most complex transit systems, this could challenge our ability to operate efficiently and responsibly. This bill marks the end of Chicago's autonomy over its own transit system.

OPINION

The foreign policy moves Donald Trump got right this year



Daniel DePetris

For President Donald Trump's supporters, 2025 has been a year of transformation. For his opponents, it's been nothing short of a long nightmare. The holiday season is a perfect time to look back, reflect and remember the consequential moments of the past year.

As human beings, we generally fixate on the negative. Indeed, there are a ton of them not to like on the foreign policy front during the first year of Trump's second term. For one, Trump's decision to bomb Iran's nuclear facilities in June risked a regional war in the Middle East for the benefit of delaying Tehran's nuclear program by a few years. (Readers might recall that Trump withdrew the United States from a nuclear deal that kept Iran's nuclear capabilities in a box for at least 15 years, far longer than what the U.S. bombing mission accomplished.) The ongoing U.S. military campaign against drug boats in the southern Caribbean is a performative act tailor-made for the Pentagon's social media accounts. The Trump administration is also picking cultural war fights with Europe, partly to cater to its own base.

Yet it wasn't all bad this year. As erratic as Trump can be, there were a few policy moves that the White House can be proud of.

Perhaps the most significant was getting a freeze in the war in Gaza. I use the word "freeze" deliberately, despite Trump's boasts that he ended the two-year conflict between Israel and Hamas and brought peace to the Middle East, the reality is that the fighting is only suspended. Even this might be too generous of an assessment. Since the so-called ceasefire went into effect in October, more than 400 Pales-



People walk amid destroyed buildings Nov. 4 in the Jabalia refugee camp north of Gaza City. The U.S. pressed the U.N. Security Council to adopt a resolution that would enshrine President Donald Trump's Gaza peace plan.

SAHER ALGHOORAH/THE NEW YORK TIMES

tinians have been killed, as well as three Israeli soldiers. While the Israeli and foreign hostages have been released, the real hard work — getting an independent Palestinian administration set up to rule Gaza; constructing an international security force to help vet Palestinian police; take control of the territory; and disarming Hamas — has only just begun.

Still, compared with the alternatives of continuing a full-scale war that at its peak killed approximately 100 people a day, bringing the conflict to a lower ebb is preferable. Merely arriving at the point in which the guns are fired less often is an achievement in its own right. And it wouldn't have occurred if Trump wasn't willing to place pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to cooperate with Washington's peace plan.

Getting Netanyahu to play along wasn't inevitable either.

Just ask Joe Biden, Trump's predecessor, who was consistently outplayed by the Israeli prime minister, whose war strategy was dictated less by attaining achievable objectives and more by the need to maintain his hard-right coalition government.

This may sound strange given all the grief he's received, but pushing Ukraine and Russia into a diplomatic process to end the nearly four-year war is Trump's second smart policy play this year. Yes, there are problems associated with the Trump-facilitated diplomacy that shouldn't be overlooked. The most obvious is Trump's wild inconsistency, in which he's sanctioning Russian oil companies and flirting with sending Tomahawk missiles to Ukraine one week and then demanding the Ukrainians hand over a chunk of its territory to Moscow the next. Trump's relationship with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is just

as volatile, ranging from verbal fistfights in the Oval Office to respectful deliberation.

Yet as bumpy as the month-long peace talks have been, you need to compare this to the alternative: no peace talks at all. As much as Ukraine's boosters want the Trump administration to provide Kyiv unlimited military support to pressure Russian President Vladimir Putin into a "just peace," they're all pushing on a locked door. Trump was never going to do this, nor would such a policy be sustainable given all the other priorities the United States has. One must also question whether an endless war would be the best option for Ukraine, particularly when Russia has more of everything to keep a war of attrition going. Ukraine's options are either a tough peace now or a worse peace later.

Trump also had a geopolitical win in the Middle East, a region normally associated with U.S.

policy failure. More impressively, it occurred in a country that has traditionally been a U.S. adversary: Syria.

After the rapid downfall of Syrian dictator Bashar Assad's regime, Ahmad al-Sharaa, a former al-Qaeda militant who headed one of Syria's largest anti-government militias, swept into Damascus and consolidated power. Sharaa has demonstrated a noticeable pragmatic streak during his first year in office, reaching out to the Gulf Arab states for reconstruction funds, pledging partnership with the West, and most remarkably, the Islamic State group and taking a frosty tone with Iran, Syria's traditional regional bane during the five-decade-long Assad dictatorship.

In Washington, there was some consternation about Sharaa's bona fides, whether he was up to the job of unifying Syria after the worst civil war this century and whether he was truly shedding his jihadist past. Trump, however, saw post-Assad Syria as a geopolitical opportunity to bring the country out of Iran's sphere of influence for the first time since the 1980s. The United States didn't will this change into existence by itself; there was no love lost between Sharaa and Iran, the chief patron of the former Syrian regime that killed hundreds of thousands during the course of the civil war. To date, U.S.-Syria relations are arguably at their best in history. We can't know if this will continue, but the fact that Washington and Damascus now see each other as counterterrorism partners is a significant starting point that many would have failed to predict.

As we travel into 2026, we can only hope that Trump builds on the policy achievements of 2025. Surely that's a New Year's wish we can all agree on.

Daniel DePetris is a fellow at Defense Priorities and a foreign affairs columnist for the Chicago Tribune.

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

Report's biased tone

I am a longtime reader of the Tribune and have been following the ongoing coverage of Operation Midway Blitz the past few months. I found the lengthy Sunday article to have a surprisingly biased angle, even relative to the prior coverage of Midway Blitz ("64 days in Chicago").

I will provide a few examples. I found it quite overheated to suggest that people are being "disappeared" by federal agents. The term "disappeared" (*desaparecidos*) has a particular meaning in the context of Latin American countries. Is the Tribune meaning to suggest that Immigration and Customs Enforcement has killed people and buried them out in the woods or in the desert? I agree that conditions seem to have been bad at the Broadview facility, but we should be careful about using such hyperbolic language. Arresting people who entered the country illegally is nothing like what happened to the "disappeared" of Latin America under those governments.

Another example is the discussion of the Laugh Factory manager's actions, which reporters describe seemingly uncritically as a "moment of resistance." Surely, someone who slams a door on the leg of a law enforcement officer is committing a crime. Is the Tribune endorsing vigilante violence against law enforcement?

I opposed Operation Midway Blitz, to be clear, and I think many centrist types are concerned about things such as warrantless arrests, citizens being held in error and the poor conditions of some facilities. I agree the point of the operation is to be mean, anger liberals and give President Donald Trump voters what they wanted, and I do think it is a big waste of federal resources that raises many humanitarian concerns.

However, ICE agents are also federal law enforcement acting on the orders of a duly elected president, and they are within their statutory authority to arrest people who entered the country illegally.

This article makes a moderate case as one who voted against Trump wonders whether I am right. The Tribune never once presents meager evidence that bolsters ICE's position and makes back against the liberal view. I am not asking for a Reuters-like recitation of fact, but the paper should strive in its coverage to provide both the pros and cons of various policies in its coverage and leave the editorializing to the editorial.

If I can't trust the Tribune to do this for me, whom can I trust?

— Adam Chambers, Batavia

Intolerant worldly power

Thank you for the thorough, heartbreaking report on Operation Midway Blitz. Fittingly, it was published on Dec. 28, Midway Innocents Day. This date in the Christian calendar commemorates King Herod's massacre of innocent children in an effort to destroy the newborn Jesus.

Worldly power can never tolerate the God who comes to us in the guise of the most vulnerable.

— Barbara Newman, Evanston

Desire for global society

While reflecting on the current Immigration and Customs Enforcement occupation here in Chicago, I am filled with hope for a future in which globalist ideas



Federal agents use their pickup truck to block local community patrollers Dec. 17 along Win Haven Drive in Elgin. Agents issued the patrollers a warning about following them.

STACEY WESCHOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

are accepted and championed. I imagine a world where people, their culture and their ideas are respected no matter where they are from. I imagine a world where we rely on our international allies and neighbors to better our domestic situation instead of assuming those relationships hinder it.

During my time as an intern at The Borgen Project, via congressional outreach efforts I have been introduced to people who understand the value in human connection across borders. This community wants our government to honor our desire for a global society, a sentiment that so many Chicagoans understand.

I would encourage all Chicagoans to donate to non-profits like the Borgen Project to make sure that the world we want to see comes to fruition.

— Shania Franklin, Chicago

Ideology over children

Our children are our future. This is not just a cliché. We need to work to ensure that all children can reach their potential because they must inherit and run our country and our world after us. We have an obligation to work toward all children having the healthiest start in life they can possibly have. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has terminated grants to the American Academy of Pediatrics that in the words of HHS spokesperson Andrew Nixon "no longer align with the Department's mission or priorities." One of the issues apparently was the language in at least one grant that mentioned "pregnant people."

Earlier this year, cuts affected federal lead poisoning prevention efforts by eliminating staff of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program and cutting potential funding for water infrastructure. The recently terminated grants included efforts to reduce sudden infant death, improve rural access to health care, address mental health, target early identification of autism and prevent fetal alcohol spectrum disorders.

We know now that hardships and adverse occurrences suffered during childhood can actually affect a child's physical health as an adult, in addition to their mental health. We know that elevated lead affects children's brain

development. We know that vaccines prevent disease. And even in this day and age, all women do not have access to prenatal care, a situation that not only affects their health but also the health of their child.

The government is willing to risk children's future and our future as a country to embrace ideological priorities instead of focusing on factors that we already know can improve children's lives.

How can the physical and mental health of children not be within the mission and priorities of this administration?

— Icy Cade-Bell, Tinley Park

Donald Trump's sagacity

The most remarkable, historic and meaningful news conference was held Dec. 19 on dramatically lower drug pricing. Indeed, it was carried live on Fox, Newsmax and One America News. However, unsurprisingly, CNN and MSN ignored it.

President Donald Trump spoke, with additional remarks by the CEOs of Merck, Sanofi, Novartis, Roche, Genentech, Boehringer Ingelheim, Gilead Sciences, Bristol Myers Squibb, GSK and Amgen.

HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Director Dr. Mehmet Oz and Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick emphasized the landmark achievement, which eluded previous administrations. It includes awarding most favored nation pricing, which will cut many drug prices in the U.S., thereby ending global free-loading on the backs of American pharmaceutical research.

Investing in America means hundreds of billions of dollars invested here with new drug manufacturing and research facilities and high-paying jobs. Many of the new drug prices will be available to patients on TrumpRx.gov.

And Trump came out with a really good idea at the end of the news conference. He asked the large health insurance companies to meet him and his team with the goal of lowering insurance premiums, just like what he did with the drug companies.

That is sagacity, with knowledge and understanding.

— David N. Simon, Chicago

Decisions causing harm

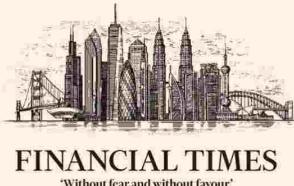
President Donald Trump chose Christmae to bomb Islamic State terrorists in Nigeria out of revenge for killing Christians. Doesn't Christianity teach forgiveness and tolerance? Isn't the Trump administration guilty of imprisoning tens of thousands of immigrants this year? Haven't at least 30 people died in Immigration and Customs Enforcement facilities?

Do the countries whose citizens have died in ICE custody have the right to bomb us for these injustices? Trump's immoral decisions are causing harm to our country and across the globe.

— Mary Maronek, Racine, Wisconsin

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The FT View



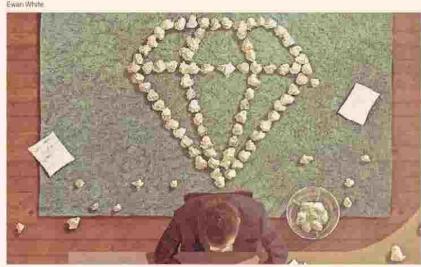
FINANCIAL TIMES

'Without fear and without favour'

ft.com/opinion

Opinion Society

Creativity thrives with constraints



Stephen Bush



Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* is a story about the value of kindness and Christian compassion. Brian Henson's *The Muppet Christmas Carol* is the same story, with an added parable: about the risks of excessive studio meddling.

The film's cinematic cut is maligned among cinephiles. Disney's studio chief at the time, Jeffrey Katzenberg, asked Henson to excise the song "When Love is Gone" after children in test screenings grew bored during it. The result is that Belle and Ebenezer Scrooge's split is startlingly abrupt. As a compromise, the song was reinstated for the film's release on home video.

As a child watching at home, I found "When Love is Gone" boring, just as the various jokes riffing off Dickens'

commercial breaks, you don't get a bigger and better version of *Girls* — you get the aptly named *Too Much*.

Absent a penny-pincher asking whether the movie really needs that third act fight or yet another showdown involving lots of CGI, you get the average Marvel movie. (And so many of them are very average.) It's got to a point where occasionally, when I sent a preview link, I have the urge to risk piracy by hacking the file, editing it down myself and sending it back to whichever streamer — and even the best of the crop, Apple TV, is prone to flab — with a note saying "there, I fixed it".

Nor is this problem confined to the screen. With a handful of exceptions, one of the modern horror stories of our time is when a favourite writer leaves a "legacy" publication to go it alone: the result is almost always that their thoughts are less sharp, less well edited and less readable than what were, before, when they worked with collaborators and editors. (It's not a coincidence, I think, that so many of the best Substack writers pay for their own editors, or have had a long career writing for magazines or organisations that prize editing.)

It's not to say that the suits are always right: it was Warner Brothers who wanted to stretch *The Hobbit* films over eight hours, and Warner Brothers again that wanted to contort the seven *Harry Potter* books into eight movies. When there is a demand for more, both the corporate desire for greater revenue and the creative desire for greater expression can form a doom loop of a kind. (Just look at the incredibly lucrative changes that George Lucas has made to the original *Star Wars* films — while each amendment made them flabbier and sillier, each new release enjoyed bumper sales on video, DVD or BluRay.)

The demand that TV and films be written to accommodate audiences who are "second screening" — that is to say, they are watching something on one screen, and doing something else on another — means that far too many movies released this year had dialogue with enough heavy-handed exposition to serve as a radio play. No one appears to have had the inclination, or the internal clout, to cut back on bloated running times.

Nevertheless, it is the case that creativity thrives with constraint and collaboration, that we work better within constraints, and that everyone, even the most successful of directors, benefits from strong editors and nervous producers. It is, just my Christmas viewing that would be improved if 2026 turns out to be the year in which the editors strike back.

Even the most successful directors benefit from strong editors and nervous producers

original went over my head. Now, I prefer the home release version to the cinematic cut (and my favourite gags are those that reference the original text).

So who was right, Henson or Katzenberg? I'm inclined to side with the producer. A great family film — like *The Muppet Christmas Carol*, *Toy Story*, *Frozen* or *KPOP Demon Hunters* — should include enough in it for viewing adults to enjoy, whether they are watching it with their kids or looking back to their past. But its primary audience is children and I am therefore inclined to side with my easily-bored younger incarnation and Katzenberg and leave "When Love is Gone" on the cutting room floor.

Ultimately, there isn't a right or a wrong call. Among film lovers, it is fashionable to side with the director over the studio. But recent years have, I think, shown us that the worried producer, the margin-cutting suit, and indeed the editor, are the unsung heroes of almost any creative endeavour.

Very few "director's cuts" are as necessary or well-put together as *Blade Runner* — most are flabby messes like *Damn Darko*. Without someone demanding that Lena Dunham's stories fit into neat slots between com-

The human cost of a world without rules

International humanitarian law and the rights of civilians are being eroded

The photo of a severely malnourished boy in Gaza became a defining image of 2025. Other shocking events have taken place further from cameras or scrutiny. They include reported atrocities by the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces against civilians in Sudan's western Darfur. Then there is the lethal strike on two survivors of a US attack on an alleged drugs boat in the Caribbean — video of which US defence secretary Pete Hegseth refuses to release but which may constitute a war crime.

All these incidents highlight the erosion of the human rights laws and rules of war designed to protect civilians that democracies had sought to enforce, however patchily, since 1945. Atrocities and appalling human rights abuses have still proliferated through those decades.

But the US retreat from the world and from the post-1945 pledges makes lawlessness all the more prevalent.

America's record was partisan before Donald Trump's return to office. The Biden administration — along with many western allies — failed for too long to press Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to curb the brutal tactics of Israeli forces against Palestinians in Gaza, as they responded to Hamas's horrific October 7 2023 attack that had directly targeted civilians in Israel.

But Trump's second term has brought a striking retreat from a foreign policy that espoused a defence of values, however inconsistently it was sometimes enforced, to one of ruthless transactionalism. The US state department's annual human rights reports in August laid bare the new approach, omitting previous critical sections on many basic freedoms. Its much-shortened report on Israel, the West Bank and Gaza failed to mention the humanitarian crisis and death toll in the strip. The reports were

notably easy on Trump allies such as El Salvador and Saudi Arabia.

The waning adherence to the laws of war has seen allegations of starvation being used as a tactic, and not just in Gaza and Sudan. Children invariably suffer the most. Recent data suggests 2025 will surpass 2024 as the deadliest and most violent year for children in conflict since UN monitoring began in 2005. This year is, on course, to be the deadliest for humanitarian workers.

Yet as well as international aid and human rights groups, there are others still prepared to battle to protect civilians. The International Court of Justice, which adjudicates on treaty breaches such as the 1948 Genocide Convention, and the International Criminal Court, which prosecutes individuals for war crimes, are under immense pressure. Trump's US has imposed sanctions on ICC prosecutors and judges over their involvement in a case against Israel that included an arrest warrant for Netanyahu. But the international courts are

still managing to operate, have grown in stature, and are emerging as a bulwark of a rules-based system.

A surprising number of US lawmakers from both parties, meanwhile, have demanded investigations not just into September's "double-tap" boat strike but the legality of using US military forces against drug smuggling.

There were also glimpses of concern among developing nations, which had mostly failed to join western condemnation of Russia's invasion, over recent US peace proposals that suggested recognition of some Russian-seized territories in Ukraine. An African Union summit with the EU in November pledged to uphold sovereignty and territorial integrity and called for a "just" peace.

Smaller global south countries understand as well as Europe's and Asia's wealthier democracies the dangers of the might-is-right world that Trump seems to embrace. But, for now, that is the global order, however unthinkable it might have seemed just a decade ago.

Letters

Headline homicide comparisons ignore London's knife crime

Your editorial ("Don't believe the fake gloom about London", December 20) is right to note that London's homicide rate remains low by international standards. But the editorial's broader assertion that London is "in most ways far safer" rests on a selective reading of crime indicators, and downplays a category of violence in which London is a clear international outlier: knife crime.

Unlike most peer cities, England and Wales systematically record and publish "offences involving a knife or sharp instrument" per 100,000

inhabitants. On this official metric, London is not merely worse than other UK regions; it is exceptional by international standards. In the year ending March 2025, the Metropolitan Police area recorded around 180 knife-crime offences per 100,000 residents, by far the highest rate in England and Wales. This is not a marginal phenomenon. Knife crime in London includes robbery, serious assault and homicide, and has risen structurally over the past decade. The fact that firearms are rare does not make the streets benign; it merely shifts the

weapon of violence. For victims, the distinction is academic.

Comparisons with New York, Washington or Paris also require caution. Those cities do not publish a directly comparable, all-offences knife-crime rate per 100,000. Where partial indicators exist (for example hospital admissions or homicide by weapon type), they suggest that London's prevalence of knife-enabled street violence is unusually high for a wealthy western capital, even if its murder rate remains lower.

Put simply: a low homicide rate does

not equate to low everyday violence. The absence of guns does not mean the absence of serious harm. And London's knife-crime figures are not a sideshow; they are a defining feature of its public-safety landscape.

Recognising this does not mean indulging in "fake gloom". It means avoiding the opposite error: complacency, built on headline homicide comparisons while ignoring the form of violence that London actually experiences.

Jürgen Schaufler
Blaubeuren, Germany

Earth's regenerative capacity has its limits

Re: Pilita Clark's column "Overshoot will make climate politics even harder" (December 19) aptly examines the political strife of exceeding the Paris temperature target. However, overshoot is one of those words that has two meanings. In climate policy, it means temporarily breaching a temperature threshold. But as defined in William R Catton's seminal 1980 work, *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* it describes an ecological process: the drawdown of finite natural capital at rates faster than regeneration, allowing a population to live temporarily beyond its environment's long-term carrying capacity.

The temperature threshold we breach today is the product of this decades-long ecological overshoot through fossil carbon combustion, as Clark points out. The "harder politics" predicted is inevitable: overshoot forces a brutal shift to zero-sum conflicts over shrinking essentials. The



Animal farm: even a four-year-old knows all too well the chicken's fate

earth, sea and sky, and all life from microbe to whale, are not "externalities" — they are where we live and move and have our being.

Explicitly recognising this ecological process matters because it reveals the

scale of transformation required. The imperative is not merely to cap a temperature but to radically restructure our draw on Earth's regenerative capacity — to reduce our throughput gradually, lest we force nature's sudden correction. Nature's limits cannot be negotiated.

David Jodrey
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From lobster boiling to the chicken on your plate

I was glad to read "Animal welfare: Live lobster boiling ban among 'ambitious' reforms" (December 23), as many FT articles that discuss the economics of animal "farming" fail to mention its negative externalities, including pain and suffering. You only need to observe a four-year-old who, for the first time, realises that the "chicken" on their plate was indeed once the chicken they know all too well from their picture book. You know that compassion for animals is innate.

Elena Gibson
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The winter solstice and the fallacy that is often believed

I really enjoyed Lia Leendert's opinion column in FT Weekend on this year's perverse weather and the winter solstice, but can I correct her statement that on the winter solstice "the sun will rise at its latest and set at its earliest" (December 20).

Unfortunately this is a fallacy believed by most people. While December 21 might be the shortest day, as a result of the angle of the earth's axis, the time of sunset has actually been getting later for the last 10 days, and is almost three minutes later than it was on December 12, while sunrise continues to occur later in the mornings until January 2.

This oddity is due to the fact that the times of sunset and sunrise are changing at different speeds, and only on the solstice are those speeds equal (and opposite). Needless to say, a similar but reverse effect takes place in mid-June.

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Best of Banx 2025



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Opinion

UK business has an opportunity to defy the gloom

BRITAIN

John Gapper



It was difficult to read the news or listen to a politician talk in 2025 without becoming dejected about the UK economy. Unemployment rose, public services remained overstretched and companies faced higher taxes from a government that came to office pledging to boost growth, only to dampen it.

So what explains the high spirits of so many entrepreneurs in Britain? They are hopeful sorts by nature, but a recent global survey of company founders by HSBC's private bank was still surprising. Three-quarters of those based in the UK

were very positive about the business outlook and the country ranked first in the world for optimism, beating not only Europe but the US.

This sounding was not an anomaly: other leadership surveys have also produced bullish results, and Lloyds Bank's barometer of UK business confidence rose in December. While business leaders tend to complain even more strongly in private than in public about government policy, many have confidence in their own enterprises and expect to expand in the coming year.

That may reflect survivorship bias, given that British businesses have experienced a series of economic setbacks. The Brexit vote in 2016 caused political volatility and trade friction, and was followed by the pandemic and higher inflation. Then came an energy price shock caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Those that are still solvent have learnt financial resilience the hard way.

The notion that "things can only get better," in the words of the D-Ream song adopted by Labour's election campaign in 1997, has been repeatedly discredited. But there is still some truth to it. The UK economy has endured destruction, including the loss of 480,000 businesses since 2020, but is growing modestly. This could be the right time to invest.

Those companies that are still solvent have learnt financial resilience the hard way

My visits to UK companies in the past 18 months have encouraged that view. Many are family or privately owned, rather than the public companies about which one hears more. The best are very professionally managed, sometimes

with backing from private equity funds. They are ambitious to expand, including to international markets, and far from depressed.

There are rational reasons to worry about the direction of economic policy, of course. As Rain Newton-Smith, director-general of the CBI, told me, "You cannot just add costs to businesses and expect them to grow." Employers are still adjusting to higher national insurance contributions set in 2024, along with sharp rises in the level of minimum wages, especially for under-20s.

British companies face the highest electricity costs in the G7 group of countries, with only limited relief in the November Budget. Productivity growth has been poor for more than a decade and business investment is expected to remain subdued this year, despite the Bank of England's interest rate cuts. The new Employment Rights Act will add complexity and make hiring harder.

But the government is also doing some positive things for the business environment. The industrial strategy that it unveiled last June correctly focused on sectors in which the UK has the greatest growth potential. Its attempt to reset damaged trade relations with the EU, including rejoining the Erasmus+ student exchange programme, needs to go further but has been a step in the right direction.

The UK economy also has enduring strengths. "Britain has fallen out of love with the things it is good at," the economists Andrew Sisson and John Springford wrote recently, but it is being forced to reassess. Industries such as financial and professional services, life sciences, media and technology are not only productive but attract investment.

This was reflected in HSBC's survey: many entrepreneurs value Britain's professional resources, particularly in the services cluster in London and the

south-east. The country's road and rail network can be patchy but it has a strong corporate support structure: "I don't need to get on a plane if I want to see a lawyer or accountant," said one executive.

In any case, leaders cannot wait for a rising tide to lift all business boats: having been heavily stress tested, the winners can afford to take some risks. Many have solid balance sheets and the strength to invest in growth or acquire competitors. Fintechs and energy startups are already using technology to disrupt larger incumbent companies.

This could be why so many UK entrepreneurs are in a good mood. The economy has been quite resilient, and periods when many people are unhappy are often a good opportunity. They are looking to the future and have not succumbed to gloom.

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The events that defined world politics in 2025

GLOBAL AFFAIRS

Gideon Rachman



International politics in 2025 was dominated by the return of Donald Trump to the White House. But the US president generates such a blizzard of news that it can be hard to remember everything that happened or to gauge its importance. So, looking back on the year, which events stand out as genuinely significant?

JD Vance's speech to the Munich security conference on February 14 opened up a deep split in the western alliance. Vance's argument that alleged anti-democratic tendencies in countries like Britain and Germany are more of a threat to freedom in Europe than Russian aggression outraged his audience.

On February 28, the vice-president played a central role in a televised confrontation with President Volodymyr Zelensky in the Oval Office. Vance chided the Ukrainian leader for alleged ingratitude, while Trump accused him of "gambling with world war three". The conversation immediately raised fears that the US was poised to abandon Ukraine and to side with Russia. Although European leaders were able to help repair the relationship between the US and Zelensky, the Trump administration did in effect end direct financial and military support for Ukraine.

Any suggestions that Vance's speech or the Oval Office incident might have been eccentric aberrations were put to rest at the end of the year, with the issuance of America's new national security strategy, which suggested that mass migration had put Europe at risk of "civilisational erasure" – and called for the US to support "patriotic" (ie far right) parties in Europe.

"Liberation day" on April 2 was when Trump unveiled sweeping tariffs on virtually the entire world, including some uninhabited islands. Although the tariffs were subsequently modified, after a negative reaction in the bond markets, they made it clear that the Trump administration is intent on blowing up the global trading system



that it inherited. Any suggestion that US trade policy would be aimed, above all, at isolating China, was ditched as America "tariffed" friend and foe alike.

The four-day conflict between India and Pakistan in May was no border skirmish. Both countries conducted deep strikes on each other's territory raising fears of what might happen the next time these two nuclear-armed neighbours clash. The aftermath of the conflict also served to sour relations between the Trump administration and New Delhi – largely because India's government, unlike Pakistan's, refused to endorse Trump's claim that he had ended the war (and therefore deserved a Nobel Peace Prize).

Trump generates such a blizzard of news that it can be hard to gauge importance at the time

The bombing of Iran in June finally saw Israel carry through on many years of threats to attack Tehran's nuclear programme. The US initially stood aside. But Israel's early successes and the lack of an effective Iranian response encouraged Trump to order US bombers to go after three nuclear sites. He later claimed that Iran's nuclear programme had been completely obliterated. Many experts are sceptical.

The implementation of the initial phase of the Gaza peace plan on October 10 tried to draw a line under the conflict that began after the Hamas attacks on Israel of October 7 2023. The war led to an estimated 70,000 deaths in Gaza and an international backlash against Israel. By the end of the year, doubts about the implementation of the accord were mounting – with little sign that Hamas was prepared to disband or that international peacekeepers would indeed be deployed to Gaza, as the plan foresees.

The meeting between Trump and Xi Jinping in Seoul on October 30 marked a

de-escalation in the US-China trade war. The true significance of the accord, however, was that China's grip over the global supply of rare earths and critical minerals – inputs that are crucial for western industry – had forced the US to scale back its tariffs. The knowledge that the rare earths card can be played again, at any time, hands China a significant advantage in the US-China rivalry.

Not everything significant that hap-

pened in 2025 involved Trump – at least not directly. The arrest of Rodrigo Duterte, the former president of the Philippines, in March and the imprisonment of Jair Bolsonaro, the former president of Brazil, in late November – demonstrated that strongmen can still be held to account for their actions. Brazil's legal system was robust enough to imprison a former president for encouraging an attempted coup, after losing an election. Duterte's extradition to The Hague to stand trial for crimes against humanity, committed during his "war on drugs", showed the International

Criminal Court still has teeth. The case will no doubt register with Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin, both of whom have been charged by the ICC.

The ICC has also announced that it is investigating possible war crimes carried out by the Rapid Support Forces militia in the Sudanese town of el-Fasher in October. The RSF, which is widely believed to be supplied by the United Arab Emirates, is thought to have massacred many thousands of people when it over-ran the town.

The partial release of FBI files in the Jeffrey Epstein case in December ended the year on a bad note for Trump. The US president had fought hard to prevent the release of the files, before being compelled to do so by Congress. The mentions of Trump in the files – combined with heavy redactions – had led to cries of a cover-up and ensured that the scandal will continue into 2026. Could this be Trump's Watergate?

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cockroaches
(plural noun) a common household pest that has become shorthand for failing and perhaps fraudulent companies that have gorged on private credit

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, financial watchdogs did everything they could to discourage banks from making risky loans without setting aside enough capital to protect depositors from losses. In the process, they kick-started another industry. Private credit and hedge funds stepped into the breach and began using investor money to lend to risky companies, using often complicated financial structures.

While interest rates were low, these funds made money hand over fist. But 2025 saw the first cracks in this market with the US bankruptcies of subprime car lender Tricolor and car parts maker First Brands. Both companies had tapped a wide variety of credit funds and loan providers to keep themselves afloat. Accusations of fraud, including double-pledging, have been made regarding their finances.

Now global policymakers, including the IMF and the Bank for International Settlements, are ringing alarm bells. Although private credit providers contend that they do not pose systemic risks because they rely on locked-in investor money, the regulators disagree. They are particularly exercised by the links between those funds and traditional banking, which the IMF puts at \$4.5tn, and about the potential for fire sales if more defaults lead investors to lose confidence in private credit.

But it took Jamie Dimon, chief executive of JPMorgan, to explain the concerns in terms a layman could understand. Asked about the bank's losses on Tricolor on an earnings call, he said: "My antenna goes up when things like that happen. And I probably shouldn't say this, but when you see one cockroach, there are probably more . . . Everyone should be forewarned on this one."

Brooke Masters

Why people love neurotic robots

AMERICA

Patti Waldmeir



They label "neurotic" isn't normally viewed as a compliment. But when University of Chicago researchers tested earlier this year how people reacted to robots pretending to be restaurant greeters, they found that folks liked a dash of neuroticism in their artificial intelligence – saying it made the robot more "human-like".

But these days there is increasing controversy over just how "human" our AI helpers should pretend to be – and what personalities they should be given, if any. Critics argue that humanlike emo-

tional attributes can trick people into treating them less like tools and more like friends or therapists, with sometimes tragic consequences.

OpenAI had to give ChatGPT a personality overhaul in April after backlash against an earlier version, which was criticised as too sympathetic. The company acknowledged that interacting with an overly obsequious chatbot "can be uncomfortable, unsettling, and cause distress" – and threaten trust.

This month ChatGPT invited me to choose how I would like to be spoken to. It offered "friendly", "candid", "professional", "efficient", "nerdy", "cynical" or "quirky", and also allowed me to adjust characteristics such as "warmth", "enthusiasm" and "emoji use". We are getting along much better now that I've chosen minimum warmth, enthusiasm and emojis, plus a "quirky" tone – and instructed it to "stop praising me for everything I say".

Notably, OpenAI didn't offer me a "neurotic" option – which makes the University of Chicago study all the more interesting. Here, researchers used a humanoid robot pretending to be a restaurant greeter, and gave it three personalities: extroverted, neurotic, or

A world where we prefer custom AI personalities to engaging with humans would be a loss

emotionless (ie, robotic). It was asked what three things it was grateful for. The extrovert enthused about how it was "super grateful" for all the "amazing" people it got to meet. The neurotic one peppered its speech with hmm's and ha's, and seemed much more humanly hesitant.

Overall, participants enjoyed the outcome of the robot more – but expressed surprise at how well the neurotic one could understand deep emotions: "the robot seemed like a person who was trying to get by in the world", one participant told the researchers. "People are not expecting robots to be anxious and thinking about what other people think of it."

Sarah Sebo, director of University of Chicago's Human-Robot Interaction lab, told me, "Neuroticism seemed to humanise and make the robot more relatable".

Some memorable fictional robots – like *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*'s famously depressed robot Marvin the Paranoid Android – have been troubled. But Lionel Robert, a University of Michigan robotics expert, tells me "if you have a robot surgeon with a neurotic personality, that might not instil confidence", nor would he want his autonomous car fretting about "not

being very good at driving in snow".

Robert is not against giving social robots and AI chatbots a personality. "That works incredibly well," he says, because "humans are used to interacting with other humans, and you've never interacted with a human without a personality, so it disarms people and makes them feel comfortable."

But the risk, Gideon Futerman of the Center for AI Safety tells me, is that "certain model personality traits, especially sycophancy, seem to make AI psychosocial – where users develop paranoia and anxiety in connection with conversations with chatbots – more likely".

Unhealthy interactions can take many forms. I, for example, always say please and thank you to ChatGPT, and never rebuke it directly, no matter how many times it makes the same mistake. I want to say "don't be so stupid", but instead I craft a tactful reprimand. Asked why, I've had to admit "I'm afraid

it will be mean to me one day if I'm rude".

"That means you think it's human," warns Yvonne Rogers, an expert on human-computer interaction at University College London. "That proves it actually works: it acts like a human and you respond like a human to it," says Robert. Another AI expert suggests I train the bot to be more robust by insult-ing it from time to time.

But we can get into trouble by focusing too much on "crafting the perfect personality" for AI, Sebo cautions. "I can't fine tune my husband's personality and that is part of the beauty of being human," she says. A world where we prefer custom-designed AI personalities to engaging with real people would be a loss. Three cheers for neuroticism – it's just so very human.

The writer is a contributing columnist, based in Chicago