



Opinion

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 2025

The Arpu conundrum

Telcos need to be prudent about tariff hikes so that they don't end up hurting rather than helping

RELIANCE JIO AND Bharti Airtel have both quietly raised tariffs, not through a headline hike but by tinkering their entry-level plans, removing the lowest packs and pushing customers to higher-priced recharges. Jio took the lead last month by discontinuing its ₹249 plan that offered 1 GB per day for 28 days. The new base plan now starts at ₹299, with 1.5 GB per day. Airtel followed within days, scrapping its own ₹249 pack that gave 1 GB per day for 24 days, repositioning its entry-level offerings closer to the ₹299-319 range. On the surface, this may look like a minor adjustment, but the implications are significant. For subscribers, this means paying 17-20% more per month for basic access. The option of low-cost, short-duration data packs is gone, leaving budget-conscious users with little choice but to spend more. For the operators, it is a clever way to lift average revenue per user (Arpu) without officially announcing a hike. This also prepares the ground for the next full-fledged tariff increase—the last headline hike happened in 2024.

To understand why operators are pushing tariffs upward, the bigger picture needs to be understood. For years, growth in telecom came from adding new subscribers. Airtel, for instance, saw high single-to double-digit subscriber growth until 2018, even as its revenues expanded steadily. Then Jio entered in 2016, upended the industry with rock-bottom pricing, and grabbed share from incumbents. Airtel's growth slowed, Vodafone Idea went into decline, and the overall industry shrank for a while. But since 2020, the picture has changed. Airtel's revenues have rebounded strongly despite subscriber losses. Jio, too, continues to grow, though at a slower pace than that the low-hanging fruit is gone. Vodafone Idea, meanwhile, has kept losing ground, but even its decline is tapering. At the industry level, the subscriber base has essentially plateaued since 2017. Jio and Airtel cannot expand much further by poaching from weaker players because there are hardly any left to acquire.

This is the crux of the problem. With subscriber growth largely exhausted, the only lever operators have left to grow revenues is tariff hikes. The question, however, is whether most consumers can actually afford it. According to the household expenditure survey data for FY24, on average, only 5.2% of household spending goes to consumer services (excluding conveyance), which includes telecom. This translates to just ₹216 per month in rural areas and ₹400 in urban areas.

The gap between what operators want and what consumers can afford is starkly visible in usage patterns. For instance, Vodafone Idea's Arpu is ₹177, but its prepaid Arpu is only ₹166, far below the cost of a full monthly plan. Many users recharge for shorter validity or lower data allowances because they simply cannot stretch their budgets. They are already consuming telecom services at the edge of affordability. This is where the risk lies for operators. Tariff hikes may be essential for their business models, but if they push too hard consumers will respond by cutting back. They may reduce data usage, downgrade to minimal recharges, or drop secondary SIMs altogether. The result could be that revenues do not rise as much as expected, or worse, they could even fall. If operators misjudge the fine balance, tariff hikes may end up hurting rather than helping their long-term revenues.

America's wind crusade hands industry to China

IN ALMOST EVERY area of the energy transition, one country dominates: China. Wind power, where the People's Republic still has less than half the global market, is a rare exception. President Donald Trump is doing his best to change that.

The administration last month cancelled an Orsted AS project off the coast of Rhode Island that's 80% complete and large enough to power 350,000 homes. It's also working to stop a project off Maryland, roughly twice the size and due to begin construction next year. A third development offshore from New York was halted for a month earlier this year before a deal was agreed to restart it. On his first day in office, Trump banned all leasing of the US seabed for wind and excluded the technology from the government's definition of "energy".

The sector has taken this unnatural disaster remarkably well. With the exception of Orsted, whose issues go far deeper than its battles with the Trump administration, shares in all the major players in Europe and the US have risen since his election. Nordex SE and Vestas Wind Systems AS have gained 64% and 9.8%, respectively, while GE Vernova Inc and Siemens Energy AG have doubled—and buoyed, in the latter two cases, by gas-turbine businesses more favoured in Washington.

That shouldn't be too surprising. The engineering firms, utilities, and turbine manufacturers that constitute the wind-power industry spread their revenues across numerous markets and have order books stretching years into the future. Trump's crusade against offshore wind in the US—a relatively marginal market, even under President Biden—isn't sufficient to deal a direct killing blow. It's the indirect damage that's more worrying. That's because he's striking at a time when Chinese companies, which for many years have struggled to compete outside their home market, are finally on the brink of breaking through. By weakening the US and European wind industry at such a critical time, Trump may guarantee that developed economies lose their early lead in wind power as decisively as they did with solar energy, batteries, and electric cars.

Engineering firms and manufacturers of costly equipment such as turbines and aircraft tend to run on slender margins and low debt. You only get revenue if you can win competitive tenders against rivals, meaning you have little scope to fatten your profits. A solid balance sheet and an array of projects help ride out uncertainty as clients change or cancel developments, and convince future customers that you have the track record and cash flow to deliver.

That makes the sort of havoc being caused by Washington more insidious. Wind power companies have mostly been able to reassure investors by pointing to their solid order books. But winning fresh bids is going to get harder as they have to conserve capital to defend themselves against fresh sales from the White House.

High interest rates, threatened tariffs, inflation, and a shrinking supply chain have already caused multiple tenders to collapse, with governments used to constantly falling costs unwilling to accept increased prices. Germany last month joined Denmark and the UK in seeing an offshore wind auction attract no bids, and the Netherlands, Belgium, and India have cancelled or put off tenders due to lacklustre interest. Mitsubishi Corp. last week pulled out of three projects it had already won in Japan.

That offers an opportunity for China. Without the intensifying stop-start policy choices that have characterised richer countries, developers have been able to count on economies of scale. Wind turbines there are now about a third cheaper than those made in Europe, according to *BloombergNEF*. European project managers have still mostly favoured equipment from local firms like Vestas, Siemens Energy, and Nordex, but their resolve is finally starting to crack. The uncertainty created by Trump is making them look more seriously at using Chinese turbines, the European Council on Foreign Relations wrote recently.

As the industry gears up for a surge in public tenders to meet an expected growth spurt in the early 2030s, China's wind-turbine makers can count on a burgeoning domestic project pipeline, lower costs, and a more stable policy environment. Rivals in Europe and the US are having to fight for new business while desperately trying to patch up the damage the White House is doing in the US, a region that they'd already largely given up on. For several years, wind power has been the one corner of the clean-power business where non-Chinese companies still had a fighting chance. Thanks to Trump, even that redoubt is crumbling.



DAVID FICKLING
Bloomberg

pipeline of future projects.

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INDIA-EU PARTNERSHIP

Union external affairs minister S Jaishankar

We're also seeing a lot of volatility on the global economic landscape, and I think together, they make a very powerful case for India and the European Union and India and Germany to work much more closely with each other

COSTING CONSUMERS

WITH THE 2026 MID-TERM ELECTION APPROACHING, WILL TRUMP FINALLY FEEL THE HEAT AND TAKE ACTION?

American tariff shock

ATANU BISWAS

Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata



ever, Trump didn't agree with the data, and he fired the Bureau of Labor Statistics head. Simple.

Naturally, someone has to pay the price when tariffs are added to a large number of imported goods in the US. However, who will? Trump claims that foreign countries and companies are bearing the burden. However, data indicates that the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration as its preferred policy tool are costing American companies and businesses money.

Goldman Sachs forecasted in early July that the effects of Trump's tariffs would begin to show in US earnings. The forecast, of course, didn't sit well with Trump. Goldman Sachs economist David Mericle stated that the company was pushing the tariff to the contentions prediction that tariffs will start to affect consumer wallets, despite President Trump's scathing criticism. "Eventually, by the fall, we estimate that consumers would bear about two-thirds of the cost" from tariffs, Mericle said.

Then, according to a recent Goldman Sachs analysis, companies will raise prices and progressively transfer the cost to customers. In a report released on August 10, Goldman Sachs analysts, led by the bank's

chief economist Jan Hatzius, estimated that by June, US consumers had absorbed 22% of tariff costs, but that share was expected to rise to 67% by October. Goldman Sachs predicts that the core personal consumption expenditure index, one of the Fed's preferred indicators of inflation, would reach 3.2% year-on-year in December (which was 2.8% in December 2024). Economists at Goldman Sachs predicted that consumers would ultimately bear roughly 70% of the direct costs of the tariffs, and that if the spillover effects of domestic producers raising their prices—which has already happened and is predicted to continue—are taken into account, the total could reach 100%.

An enraged Trump quickly demanded that the investment giant dismiss its chief economist or "just focus on being a DJ". However, despite Trump's fury, Goldman stuck to its analysis.

Tariff-driven price increases are a slow boil for a number of reasons: Tariffs are lower than most people had expected; businesses loaded up their warehouses with pre-tariffed goods; Trump's erratic approach to tariffs has prevented the majority of them from taking effect for months, and many items are exempt (at least for the time

being); higher costs have been split by entities along the supply chain, reducing the impact on the retail store. Tariffs usually take several months to permeate business supply chains and appear in the prices that customers pay at retail establishments.

Still, the cost of some imports that the US significantly depends on, such as sporting goods, tools, linens, household furnishings, and toys, has increased, according to recent Consumer Price Index inflation figures. According to newly-released research by Harvard Business School professor Alberto Cavallo and colleagues, as of August 8, domestically produced goods are running 3% higher and imported goods are costing 5% more than pre-tariff trends indicated, albeit slowly. "A year from now, maybe two years from now, we'll notice that consumers ended up paying a significant amount of the tariffs even if they didn't notice the increases right away," he said.

Additionally, American firms surveyed at the end of 2024 expected to raise their pricing by 2.5% in the upcoming year. The Atlanta Fed said those projections jumped to 3.5% by mid-May. According to a State Bank of India analysis, the new levies could reduce US GDP growth by 40-50 basis points, and inflationary pressures will probably increase as a result of rising input costs and a weaker dollar.

Overall, Trump may deny any evidence now, fire federal employees, or (at least) request that any private organisation fire its economist. However, it may become increasingly harder to hide or ignore as the scars of tariffs become more noticeable in the economy and the consumer market. With the 2026 mid-term election approaching, will Trump finally feel the heat and take action? Even if he does, would it be too late for both Trump and the US?

Volatility is here to stay

JAMAL MECKLAI

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IT IS A cliché that in international relations there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests; however, Donald Trump's rude style of operation is certain to set US interests back for a long time, perhaps even a decade or more.

There are several analysts who contend that his tariff attack on India is really part of a broader game he is trying with Russia. But he has clearly pushed the wrong buttons there since whatever he thinks he is offering Russia doesn't seem to have any relationship with what Putin really wants. In any case, given his unpredictability, none but the truly desperate would reach out in response since he may well change his tune again.

This explains why India cannot—and will not—give in to his bullying, irrespective of the impact it has on our economy, which, while serious, will not break us. This is even though, on a pure numbers basis, it may appear sensible to give up \$2-3 billion of gains (given the currently sharply reduced discount on Russian oil) in return for substantial savings (of the order of \$30-35 billion) on potentially lost exports. Of course, he may pile on the pressure, targeting pharma or IT services next, and then again, he may relent and come back to the 25% tariff level. It's shocking how this now seems like it would be a reasonably acceptable outcome—score one for Trump's Art of the Deal!

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To be sure, there will be a collateral impact on our domestic politics, since it is shining a laughing light on our pretensions to being a global power, highlighting the reality that being the fourth (soon to be third) largest economy in the world is hardly relevant when our GDP per capita—a more meaningful measure of well-being—is a lowly 132nd. But, as always, when we have our backs to the wall, we are forced to look hard at who we are, and how we wish to be, and how we plan to get there. Business as usual is over.

The good news is that our most significant economic success over the past few years has been maintaining the deficit on a steady downward path; at 4.8%, the Centre's deficit, while high, is "respectable"—certainly S&P thinks so. And although the target of 4.4% for 2025-26 will most certainly be exceeded given the sudden structural changes that we will need to implement, we will likely remain at a reasonably creditworthy level. Again, the GDP number just reported for Q1FY26

was a celebratory high 7.8%. And while it is true that the excellent number was driven largely by the services sector, which could become a red rag to the Trump bull if he were singularly focused on squeezing India down, there's no point worrying or responding in advance when the entire play is built on so much uncertainty.

In any event, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) will need to ensure that the rupee doesn't go into a major slump. It has already slipped to an all-time low of 88, and market reports suggest that the central bank was not as active as it had been in protecting 88 over the previous two months. This makes sense since it would be important to retain as many reserves ammunition as possible to support the

currency over the next year when export receipts could possibly decline by \$30-35 billion. Nonetheless, it is imperative that the RBI takes a strong stand before the rupee hits—or even threatens—90, bringing as it would a vision of 100 rupees to the dollar, which could scare the already skittish global investor community.

To be sure, the RBI will be sup-

ported in its efforts by the fact that interest rates would not decline—and may even rise—given the expectation of somewhat higher inflation both with the weaker currency and the widening fiscal deficit since the government now has no choice but to implement long overdue reforms in health and nutrition, education (with a particular focus on employability, agriculture, and, as always, substantially improving the ease of doing business, where our last rank in 2020, before the World Bank discontinued it) was 63rd out of 190 countries.

This could, of course, take a toll on equities, which are already showing signs of a funk with foreign portfolio investors selling to where their share of the market has fallen below that of domestic institutional investors; on the other hand, the goods and services tax cut could certainly provide some support to local investors, whose number has risen by a record 22% (year-on-year), a trend which shows no sign of easing up.

In any event, no prizes for guessing that volatility will remain the name of the game. And importantly, with our backs against the wall, India will need to rise with renewed vigour and a clear focus on what we need to do to genuinely earn the sobriquet of a global player.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Chip-powered future

Apropos of "More wafer world" (FE, September 3), the Semicon India conference highlighted India's growing ambition to become a major player in the semiconductor industry. The PM pointed out how India is steadily moving beyond its earlier role of providing support services to building a complete ecosystem for chip design and manufacturing. With investments already running into a ₹1 lakh crore, international and domestic firms are beginning to view India as a reliable and competitive base for this high-

tech sector. At a time when several advanced economies are grappling with sluggish growth and inward-looking policies, India's steady performance—clocking one of the highest growth rates worldwide—reinforces confidence in its resilience. The promise of further reforms aimed at easing investment and nurturing innovation will strengthen this momentum. The vision of chips being not only made but also designed in India reflects both self-reliance and global integration. Semiconductors are at the heart of modern technology, and India's emergence in this space will

have a multiplier effect on employment, exports, and digital leadership. —Vandana Chopra, Chandigarh

Inflection point

India's indigenisation of a 32-bit microprocessor is an auspicious inflection point, signalling latent technological sovereignty in a domain long monopolised by a handful of global players. Yet, to remain confined to back-end design and assembly would reduce this breakthrough to symbolism. The urgency lies in propelling India into the rarefied orbit of full-stack semiconductor nations—

where advanced fabrication, process innovation, and packaging converge into strategic depth. The \$18-billion pipeline of projects may furnish scaffolding, but their fruition demands accelerated execution, robust intellectual property generation, and synergy between academia, state policy, and private capital. Unless India transcends its role as an ancillary design hub, it risks forfeiting the window to emerge as a decision on what we need to do to genuinely earn the sobriquet of a global player.

—N Sadhasiva Reddy, Bengaluru

Write to us at letters@expressindia.com



Editor's TAKE

The Great Indian Monsoon Deluge

Every monsoon the cities of India turn into lakes as common people suffer; little is done to find a permanent solution to deal with monsoon rains

This is yet another monsoon season when everybody is cursing the rains, giving little thought to the fact that it is not nature but ourselves to be blamed for our miseries. We lament the rains in rainy season and as soon as monsoon retreat we forget about it. From Delhi to Mumbai, Chennai to Jaipur, the monsoon brings a recurring nightmare of waterlogging, floods, and disease outbreaks.

This year, however, the situation has reached alarming levels. In the capital, the Yamuna has surged past danger levels, displacing over 10,000 people from low-lying areas. The river was recorded at 206.4 metres this week, with forecasts warning it could breach 207 metres. Instead of long-term solutions, Delhi continues to rely on last-minute evacuations and temporary shelters.

In Mumbai, the monsoon is synonymous with chaos. Despite crores being spent on stormwater drainage upgrades after the devastating 2005 deluge, the city still drowns with every heavy downpour. Roads cave in, trains slow down to a crawl, and flights are delayed. Experts blame rampant construction, shrinking wetlands, and inadequate drainage. The Mithi River, once a natural buffer against flooding, has been choked by garbage and encroachments.

One of the most striking ironies of this monsoon is Jaipur, a city better known for its arid climate, facing widespread flooding. Heavy rainfall overwhelmed its fragile drainage infrastructure, turning its heritage streets into streams. Climate change is altering rainfall patterns, making desert cities vulnerable to floods they were never designed to withstand. This year, torrential rains once again submerged vast swathes of Chennai. The infamous 2015 floods, which killed hundreds and displaced thousands, were attributed to poor urban planning and blocked waterways. A decade later, little has changed. The common thread linking Delhi, Mumbai, Jaipur, Chennai, and other cities is not just excessive rain but poor planning. Encroachments on riverbanks, destruction of wetlands, outdated drainage systems, and unregulated construction have turned natural rain into unnatural disasters. Relief camps, evacuations, and emergency advisories dominate the response, while long-term solutions gather dust in government files. To prevent the Great Indian Deluge from becoming an annual tragedy, India must rethink its urban planning and flood management strategies. Rivers, wetlands, and floodplains must be protected and rejuvenated. These natural sponges absorb excess rainwater and mitigate flooding.

Indian cities rely on colonial-era drainage designs that are hopelessly outdated. Stormwater drains need expansion, desilting, and integration with modern urban infrastructure. Construction on floodplains and wetlands must be strictly banned. If Indian cities are to survive the next century, resilience must replace complacency.

Tariffs: A test for Indo-US trade ties

While New Delhi has so far avoided retaliation, the tariffs put Indian exporters at a sharp cost disadvantage against competitors like Bangladesh and Vietnam, raising concerns about job losses and weakened competitiveness



KALYANI SHANKAR

On Wednesday morning last week, India woke up to the news that the US had imposed 50 per cent tariffs on its goods sold to the US. The Trump administration followed through on its threat to double levies from 25 per cent due to India's purchase of Russian oil.

Since his return to the White House this year, President Donald Trump has implemented tariffs. Trump's decision on Indo-US relations is likely to impact the relationship between the two countries. It affects 48.2 billion in exports. This includes clothing and chemicals.

However, the risk of a trade war remains low, as India has not retaliated and is implementing reforms to mitigate the impact of the tariffs. New Delhi is responding to tariffs by proposing a cut in GST and seeking new export opportunities.

High tariffs could harm India's economy, lessen its competitiveness against China, and hinder Prime Minister Modi's goal of making India a manufacturing hub.

The United States was India's largest trading partner, with trade at \$2.2 billion. Let us take a closer look at how the US's hike in tariffs could affect the Indian economy. In 2024, New Delhi was projected to export around \$87 billion, its largest market to date. These tariffs place Indian exporters at a 30-35 per cent disadvantage compared to countries like Bangladesh, which face lower US duties.

Furthermore, India also engages in trade with other nations, including China, the EU, and the UAE. The estimated impact of US exports primarily affects labour-intensive sectors. Lower crude prices give both federal and state governments the fiscal space to support these industries with targeted incentives. Experts believe this tariff could lead to a stagnant market and limitations. India's GDP growth, projected to be around 7 per cent in 2024, is expected to be reduced to approximately 6.4 per cent.

India's \$79 billion textiles industry, which generates \$37.7 billion in exports to the US, is particularly vulnerable, with nearly \$10.3 billion of its revenue coming from this market. The Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEP) has noted that Indian exporters now face a 30 per cent cost disadvantage compared to competitors in Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cambodia.

Trump's tariffs could have a significant impact on specific sectors and jobs that are linked to US demand. This could lead to job losses and a slowdown in the sector's growth. Rating agency Moody's has indicated that Trump's tariffs on Indian imports could hinder India's economic growth. The agency stated that after 2025, the significantly wider tariff gap compared to other



The Pioneer SINCE 1865

ANALYSTS HAVE WARNED THAT THE 50 PER CENT DUTY THE US HAS IMPOSED ON INDIAN GOODS IS AKIN TO A TRADE EMBARGO

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Asia-Pacific countries could severely limit India's ambitions to develop its manufacturing sector and might even reverse some of the progress made in recent years in attracting related investments.

Exporter associations estimate that tariffs could impact nearly 55 per cent of India's \$87 billion merchandise exports to the US. This could advantage competitors like Vietnam, Bangladesh, and China, which face lower tariff rates. India is the world's third-largest oil consumer and the biggest buyer of Russian crude oil.

This is crucial for India's energy sector. It could disrupt this crucial energy partnership and force India to seek alternative sources of oil, which may be more expensive and less reliable. As an alternative, the Modi Government is urging people to buy domestically produced goods, urging them to "prioritize products made in India." Major industries, such as the auto components sector, which exports approximately \$7 billion annually to the US, could be affected by tariffs, risking India's investment. Speaking at a construction industry event in New Delhi recently, Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal said India was "always ready if anyone wants to have a free trade agreement with us." But, he added, India "will neither bow down nor ever appear weak."

The Indian Government is implementing measures to reduce the impact. At the same time, the long-term effects on the economy and stock market remain uncertain. Political and

business leaders in India are calling for quick market diversification to reduce reliance on the United States. Analysts have warned that the 50 per cent duty the US has imposed on Indian goods is akin to a trade embargo. Modi has promised to protect farmers, fishermen, and workers, emphasising national interest and energy security in the country. On Thursday, the Government reassured exporters of its unwavering support, promising to extend comprehensive measures to protect livelihoods amid global headwinds.

This is to reassure the public and the business community. The Government is working on extending support measures for exporters, such as the rollout of an export promotion mission and a moratorium on loans to cushion them from the impact of the US's 50 per cent tariffs on Indian goods, an official said. New Delhi is finding broad support from the Western intelligentsia in its struggle to resist the US pressure.

This international support helps India navigate the challenges posed by US tariffs and maintain its position in the global trade arena. For the time being, neither Washington nor New Delhi is itching for a trade war. There is a great potential for diplomatic negotiations, with Modi using the back-channel route to persuade for lower tariffs, and Trump being willing to compromise if he wants to do business with India. This possibility of negotiation brings a sense of hope and optimism for the future of Indo-US trade relations.

PIC TALK



An artisan gives the finishing touch to an idol of Goddess Durga ahead of the Durga Puja festival in West Bengal.

PHOTO: PTI

DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

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A longing to belong or an urge to be accepted!



SANJAY CHANDRA

2 THE PIONEER 2ND OPINION

My daughter has founded a start-up company, a platform for emotional well-being through peer-led meaningful connections. It is important to create spaces where people can slow down and speak honestly without the pressure of performance. We embark upon this journey from the time we are born. We learn to smile and gurgles in our cradle because it makes others happy. In adolescence, we seek approval from our friends and teachers. As mature adults, we look for appreciation from peers, spouse, family, society — almost everyone. In our twilight years, we look for validation from our children. I am consulting an ophthalmologist for a recently developed squint in one eye. Disturbed, I pestered her with questions. With a twinkle in her eyes, she told me that the

only two women whose concerns should matter to me now are she and my wife. She had made a point: I did not need to conform to physical attributes set by others. My wife, however, may disagree. She does not trust my sartorial sense. She selects matching trousers and shirts for me regardless of whether I am stepping out alone or with her. I can understand her apprehension if we are visiting a relative or a friend, for my sloppy appearance could be seen as a commentary on her sense of style. Her sensitivity on the subject is beyond me when we are visiting the mall, where we are unlikely to encounter acquaintances, or if I am meeting people she neither knows nor is likely to know in future.

Their opinions, expressed behind my back, would not reach her ears. Even my two daughters, I am afraid, pick on me. They are sticklers for perfect etiquette. One afternoon, while out for lunch with the family, I tried catching the waiter's eye with a simple "Hello." The girls were horrified. I should have used the accepted phrase, "Excuse me!" I could not understand their embarrassment. We rarely return to the same restaurant. The waiter, if still there months later, is unlikely to remember us. Nor would his service be less attentive because of my not-so-impeccable manners. This urge for approval from others extends even into old age, when it should not matter. My ninety-five-year-old father gets in a tizzy when an

acquaintance comes to visit. He nervously paces the apartment, checking if the air conditioners work, the cutlery is right, the napkins in place. In our younger days, we admired his refined language and manners. Now, I am disappointed by his use of vernacular swear words.

At a family function, my father was annoyed that I remained closeted in a room for much of the evening to attend a stormy online meeting of the society's governing body. He worried about the reaction of another guest, my close friend and now also a relative. We are social beings. We need to feel we belong — to a family, a community, or a piece of land. Yet our conditioning makes us crave acceptance.

We conform to attributes that may be irrelevant or beyond our control. These superficial factors are set by parents, elders, peers, or society at large. We are unhappy if we have less money than our neighbour. We teach children the importance of complexion, height, or weight. We insist they must top examinations. Such conflicts between imposed norms and reality create stressed, unhappy individuals. We must impart to children the wisdom to discriminate judiciously between a longing to belong and an urge to be accepted.

The author is an electrical engineer with the Indian Railways and conducts classes in creative

HEALTHY LIVING STARTS WITH DISEASE PREVENTION

In today's world, health is the greatest wealth of any nation. In a country like India, with a population exceeding 1.4 billion, ensuring the well-being of every citizen is a significant challenge. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, obesity, and lifestyle-related illnesses are rising rapidly.

Surveys reveal that about 63 per cent of all deaths in India are caused by NCDs. For instance, nearly 90 million people suffer from diabetes, a figure expected to rise to 110 million by 2030, with direct and indirect treatment costs reaching approximately ₹1.5 lakh crore annually. Cervical cancer alone claims nearly 75,000 women's lives each year.

These statistics highlight that treatment alone is insufficient; prevention is essential. According

to the World Health Organisation, investing just one dollar in preventive healthcare in developing countries can yield nearly seven dollars in economic benefits by reducing treatment costs. Lifestyle modifications, including 45 minutes of daily exercise or walking, avoiding harmful foods, adequate sleep, and abstaining from addictions, can help maintain long-term health. Healthy citizens form the foundation of a strong nation. Instead of spending billions on treatment, small, consistent changes in daily routines and health awareness can prevent numerous diseases. Prevention, indeed, is far better than cure, ensuring both personal well-being and national prosperity.

JITESH MORE | KUTCH

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Can anyone trust Vladimir Putin?

Should anyone trust dictator Vladimir Putin? Is there even two per cent truth in his statements made in China? During a China summit, Putin claimed that in his meeting with Donald Trump in Alaska last month, he had reached an "agreement" with the US President on ending the Ukraine war. But he did not say whether he would agree to peace talks with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky under Trump's mediation. When Zelensky went to the White House with European leaders after the Alaska meeting, Trump said that Putin had agreed to meet him.

But Putin never disclosed when or where. Once again, he is blaming the Western countries for the war. But why and how? Does a free country not have the right to decide its alliances? Who gave the Kremlin the authority to decide whether Ukraine should join the European Union or NATO? Putin's latest lie is that the crisis began with a coup in Ukraine supported by the West. Yet records show that on April 21, 2019, Zelensky won a clear democratic mandate with 73 per cent votes against Poroshenko's 25 per cent. A 2 per cent truth in Putin's statements is likely an overstatement; his claims often demonstrably contradict established facts and historical records, making it difficult to trust him.

JANG BAHADUR SINGH | JAMSHEDPUR

Exempt healthcare products from GST

The reforms in GST are welcome. The decision to exempt premium paid towards health and life insurance policies is a meaningful one. But not exempting medicines and medical devices will keep the reforms incomplete, despite long-pending demands in this regard since the inception of GST. Taxing the sick is not only irrational and illogical but also inhuman. Failing ill is neither a matter of comfort nor a luxury to be taxed.

The one who suffers faces mental and physical incapacity besides financial woes. How rational is it to tax such suffering?

The health of the people is directly related to the productivity of the nation. The GST Council and the Government must decide on this meaningful demand to exempt medicines and medical devices. Already, injustice has been done by allowing pharma companies to increase medicine prices by 10 per cent annually under the guise of inflation.

Instead of promoting generics, the Government should bring down prices. Reviving public sector pharma companies is essential to ensure affordable, quality medicines and to compel private players to remain reasonable.

AG RAJMOHAN | ANANTAPUR

Empowering girls through education

Appropos the news item "Indian non-profit working for girls' education among 2025 Magsaysay Award winners" published on September 1, this is my response. Heartiest congratulations to Educate Girls, the non-profit organisation that has won the Ramon Magsaysay Award 2025, becoming the first Indian organisation ever to receive this prestigious honour.

The NGO works extensively to bring education to underprivileged girls in the remotest corners of India, aiming to break cycles of gender inequality and transform communities.

What impresses most is that Educate Girls works across more than 30,000 villages with the support of community volunteers, and has so far brought over two million girls back to school while supporting 2.4 million children with remedial learning. The recognition underscores the power of grassroots innovation in driving long-lasting social change and ensuring educational equity. It is heartening that the NGO aims to reach 10 million learners in the coming years, ensuring last-mile access to education for girls and young women most at risk of being left behind. Such efforts reaffirm faith in people-led initiatives to reshape society and offer hope for a more inclusive future.

RANGANATHAN SIVAKUMAR | CHENNAI



India needs a permanent disaster relief law for climate resilience

When nature unleashes its fury, it does not just wash away homes and harvests — it also exposes the cracks in our governance. A legally binding disaster relief law, backed by dormant national resources, could transform the way India responds — from delayed compensation to timely, guaranteed rehabilitation

FIRST Column



DINESH SOOD

When natural disasters strike, they expose not only the vulnerabilities of our terrain but also the inadequacies of our governance. The ongoing devastation in Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir, described as one of the most severe in its history, has once again triggered calls for a more structured, legally binding framework to address cloudburst, landslide, and flood relief.

Centre to enact a Disasters Relief Law mandating the use of over ₹2 lakh crore unclaimed money remains in limbo, growing at 15-20 per cent annually across different financial sectors over the decades. This includes ₹78,213 crore in banks and post office deposits, ₹27,000 crore in EPFO accounts, ₹22,000 crore in insurance, ₹90,093 crore in stocks and dividends IEPF (Investor Education and Protection Fund) and ₹2,600 crore in mutual funds. The Supreme Court has recommended the establishment of a Central Unclaimed Property Authority (CUPA). This would be a single Government body to track and manage the unclaimed money centrally. By making a law, this money could be put to good use, as it is now the country's money, which has been lying idle for years. There can be no better place for its good use than in natural disaster relief, which is, therefore, both timely and urgent. If ₹2 lakh crore lies unclaimed and idle with the Centre, could it be unlocked for rebuilding shattered lives, infrastructure, and livelihoods?

The appeal is not just about Himachal and Punjab; it resonates across the entire country. Year after year, states are battered by floods, landslides, cyclones, and earthquakes. The scale of human and economic losses has long outpaced the ad hoc relief packages that the Centre and states announce after every calamity. Between 1980 and 2024, Punjab alone witnessed floods that affected nearly 13 million people, inundated more than 4.64 lakh hectares of fertile farmland, damaged over 8 lakh homes, and caused the deaths of more than 2,500 people along with the loss of nearly 18,000 livestock, and currently the crop area affected is over 95,000 hectares. Himachal Pradesh has already recorded losses worth ₹2,348 crore during the current monsoon season. These are not marginal



WITHOUT A LEGALLY GUARANTEED FRAMEWORK IN PLACE, STATES WILL REMAIN VULNERABLE. CITIZENS WILL REMAIN UNCERTAIN, AND REBUILDING EFFORTS WILL CONTINUE TO BE INCOMPLETE

The writer is Co-Founder and MD of Oran International and Network Member of India International Skill Centres (IISCs), an initiative of Gol

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numbers; they reflect a systemic failure to safeguard lives and livelihoods.

Disaster relief efforts in India are currently reactive, with compensation announcements occurring only after significant damage has been done. While the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) and State Disaster Response Funds exist, their allocations are consistently inadequate. More critically, there is no legal obligation for the central Government to release funds promptly or in proportion to the assessed damages. This situation leaves states vulnerable to protracted negotiations and political manoeuvring. India is one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, with over 40 million hectares at risk from floods and a long coastline exposed to cyclones. Climate change has exacerbated these threats, leading to more intense floods and increased landslide incidents. Given this reality, the current relief model, which is designed for repeated disasters, is utterly insufficient. We must confront and resolve the systemic issues that obstruct effective disaster relief.

Establishing a permanent disaster relief law is not optional; it is imperative. This law should mandate pre-allocated funds based on scientific risk assessments rather than on post-disaster bargaining. It must ensure the automatic disbursement

of relief funds within days, instead of dragging on for months, through direct benefit transfers. Furthermore, this law must cover long-term rehabilitation for housing, healthcare, and livelihoods, rather than just emergency provisions. It must also institutionalise accountability for delays and mismanagement.

Lessons from Himalayan States

Recent disasters in Himachal Pradesh and Punjab highlight the compounded risks faced by Himalayan states. These regions contend with fragile ecosystems prone to landslides, heavy rainfall that causes flash floods, and increasing human encroachment that intensifies natural hazards. The situation in Punjab reveals another critical failure of the current system: recurring floods demonstrate the urgent need for investment in long-term flood management solutions.

Despite the millions affected and staggering losses incurred year after year, Punjab has failed to make the necessary long-term investments in flood management that would mitigate damages. We cannot wait any longer; prioritising investment in sustainable flood management measures is non-negotiable. Poor drainage systems, unregulated sand mining, and a lack of preventive planning amplify the impacts of heavy rains.

Both of these cases unequivocally demonstrate that piecemeal relief efforts are inadequate. Without a legally guaranteed framework in place, states will remain vulnerable, citizens will remain uncertain, and rebuilding efforts will continue to be incomplete. We must act decisively to establish a robust disaster relief system that protects our communities and ensures swift recovery.

Ad Hoc Relief Model is Unsustainable

Disaster relief in India is currently tethered to post-disaster announcement packages issued by the central and state Governments only after the full extent of damage is revealed. While the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) and State Disaster Response Funds exist, they are repeatedly underfunded, delayed in disbursement, and woefully inadequate for the large-scale rehabilitation required. Furthermore, the release of these funds is often mired in negotiations, excessive red tape, and political manoeuvring, rather than adhering to a clear, binding framework.

This ad hoc approach must be discarded. Disasters are no longer isolated incidents; they are persistent realities we face. Climate change is worsening rainfall patterns, leading to more severe floods and

increasingly frequent landslides. Relief efforts must not rest on discretionary announcements; they must be guaranteed, timely, and sufficiently robust to meet the challenges we confront.

Why Disaster Relief Law is Imperative

A permanent disaster relief law is essential to transform our crisis response. This law must mandate pre-allocated funds for every state, determined by scientific risk assessments. It is unacceptable that relief should take months; funds must be automatically disbursed through direct transfers to affected families within days. Furthermore, it must encompass long-term recovery efforts, including the rehabilitation of homes, restoration of livelihoods, healthcare provision, and rebuilding of infrastructure. We must hold Governments accountable by requiring them to publish clear timelines and expected outcomes for disaster response.

This issue is non-negotiable and transcends political disputes. Leaders, whether in the ruling party or the opposition, must recognise the indiscriminate nature of disasters; they spare no region or ideology. A law that guarantees automatic fund deployment in times of crisis will significantly bolster India's resilience and reaffirm the state's unyielding commitment to its citizens.

We cannot let the call for such legislation be overshadowed by political noise. Himachal, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir must demand this vital change. While natural disasters are unavoidable, the suffering that arises from institutional neglect is entirely preventable. The era of ad hoc promises is over; it is time we established a permanent disaster relief law now.

Parliament must take urgent action to enshrine disaster relief in law. Such a framework is essential not just for providing certainty to affected citizens but also for fortifying India's disaster preparedness in the face of climate change. Relief should be established as a legal right, not left to the whims of political generosity.

Natural disasters may be inevitable, but the ongoing suffering caused by financial delays is entirely within our control. India must transcend temporary solutions and implement a permanent safeguard for its citizens. A law that guarantees timely and adequate disaster relief is not merely an administrative reform; it is a moral duty that cannot be ignored.

The world's most sophisticated human-trafficking scam



KUSHAN MITRA

Harjinder Singh, 28, entered the United States from the southern border claiming that he faced persecution in India because he was a follower of the movement for an independent Khalistan. A few weeks ago, he was driving a large truck, what the Americans call a 'Big Rig', and took an illegal U-turn. A vehicle that was following, ironically with three Haitian immigrants in it, crashed into the truck, killing all three individuals.

Since the accident, Harjinder seems to have garnered a huge deal of support including from Gurpatwant Pannun, who visited him in jail and offered \$100,000 to the victims as 'blood money', and even Akali Dal MP, Harsimrat Kaur Badal, who urged the Ministry of External Affairs for a less strict punishment.

Many supporters of Harjinder have also pleaded for no strict implementation of language norms for commercial drivers in the United States. However, at his arraignment it was clear that Harjinder did not speak or understand English. Ergo, it is bizarre that he should have held a job down in a country where all road signs are in English.

Support for Harjinder mounted: some complained of racism, others said he should get a fair trial. He faces a potential 45 years in prison and the argument used is the same as in India, that he made a 'small mistake' but should not suffer for it. But the backlash from the nativist 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) nationalists has taken the supporters' backs. Their simple argument is that actions have consequences, and it is almost certain that Harjinder will face a long prison term in the United States, followed by deportation.

But what this case has also revealed is that the long-haul trucking industry as well as other commercial driving jobs in North America have been taken over by immigrants from Punjab and Haryana, many of whom have gone to Canada and the United States illegally. There are tens of thousands of asylum applications in both countries by young men and women claiming persecution for supporting the Khalistani movement in India.

This has puzzled many in India since that movement, a creation of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), largely died out years ago although some small embers might remain. News stories have emerged in recent



weeks that after failing in their initial applications for asylum, some have claimed that because they voted on a referendum for Khalistan in Canada they could be potentially persecuted in India and have attached 'voter cards' as proof.

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While there is no doubt that there are some extremists, it is painfully clear that the 'movement' is nothing but a giant human trafficking scam. Harjinder is just one of thousands of young men pushed into long-haul trucking, being paid below minimum wage. Other young men have been moved into organised crime, transporting drugs for cartels led by second and third generation immigrants, and others into extortion, the attack outside comedian Kapil Sharma's restaurant being a case in point. The stories of young women from North India who moved to Canada and have been pushed into prostitution are all over the local media. These young men and women pay lakhs of rupees to agents who organise the 'Dunki' route through Latin America or admission in hole-in-the-wall 'colleges'. And the great life that they are promised never materialises as, with poor language and work skills, they can only take low-end jobs, usually for those running the entire Khalistani racket.

For those running the racket, the pretence of an active movement is vital to ensure a steady stream of low cost labour and young women coming into their grip. This is why occasional well-funded protests in India, coupled with support from global media organisations always keen to show India in a poor light, take place. This allows for thousands more to claim 'persecution', as many did after the farmers' protests. Capturing some levers of the Canadian state, allegedly including the Prime Minister,

only greased the wheels of the racket.

Which is why there is such fear of the Harjinder case — a case that could potentially blow the wheels off the racket, particularly after Kashi Patel, the Director of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), has been acting against some elements. The Khalistani movement is nothing but cover for organised crime both in North America and in India, because the immigration agents taking lakhs of rupees are a tentacle of the crime web.

However, it must be pointed out that successive Governments in Punjab have failed spectacularly in raising the economic prospects of the youth in the state. A broken education system, the lack of a services industry or revival of manufacturing means that jobs are hard to find. Rampant drug abuse and joblessness in what was once North India's industrial heartland has driven thousands to resort to desperate measures. The flooding in the past month of thousands of hectares of farmland will likely make the situation worse, forcing thousands more to put their lives on the line and move to North America, even though the reality of life there is worse than in India.

While Harjinder Singh must bear the brunt of his actions and be punished according to the law in the United States, our Governments, both in New Delhi and in Chandigarh, must not sit idle. A revival of Punjab's economy, growing it beyond remittances, and educating the youth about the exploitation and money-grubbing nature of organised crime is a must.

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Trump's Nobel peace meets India's calculated refusal



SANTHOSH MATHEW

"History does not move in straight lines; it bends, twists, and contradicts itself, often leaving us with ironies sharper than truth itself." This has defined leaders, nations, and institutions across time. People are remembered not only for their ideals but also for the paradoxes they embodied. Facts expose these contradictions with brutal clarity, reminding us that ambition — personal or political — feeds on vested interests far more than on moral consistency. Few arenas illustrate this better than the stage of global recognition, where lofty prizes intersect with politics, and where Donald Trump's Nobel aspirations collide with India's choices.

Consider the Pulitzer Prize, the pinnacle of journalism. Its founder, Joseph Pulitzer, was celebrated for championing investigative reporting. Yet he also pioneered sensationalist 'yellow journalism', filling his papers with scandal-driven headlines. A man hailed for elevating journalism simultaneously corroded it. The Nobel Peace Prize carries the same irony. Alfred Nobel, who endowed the award, made his fortune through dynamite and arms. The 'merchant of death' became the patron saint of peace.

This contradiction plays out in the lives of leaders as well. Ethiopia's Abiy Ahmed won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2019 for ending hostilities with Eritrea, only to lead his nation into a bloody civil war months later. Aung San Suu Kyi, once revered as Myanmar's icon of democracy, later defended atrocities against the Rohingya. Muhammad Yunus, celebrated globally for microfinance, faced hostility at home. The Nobel's history is littered with such premature judgments. It is within this backdrop that Donald Trump's Nobel Peace Prize ambitions appear. Trump, flamboyant and unpredictable, repeatedly claimed that no one deserved the Nobel more than himself — citing his talks with North Korea or Middle East initiatives. In a surprising twist, Pakistan nominated him. India, however, did not. Narendra Modi's refusal was less about Trump personally and more about principle: India would not barter long-term interests for short-term theatrics.

On the surface, Pakistan seemed to benefit. Trump offered tariff relaxations, while India endured steep hikes and a falling rupee. But beneath the immediate costs lay a deeper calculation. The Nobel's reputation is checked; figures like Suu Kyi and Abiy show how quickly

laurels can turn into embarrassments. Even Gandhi — arguably history's greatest advocate of peace — was never awarded. If Gandhi could be denied, why should India lobby for Trump, a man defined by 'America First' unilateralism?

India's decision was one of foresight. Global politics is not about morality but about enduring interests. As the old dictum says: there are no permanent friends or foes, only permanent interests. India today tilts towards BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, not to reject the West entirely but to assert autonomy and balance. By refusing to nominate Trump, India sent a message: it will not play second fiddle in another leader's performance.

Trump's craving for the Nobel is itself contradictory. Here is a leader who mocked the UN, berated NATO, imposed tariffs on allies, and dismissed multilateralism — yet longed for validation from the world's most symbolic multilateral institutions. His quest for peace recognition was less consistency than irony.

India bore the short-term costs of Trump's displeasure but preserved long-term credibility. Pakistan, in seeking favour, indulged in symbolic gestures. India, in contrast, prioritised sovereignty and multipolar balance. Had it supported Trump's nomination, it might have joined the long list of premature endorsements that haunt the Nobel's legacy. Instead, it chose restraint.

The Peace Prize itself has become a mirror of paradox. It has overlooked Gandhi, rewarded leaders too soon, and sometimes crowned peacemakers who later unleashed violence. It embodies the contradictions of human history. In this light, India's refusal to induct Trump was not weakness but clarity. It is a decision history may judge as wise. From Pulitzer's journalism to Nobel's dynamite, from Jefferson's liberty to jinnah's secularism, from Gandhi's peace to Bose's nationalism, history teaches us that leaders are defined less by purity than by paradox. Trump's Nobel quest is one more entry in this book of ironies. By saying no, India affirmed a timeless principle: the courage to resist short-term temptation for the sake of long-term wisdom.

Contradictions are not failures; they are the fingerprints of history. They remind us that the loftiest prizes, the greatest ideals, and even the most powerful leaders are bound by irony. Sometimes, the truest strength lies not in seeking recognition, but in refusing it.

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Tariffs and Autonomy

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the side-lines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit in Tianjin carried more weight than the symbolism of a shared limousine ride. It offered a glimpse into India's evolving calculus at a moment when global alignments are being redrawn under duress.

The optics were striking. A visibly relaxed exchange between the Indian and Russian leaders, one punctuated by warmth and informality, was far removed from the coercive language emanating from Washington. The United States has slapped unprecedented tariffs on Indian goods, ostensibly to punish New Delhi for sustaining energy and defence ties with Moscow, and unleashed undiplomatic rhetoric that suggests an inclination to treat India as a supplicant. Yet, rather than displaying retreat, India chose to reinforce its comfort with Russia in a highly public setting, and under the watchful gaze of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

This triangulation is significant. For China, hosting both Mr Modi and Mr Putin in Tianjin was an opportunity to showcase a platform that can rival Western-led forums. For Russia, embattled by sanctions and ultimatums, it was a stage to demonstrate that it is not isolated, that powerful partners are still willing to sit beside it. And for India, the moment was about signalling resilience: strategic autonomy is not to be dictated by tariff shifts or diplomatic deadlines.

India's posture marks neither defiance nor reckless adventurism. It reflects a careful weighing of national interests in an environment where economic pressure and security imperatives intersect constantly.

The economic stakes are considerable. A 50 per cent tariff wall raised by the United States threatens to bite into India's exports, particularly in sectors that had come to rely on the American market. The penalty surcharge linked to Russian transactions adds insult to injury, effectively demanding that India choose between affordable oil and access to the US consumer. But a country of India's size and ambition cannot afford to be reduced to such binary choices.

The partnership with Russia is not merely sentimental, rooted in Cold War history. It is a matter of hard economics and national security. Energy flows, defence cooperation, and emerging technology exchanges are too critical to abandon at the flick of a tariff wand.

Critics may argue that the choreography in Tianjin risks alienating Washington at a delicate time. Yet, the larger truth is that America's own strategy is narrowing India's options. By conflating legitimate trade disputes with geopolitical coercion, Washington is leaving little space for constructive give-and-take. That vacuum is inevitably filled by alternative arrangements - even if they carry their own risks.

What emerges from Tianjin, therefore, is not merely the image of three leaders clasping hands, but the outline of a multipolar reality. India will continue to value its partnership with the United States, but not at the expense of its sovereign choices. If tariffs and ultimatums are the language of the day, then gestures of solidarity with Russia and pragmatic cooperation with China will remain indispensable instruments of Indian diplomacy.

On shaky ground

The images of vehicles stranded for hours on Gurugram's highways after Monday's rains were not just about one evening's chaos. They were a mirror to India's most glaring urban paradox: the co-existence of futuristic corporate skylines and crumbling civic foundations.

What unfolded was not a natural disaster but an urban planning failure. A downpour, foreseeable during monsoon, brought one of the nation's richest cities to a standstill. Tens of thousands of commuters spent six to eight hours trapped in their cars, some contemplating sleeping in offices, others joking they would reach faster on foot. This was not mere inconvenience; it was a collapse of confidence in the idea that prosperity automatically translates into livability.

Gurugram has long projected itself as the "millennium city," a hub for global corporations, luxury apartments, and gleaming malls. Yet, beneath the glass facades and multilane expressways lies an urban skeleton unable to withstand even seasonal rains. Drainage systems are poor, waterlogging routine, and traffic management reactive at best. Residents pay exorbitant rents, companies pay premium real estate costs, but the most basic guarantee of a functional city - the ability to move without disruption - remains elusive.

The deeper lesson is not confined to one city. Across India, the monsoon has once again revealed the fragility of our infrastructure. Himachal Pradesh has lost hundreds of lives this season to landslides and flash floods. Punjab, Uttarakhand and Kashmir have faced severe destruction. In Delhi, the Yamuna river breached danger levels, displacing thousands from low-lying settlements, and the new government so far seems to have done little to address major infrastructure problems. Climate change has undeniably intensified rainfall patterns, but the devastation is magnified by poor planning, encroached waterways, and out-dated disaster preparedness.

Urban India often mistakes rapid growth for sustainable development. Towers rise faster than drainage lines are laid. Highways expand before flood channels are secured. Local governance is fragmented, with multiple agencies working at cross-purposes. Gurugram exemplifies this contradiction: world-class ambition paired with Third World neglect. The cost is borne daily by residents, and episodically in crises such as this week's gridlock.

The solution is not complicated, though it requires political will and long-term vision. Cities like Gurugram must invest in storm-water management, integrated traffic systems, and transparent accountability for civic bodies. Short-term advisories, such as asking offices and schools to shift online, merely sidestep the problem. The real challenge is to redesign cities so that seasonal rains do not turn into annual emergencies. India's aspiration to be a global economic power cannot rest solely on skyscrapers and corporate hubs. It must be judged by how its cities withstand stress, how they protect their residents, and how they integrate resilience into everyday life. Gurugram's ordeal is a warning. Unless infrastructure catches up with ambition, every burst of rain will remind us that the foundation of growth is still on shaky ground.

Higher Education Woes

The existing teaching community's ingrained resistance to accept a syncretic approach is both behavioural and capability-driven. For example, congenital aversion to technology enablement is defended by citing the possible loss of interpersonal interaction and the affective dimension between teachers and students. This argument is invalid as a blended teaching environment does not advocate the discontinuity of the human interface between teachers and students



up classrooms, creating an infrastructure shortage. Contrastingly, in prestigious institutions like JNU, Jadavpur University, Presidency University, to name a few, seats in subjects like Economics and Chemistry are going empty.

Clearly, infrastructure is not a problem here. The more disquieting issue is that the students of the aforementioned institutions as well as others, disenchanted with the current educational framework, are seeking options which will boost their chances of employability.

While one can argue that education should not be designed on economic considerations alone, this growing apathy merits a rethink.

Insofar as the outcry against the low pupil-teacher ratio is concerned, noted economist Karthik Muralidharan (tellingly points out that the concern is overblown. "Increasing the number of teachers doesn't help either," evidence suggests a weak relationship between PTR reduction and learning gains. For instance, a study by Abhijit Banerjee and colleagues found no effect of smaller class sizes on student learning".

Meanwhile, the gap between education and employment continues to widen. Despite the growth in the graduate and post-graduate numbers, the April 2025 PLES (Periodic Labour Force Survey) figures show urban joblessness standing at 6.5 per cent while rural unemployment numbers are at 4.5 per cent.

What is of greater concern is the fact that the unemployment percentage is 13.8 per

cent in the 15-29 years age-group, higher than the overall average.

In such a scenario, the outcry regarding building infrastructure and adding more 'experienced' teachers rings hollow. Subject-based theoretical teaching, based on narrow grooves, is untenable in a non-linear world.

It becomes increasingly clear that the original woahalla on inadequate funding, PTR ratios, and infrastructure are deflecting the more significant issues affecting higher education which includes outdated curriculum design, ineffective teaching pedagogy, and resistance to change within a section of the teaching community. These foundational issues demand focussed attention.

As part of its new design, the NEP has taken remedial measures to move away from the archaic curriculum, bringing in flexibility and making it more holistic and interdisciplinary.

Special emphasis has been given to inculcate a higher order of cognitive capacities which encourages critical thinking and problem solving. The redesigned curriculum attempts to bridge the gap between education and employability, focusing on developing student capabilities which would be relevant to evolving employment needs.

To complement the redesigned curriculum, the NEP boldly breaks away from the outdated

Macaulayan pedagogic structure. Introducing a more student-centric, multidisciplinary, technology-enabled framework it encourages a blended model of pedagogy.

This includes digital literacy, interdisciplinary, problem solving and vocational exposure. The ITEP (Integrated Teacher Education Programme) is being implemented along with others. Unfortunately, the result of these efforts has been middling to poor.

The foremost reason for this resistance is the resolute indifference of a large section of the teaching community in accepting and adapting to the change. Ignoring the fact that education has to be viewed from a historical and relational context, they continue to deploy dated pedagogy, paying lip-service to the idea for a student-centric framework.

The existing teaching community's ingrained resistance to accept a syncretic approach is both behavioural and capability-driven. For example, congenital aversion to technology enablement is defended by citing the possible loss of interpersonal interaction and the affective dimension between teachers and students.

This argument is invalid as a blended teaching environment does not advocate the discontinuity of the human interface between teachers and students. Instead, keeping the generational perspective in mind, it recommends a balance between in-person teaching and technology-aided learning. It is evident that the reasons for this resistance, largely from academics belonging to humanities and social sciences, arise out of technophobia, fear of loss of identity and most importantly, fear of replacement.

Resistance research reveals that underlying emotional responses shape resistant attitudes. Instead of outright dismissal, there are carefully crafted justifications (loss of human contact, demographic divide in accessing technology, low teacher-student ratios, lack of infrastructure), couching the internal, emotional resistance to change. It is time for institutions and individuals alike to acknowledge that mindset change in the teaching community is essential for bringing about sustainable improvements in education.

What educators have to internalise is that by acknowledging a new pedagogy which is seemingly opposed to the chalk and blackboard approach, they will be positing the principles of Hegelian dialectic, where the dynamic interplay of thesis and antithesis combines to arrive at synthesis. The journey would entail disruptions, but it would certainly engender a new education system that has enduring relevance in a fast-changing world. Embracing an adaptive mindset would be the best way to begin.

CHINADAILY

Deployment of Typhoon undermines peace

In a provocative move that poses a serious threat to regional peace and stability, the United States plans to "temporarily" deploy its Typhoon intermediate-range missile system on Japanese territory during a joint US-Japan military exercise from Sept 11 to 25. About 1900 US and 12,300 Japanese marines and other military personnel will participate in the drill code-named Resolute Dragon. The system will reportedly be withdrawn from Japan after the end of the drill, according to reports.

The land-based, ground-launched system, which will be positioned about 40 kilometres southeast of Hiroshima, can be used to launch SM-6 multi-role missiles and Tomahawk cruise missiles, whose range can reach 2000 kilometres.

A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman called the deployment another "destabilizing step" by Washington in "building up the capabilities of its ground-based short- and intermediate-range missiles for the purpose of forward deployment of such systems in various regions of the world".

It would be the Typhoon system's third deployment in the Western Pacific. The US army conducted a live-fire test with

the Typhoon system in Australia last month, the first time that this missile system was fired on foreign soil. And in April last year, the US shipped the missile system to the Philippines during a joint military drill.

A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, responding to the move, urged the US and Japan to respect other countries' security concerns, refrain from the deployment of Typhoon, and contribute to regional peace and stability with concrete actions. "China has repeatedly expressed grave concerns on relevant issues," spokesman Guo Jiakun said on Friday, adding that China always opposes the US deploying the Typhoon system in Asian countries.

The joint exercise will start just days after China's scheduled military parade on Sept 3, which is part of a series of activities to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the victory in the Chinese People's War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression (1931-45) and the World Anti-Fascist War.

Commenting on this, Kyodo News said in a report that the missile system deployment, for the first time on Japanese

territory, is viewed as sending a message to China. The joint drills, which focus on "controlling and defending key maritime terrain", reflect a deliberate escalation of the US efforts to build integrated, land-based strike capabilities across the Asia-Pacific region, which will inevitably escalate tensions in East Asia, particularly with Japan's neighboring countries.

Since its withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019, the US, with the purpose of maintaining its hegemonic position globally, has sought to deploy ground-based intermediate-range missiles in the Asia-Pacific region, which it believes could help beef up military deterrence against China.

The "temporary" deployment of the Typhoon system during the joint drills is nothing but a tentative step toward the planned permanent deployment of mid-range missiles in Japan, which, if materialized, could upset the existing strategic balance and increase the risk of miscalculation and conflict.

The deployment aims to tilt regional dynamics in favor of increased dependency on US military protection among Asia-Pacific countries, which can be anticipated



Letters To The Editor

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Build bridges, not walls

Sir, The recent developments surrounding the West Bengal Urdu Academy's literary festival present an important moment for reflection on our democratic values and cultural heritage. India's strength has always resided in its ability to celebrate diverse voices and traditions within a unified national framework.

When cultural events face suppression, we lose not only artistic expression, but the very pluralistic foundation that makes our democracy resilient.

The postponement of literary

festivals or cultural programmes, regardless of the language or community involved, represents a concerning trend.

Such actions can inadvertently signal that certain voices or traditions are less welcome in our public discourse, which runs counter to our constitutional principles. Rather than viewing cultural diversity as a challenge to be managed through political calculations, we might consider it as an asset to be celebrated.

Literary festivals, whether in Urdu, Bengali, Hindi, or any other language, contribute to the rich tapestry of Indian intellectual life. Moving forward, I hope our leaders will prioritize creating spaces where all communities feel

secure in expressing their cultural heritage, while simultaneously fostering dialogue that builds bridges rather than walls between different groups.

Yours, etc., Santanu Das, Hooghly, 2 September.

Old friends

Sir, This refers to the front-page report 'Modi & Putin hold bilateral meeting amid US tariffs' (September 2). The recent visuals of Prime Minister Modi with President Putin at the SCO summit in Tianjin should be a clear message to Washington. Despite President Trump's 50 per cent tariff on India, the country is not cutting its ties with Russia. Modi's warm handshake with Putin



and his ride in the Russian's Aurus car were strong signals of India's independent stand.

In fact, India may soon import even more Russian oil, partly because of the softening in Russia's refining capacity.

India has always said this is not an era of war. But buying Russian oil was also a US suggestion, meant

to avoid a global oil shock. If, after three years, Western sanctions have failed to weaken Russia's war machine, then blaming India is unfair.

India's friendship with Russia goes back to 1947. While India has built close ties with the US in recent decades, Trump's earlier pressure tactics has already made India cautious.

In today's multipolar world, no country can afford to break old partnerships.

The SCO summit has strengthened India's position. If the US is now shouting war, India should welcome it - but without yielding to threats.

Yours, etc., Vandana, Chandigarh, 2 September.

IN MEMORIAM

CHATTERJI DEVI - Passed away on September 4, 2001. Remembered with love and gratitude by sons Bhaskar, Vidyarthi and daughter Reeta.

Narratives, noise and the new global order

CHAITANYA K. PRASAD

Geostategic communication in the latter half of 2025 is undergoing a tectonic shift and an unprecedented push. Events geopolitically have defied the grammar of logic. Information, dissemination, and context generation have broken the ground rules, at times giving rise to infodemics, fakery, and the over-optimization of the content matrix.

The reality today is that the global information landscape faces mounting challenges of consistency, focus, norms, and practices. Due to the complexities prevailing, there is no conceptual clarity within communication frameworks to decide issues such as climate change, the green economy, the circular economy, tariffs and trade wars, or sustainable development. Perceptions of these issues are increasingly dependent on algorithms, data analytics, surveys, and social media tools — mechanisms that filter, amplify, or distort realities in this absence of clarity and deeper understanding, audiences are being subjected to new ground rules for transparency, authenticity, and content creation, often with uneven results.

Economic policies such as tariffs are rarely abstract; they touch ordinary lives through rising costs of essentials, disrupted supply chains, and shifts in employment. Yet, their implications are often communicated in opaque language, numbers, trade flows and deficit balances that alienate rather than inform. Climate change too suffers from a similar communication gap. A graph of rising CO2 levels may resonate in academic circles, but for the farmer whose crop fails under erratic rains or the urban worker breathing toxic air, the lived consequences demand narratives grounded in daily realities.

Disasters, whether climate-driven floods or trade-induced job losses, become communication failures

when institutions cannot explain cause, effect, and recourse in ways that ordinary citizens can grasp. For geopolitical communication to have legitimacy, it must move beyond jargon and capture how macro-level shifts intersect with micro-level experience.

Economic issues, strategies, and instantaneous policy mechanisms are now intertwined with the geostategic landscape, creating complex matrices of outreach, perception, and relationships. The challenge before strategists is to design a communication framework that balances competing interests without reducing nuance to noise. Today, tariffs, trade wars, and climate policies resemble boxing matches fought across the information terrain.

What is often ignored is the cost of communication missteps, contradictory narratives, conflicting mandates, and escalating rhetoric, which fuel mistrust, sharpen divides, and trigger reputational damage. Beyond diplomacy has a chance to intervene. The absence of coherence allows hostile actors to manipulate narratives and exploit uncertainty.

In the geostategic space, reputational management and narrative alignment are no longer afterthoughts but first lines of defence. The imperative is to align stakeholder confidence, ensure channels of de-escalation remain open, and minimize damage by carefully calibrating words before weapons. Appropriate messaging has become the mantra, mobilizing public opinion, signalling resilience, and projecting a nation's capacity to diversify economically while remaining an active and responsible global player.

As the world steps into this new chapter of geopolitical flux, communication strategies must be sophisticated, dynamic and multidimensional. The political climate is not only testing traditional paradigms but demanding innovation in how messages are crafted, delivered, and consumed.

Information today is less about access than credibility, control, and interpretation. The question is not who speaks, but how narratives are framed, reframed, and weaponised. We live in the age of "instant noodle communication," where messages are expected to be quick, simplified, and emotionally engaging.

In the middle of a crisis, such tags trend before policymakers draft official statements, and viral videos eclipse white papers. Public perception forms in real time, demanding that governance and diplomacy weave communication into the very fabric of policymaking. If messaging remains reactive, narratives will be shaped by chaos rather than strategy.

Diplomacy can no longer afford to treat communication as an afterthought. It must be embedded at the start of decision-making, ensuring that policies carry not only strategic weight but communicative clarity. In today's world, perception is as powerful as policy, and messaging is as critical as the action itself.

Generative AI is emerging as a game changer in this shifting terrain, altering the parameters of influence, perception, and intervention. Tech-driven tools are shaping new models of geostategic communication, where non-state actors can command as much visibility as nation-states.

AI can amplify, distort, or democratize narratives depending on who wields it. Deep-fakes blur fact and fabrication, while AI-powered dashboards track sentiment in real time, dictating strategies almost instantly. Within this new order, trust is built less by statements and more by images, symbols, and emotional resonance.

The challenge is not only technological but ethical. Can diplomacy adapt frameworks to ensure that truth does not collapse under the weight of simulation? Can communication be both rapid and responsible in an era of viral



manipulation? The answers will define the credibility of global institutions in the years to come.

Geopolitical alliances, once built on security or economic cooperation, must now also engage in shaping global communication norms. The digital sphere is today's battlefield, misinformation campaigns, propaganda wars, and algorithmic biases are as dangerous as missiles. By pooling resources, alliances can establish norms for transparency, accountability, and digital responsibility.

What is required is a collaborative effort towards a new "Global Information Order", an institutional platform bridging the gap between medium and message, narrative and policy. The 7Rs of communication — relevance, reliability, response, revival, reconstruction, and reposition, must be mainstreamed to create a communicative ecosystem that builds trust while respecting diversity.

The new global order must calibrate perception, build relationships, and drive action through mutually agreeable communication tools. It must integrate rather than divide, connect rather than confine. As we move forward, communication must transform from a transactional act into a trust-building exercise,

placing people, their lived realities, and their collective aspirations at the centre.

The geopolitical reality of 2025 makes one truth clear: communication is no longer a tool to package decisions but a core element of policymaking itself. Perception is as powerful as policy, and a well-crafted message can be as consequential as a treaty. Strategic communication must therefore be embedded at the start of the decision-making chain, ensuring coherence, credibility, and clarity.

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the ability to communicate effectively will be one of the most powerful tools in navigating the complexities of this neo-geopolitical era. The global stage demands not just information, but informed, intentional and inclusive communication that can withstand the noise, bridge divides, and build a more cooperative order.

In the end, navigating the new age of geopolitics will depend less on who has the loudest voice and more on who has the clearest message.

(The writer is a former Civil Servant, who writes on cinema and strategic communication. Inputs were provided by Zoya Ahmad and Vaishnavi Srinivasan. The views expressed are personal.)

100 Years Ago

News Items

THE RICKSHAW WALLAH

POPULARITY OF OLD-TIME VEHICLE

Despite the fact that motor conveyance is making good progress in Calcutta, the rickshaw, the most humble vehicle to be seen on the streets of the city, is more than holding its own, although it is not so much in evidence here as in Colombo and Madras. In his last annual report, the Commissioner of Police states that while hackney carriages, taken as a whole, have decreased, rickshaws have greatly increased. "In this connection," he adds, "I would, I think, be advantageous to reconsider the suggestion I originally put forward in regard to increasing the fees charged for rickshaw bearers' licenses." Last year 529 new licenses were issued for rickshaws and 1,150 rickshaws and palanquins (22 of the latter) were re-registered. Bearers licensed numbered 1930. Rickshaws are becoming increasingly popular with poorer class Indians and Anglo-Indians, as the fares afford a happy medium between the taxi-cab and the gharry, and they are able to penetrate into thoroughfares impassable to large vehicles. The phenomenal increase in the number of buses in the last few months, with cheap tickets for long distances have, however, adversely affected the rickshaw. In the important streets in Northern Calcutta half a dozen or more of these vehicles, mostly resplendent in plush and gilt, may be seen at any time. Marwaris, among others, are large proprietors of rickshaws, which they let on a daily basis of about one rupee to bearers who retain some tens earn above that amount. It is said that the majority of the bearers, usually Behars, earn a respectable income. It sometimes happens that the rickshaw is owned by a family, forming the sole source of livelihood. It is worked day and night bringing in on an average of Rs. 60 a month — a good return on an original cost of Rs. 150 to Rs. 200. At night, when the taxi driver sleeps in his car, and exhaustion brings rest to gharry horses, the rickshaw wallah, with his tinkling bell successfully haunts the streets for late fares.

AVOIDING CRASHES

"OFF-SIDE" RULE URGED BY BENGAL A. A

Berlin. The Automobile Association of Bengal has addressed a letter to the Commissioner of Police, Calcutta, recommending the adoption, at the earliest possible date, of the "off-side" rule for vehicular traffic in the city.

The rule gives the right-of-way to the vehicle approaching from the right hand, on all roads without exception. The Earl of Donoughmore, Vice-President of the Automobile Association, speaking at the annual meeting held in London, expressed pleasure at the Association's recommendation in favour of the rule, and testified to the efficiency with which it worked in France.

It is understood there is a probability of the rule being applied to the whole of the vehicle traffic in the United Kingdom in the immediate future.

VETERINARY REPORT

EQUINE MORTALITY IN ASSAM

Shilling.

The Veterinary Report for the year 1924-25, issued by the Ministry of Education, shows a decline in the mortality among equine and other animals from contagious diseases, but an increase in that of bovines; from 20,399 in the previous year to 23,940 in the year under review. Foot and mouth disease, and haemorrhagic septicaemia, share the increase, while there was a decrease in the number of deaths from anthrax and other contagious diseases. The suggested introduction of legislation to ensure effective means of control over the movement of diseased cattle, so as to stop the spread of infection, it is added would be unpopular, but an increase in the district staff would doubtless improve matters to some extent. Satisfaction is expressed that efforts would continue to be made to stimulate interest in the work of the Department by the opening of veterinary stalls and the giving of lectures and demonstrations at agricultural and other shows.

NEW FLYING-BOAT

CALCUTTA-RANGOON AIR SERVICE

Replying to an inquiry by the Committee of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce in connexion with the proposed air service between Calcutta and Rangoon, the Director-General of Posts and Telegraphs has informed the Chamber that a flying-boat was at present under construction to the order of the Air Ministry, and the trials proved successful it would be capable of performing the Calcutta-Rangoon flight between sunrise and sunset.

In the meantime steps are being taken to select suitable sites for seadromes at the two termini. Referring to certain remarks of the Committee on the advantages of an air service between Calcutta and Rangoon to commercial interests, the Director-General considers that, until the experimental stage is concluded, it would be premature to formulate proposals for a commercial service.

Will Supreme Court affirm Trump's monarchy?

FELICITY DEANE

Trading partners of the United States are facing a fresh period of uncertainty after a US federal appeals court ruled President Donald Trump's "reciprocal" tariffs were illegal. In a 7-4 majority, the judges ruled Trump had exceeded his power by invoking emergency powers to impose tariffs of "unlimited duration on nearly all goods from nearly every country in the world", upholding an earlier court decision.

The ruling will throw into disarray the strategies of trading partners still in negotiations with the US, who may decide to wait and see the outcome of the legal battle.

Although there are different options available to challenge the decision, Trump has made it clear the next stop will be the Supreme Court. The US Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit said the tariffs would remain in place until October 14, to allow time for further appeals.

The ruling testing the limits of executive power under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) from 1977. Trump is the first president to use this act to impose tariffs, setting the stage for

a test of executive power. At least for now, it is a test the administration appears to have failed. The judges rejected Trump's interpretation, which they said would place no limit on the president to raise revenue without any authorisation from Congress.

Citing Article I, section 8, of the US Constitution, the majority judgement unequivocally stated that "tariffs are a tax" and the power to tax under the Constitution rests with Congress.

In upholding an earlier decision by the Court of International Trade, the appeals court majority noted: "If the President can declare an emergency to cut the deficit by raising taxes in whatever way he wishes, not much remains of Congressional authority over taxation."

There were two important outcomes from this latest decision. First, the "liberation day" tariffs are (currently) deemed illegal. Secondly, these "illegal" tariffs will temporarily stay in place to allow for the appeal options to be explored.

Revenue will continue to be collected under the executive orders in question. Should the tariffs be deemed illegal on appeal, that revenue may need to be returned.

This ruling does not apply to all tariffs. It doesn't cover specific sector tariffs such as those on aluminium and steel. However, other tariffs imposed during the first Trump presidency have already been ruled illegal under World Trade Organization rules and are currently the subject of appeal under the multilateral dispute settlement system.

The latest ruling would not reverse the decision to suspend the de minimis exception that caused global postage chaos. However, if the ruling is upheld, the rate of tariffs on low-value goods would revert back to pre-"liberation day" percentages. In many instances, this would mean back to zero.

Trading partners initially responded with panic to the unravelling of Trump's chaotic tariff agenda in April. There was a rush to meet with the president and make so-called deals. So what should governments of trading partners do now?

The most logical response might be to wait out the US legal process, because there may be no point in making deals if the tariffs are upheld to be illegal.

Unfortunately, this means continued uncertainty for business. On one



hand, the courts may determine the tariffs are unlawful and must therefore be revoked. But Congress could subsequently move to reimpose tariffs with fresh legislation, or Trump could try other legal avenues.

If the administration does decide to appeal to the Supreme Court, the important test will not necessarily be about tariffs but whether the US Constitution will continue to support the separation of powers.

The appeals court decision argues the IEEPA does not support the introduction of tariffs of the magnitude of the "liberation day" tariffs. What the IEEPA does allow is for the president to "regulate" importation. However, the court suggested this phrase is nothing more than "a waiver this need on which to rest such sweeping power."

Crossword | No. 293231

ACROSS												
1	Soon lore will be translated into English (7)	15	Novel not with Smiley's serious stuff (9)	28	Temperature rating cut by half around large decorations (7)	5	Free ticket offered by a US city theatre group (7)	17	US state about to encourage fairground attraction (8)			
2	Concern about sailor's source of trouble in nightclub (7)	16	Opening race not without content (4)	29	Article is recalled about French bits of land in part of central Europe (7)	6	Support? It's got when expressing annoyance (4-2)	18	Legendary castle attended by Fate (7)			
3	Possibly fell over after question in restaurant area (5,4)	17	Jazz fans getting half of performers rejected (4)			7	Excessive specifying has characters switching places — indication of riot? (9)	19	Ecoes overseas often take in a lot of historic and curious buildings (7)			
4	Appear frightened to have debt while in credit (5)	18	Meat dish I scarf rudely — look (9)	DOWN	1	Books, say, about new times (7)	8	Consumes specifically targeted jokes on the radio (7)	20	Consume: specifically targeted jokes on the radio (7)		
5	Very clear this writer taps into a lot of elegance (7)	19	Invoking small amount of liquid? Just the reverse (7)	2	South American figure turned up at four after end of debate (5)	9	Increased current cost of gastronomy venue? (8)	21	Economic skill picked up? Just the opposite (1,6)	22	Calm when covered by gross oily stuff (6)	
6	Complaint linked to old art club (7)	20	Complaint linked to old art club (7)	3	Agreed: US city's mostly in American state (8)	10	Programmes to include tune arranged for string players (9)	23	Matches on Saturday show this game (5)			
7	Abandon barring women boarding vehicles? On the contrary, becoming insulting (7)	21	Revolutionary attack knocking out one African town (5)	4	No good getting upset over church in central Italy initially providing Italian cuisine (7)	11	Sailor accounting for most of ship's weight (5)					
8		22	Temple in playing tennis is demanding (9)									

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



The Free Press Journal
Founder Editor: S Sadanand

Maratha stir may be over, but crisis remains

In according to six of the eight demands of the Maratha reservation activist Manoj Jarange Patil, which allowed him to claim victory and thousands of his followers to celebrate, the Mahayuti government in Maharashtra led by Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis went further than its predecessors but, ironically, cannot claim complete credit or leverage it politically—yet. This stems from the fact that in granting some of Patil's demands, such as implementing the Hyderabad Gazette (1908), the Satara Gazette (1884), and the Pune-Aundh Gazette to facilitate Kumbi certificates for the Marathas in the OBC category, and issuing a Government Resolution specifying the process based on the 58 lakh records found, the Fadnis-led three-party government has riled the OBCs and their leaders, including Chhagan Bhujbal, a cabinet minister.

Fadnis would not want a Maratha-versus-OBC formation, given the overwhelming electoral influence of both—he asserted that his government will not let a dispute happen—but this is far easier said than done. The government would have to brace itself for a degree of backlash from the OBCs. Maintaining peace between the two powerful sections and coming good on the assurances made to Jarange Patil on Tuesday will call for deft handling of competing demands, time sensitivity, political smarts, and leveraging personal equations across the political, social, and academic realms. The road ahead is more slippery than it appears in the warm glow of the accord between the government and Jarange Patil.

For now, though, Fadnis has bought himself elbow room and time by agreeing to most of the demands, which include, besides the key one on issuing Kumbi certificates on the basis of the gazettes, the withdrawal of police cases on Maratha activists filed during the agitation in the past two to three years, granting compensation and jobs to family members of those killed in these protests, forming village-level committees to scrutinise applications of Marathas applying for caste certificates, and time-bound clearance by the caste verification committee. What the Fadnis government desisted from accepting is the activist's demand to recognise all Marathas as Kumbis in a blanket manner, which the government representative, minister Radhakrishna Vikhe Patil, and others convinced Jarange Patil, is unlikely to stand scrutiny in the courts.

However, despite most of the demands being accorded to, it would be premature to declare that the Maratha reservation issue, complex and vexing for all governments for more than a decade, has been resolved. For one, Jarange Patil, who emerged as the community's leader in the past few years, pushed the Fadnis government with its back to the wall on this occasion after calling off his previous agitations without anything in hand; he and his team of advisors-academics will be closely watching if the Fadnis government comes good on what has been agreed. Secondly, the government's every decision and action can be—and may well be—challenged in the courts and would have to withstand judicial scrutiny.

The Maratha quota stir goes back nearly three decades, but in 2014, prior to the Maharashtra Assembly elections, the then government led by Congress' Prithviraj Chavan had granted 16 per cent reservation to Marathas and 5 per cent to Muslims on the strength of the 'social and economic backwardness' of the communities. This was struck down in the Bombay High Court. In 2018, the then Fadnis-led government granted the quota again. It was upheld in the HC but capped at 12 per cent; however, the Supreme Court struck it down in 2019. The agitations, since then, have taken parts of Maharashtra and Mumbai by storm. Lakhs of protestors descending on Mumbai ended up severely disrupting parts of south Mumbai, prompting even the HC to sternly warn Jarange Patil about the law. Whether the current GRs, issued notably without a full cabinet meeting, will stand legal scrutiny is an open question.

The political leveraging will prove to be difficult for Fadnis not only because of this aspect and the implementation headaches but also because his two deputies—Shiv Sena's Eknath Shinde and Nationalist Congress Party's Ajit Pawar—have been rather hands-off on this issue. This further crystallised the perception that the three leaders are hardly on the same page, though they jointly make the government. And it is noteworthy that the government's negotiators, with Jarange Patil and his team, were mostly political in nature, while the Congress or the NCP who had switched allegiance to the BJP. So, Fadnis cannot claim to be the unlikely hero for Marathas yet. In fact, his acumen, patience, and political goodwill will be sorely tested in the months ahead.

For the Marathas, especially in Marathwada, the relative success of this agitation does not spell the end of their troubles. At the core of their demand for reservation in government jobs and educational institutions lies the diminished opportunities for young people of the community. This has been triggered by the continuing agrarian crisis in the state and has brought out sharp differences between them and the small section of wealthy and politically powerful Marathas, including most of the state's chief ministers. Reservations, even if they are fully implemented, are a transitional move; the real issue of making agrarian work sustainable for the community remains to be addressed.



Insight

BHAVDEEP KANG

Bihar's massive youth bulge is shaping the election campaign in India's most underdeveloped state. The chief ministerial aspirants, from doughty incumbent Nitish Kumar to legacy politician Tejashwi Yadav and dynamic newbie Prashant Kishor, all are targeting under-30 voters, each in his own way.

Rashtriya Janata Dal boss Tejashwi Yadav is just 35 and is playing the youth card for all he's worth. On Tuesday, he grabbed eyeballs by grooving with youngsters on Patna's Marine Drive. What escaped attention was the scene of Yadav's dance moves: a 4-lane marquee expressway dreamed up and executed by his arch-rival, Nitish Kumar. Running along the banks of the Ganga, the 20-km stretch is a reminder that whatever little development Bihar has seen began with Kumar's in-prings as CM in 2005.

Tejashwi belted out a lyric in praise of his father and former CM, Lalu Yadav: "Lalu bina chaalu ee Bihar na ho" (Bihar needs Lalu). Reminding voters of his troubled legacy may not have been a wise move. His family's 15-year stewardship of Bihar from 1990 to 2005 saw the state slide to the bottom in economic and human development indicators. In the crucial

post-liberalisation decade, other states took advantage of economic reforms to forge ahead, while Bihar remained bogged down in caste politics, violence and corruption. For example, Tamil Nadu's per capita GDP shot up sixfold to Rs 30,062 by 2004-5, well above the all-India average of Rs 24,142, while Bihar remained at a modest Rs 7,914.

In 2005, Bihar had the highest rate of poverty at 54.55 per cent, the highest unemployment and the least investment. It also had the poorest literacy rate and the highest birth rate. The education system was in shambles, with schools desperately understaffed. A notoriously poor law and order situation and equally poor infrastructure stymied industrial development. With limited opportunities for employment at home, labour migrated en masse in search of livelihood.

Yadav, one of the nine children of Lalu and Rabri Yadav, should ideally explain how he will do things differently. In the bad old days, social justice" was deployed to justify Bihar's poor governance and the development gap and to protect the interests of crime lords. Yadav knows that will no longer fly with the young electorate. So, he has sought to deflect attention from his party's disastrous past by targeting Kumar in the

present. While Kumar's first two terms saw a slew of reforms, which boosted Bihar's growth to an average of 11 per cent in that period, his frequent political oscillations appear to have had a decelerating effect. While gains have been made, Bihar remains at the bottom of state-wise rankings on significant metrics, including per capita income. It stands 15th in terms of GDP and accounted for a mere 2.8 per cent share in India's nominal GDP.

As for human development indicators, the poverty rate has fallen to 33.7 per cent (2022), while literacy has improved to 70.7 per cent (2022), and the total fertility rate (TFR) has decreased from 4 in 2005 to 3 in 2020. But urbanisation is still low and population density high, with significant unemployment. Although salaried employment improved from 4.2 per cent in 2005 to 10 per cent in 2021, it remains well below the national average. Uttar Pradesh stands in stark contrast to Bihar, having progressed visibly to become one of the top five states by industrial output. The ageing Kumar is a convenient target for the youthful Yadav in a state where 40 per cent of voters are less than 30 years of age. Unemployment is a huge concern, and Yadav has flamboyantly promised jobs for one crore youth. He has also mooted a domicile pol-

icy, that is, reserving jobs for locals. He intends to waive fees for competitive exams, provide transport to exam centres and set up a Youth Commission. All this, in addition to handouts of Rs 2,500 to every woman, subsidies on gas cylinders, free electricity and increased pensions for widows, the elderly and the differently abled.

Kumar has countered by claiming he will create one crore jobs both in the government and the private sector over the next five years. He also outlined plans for a skill university under the Saat Nischay Scheme to enhance employability over the next five years. To underline the credibility of his "resolve", he pointed out that 8 lakh youth had already been given government jobs between 2005 and 2020. In addition, eligible women will receive Rs 10,000 to assist them in finding a source of income, besides easy access to credit.

Prashant Kishor, founder of the Jan Suraj party and political strategist extraordinaire, is not to be outdone. He guarantees that local youth will get in situ employment at salaries ranging from Rs 10,000 to Rs 12,000 per month, thereby obviating the need for migrating in search of work. Remittances from some 75 million workers from Bihar account for a large chunk of its GDP, but that hasn't deterred

Kishor from promising that 5 million youth will be brought back and given jobs by his government. Other sops include underwriting private school fees for underprivileged children and pensions for all senior citizens.

Congress leaders Rahul Gandhi and Kanhaiya Kumar, too, have targeted young voters with the promise of jobs. Gandhi addressed a 'maharozgar mela' (employment fair) in Patna earlier this year, castigating Kumar's government for failing to provide local job opportunities for Bihar's youth. Earlier, Kanhaiya had conducted a padyatra, raising the slogan of 'Palaan Roko, Naukari Do' (stop migration, provide jobs).

Interestingly, none of the contenders have explained just how these jobs will materialise, given the state's heavy debt burden and limited industrial growth. Whoever ends up at the helm will not be able to deliver on promises in the short term. Until the state accelerates infrastructure development, improves law and order and pro-actively implements the labour codes so as to attract investment, Bihar's youth will continue to seek their livelihood elsewhere.

Bhavdeep Kang is a senior journalist with 35 years of experience working with major newspapers and magazines. She is now an independent writer and author.

Who will benefit politically out of Maratha agitation?

It's tough for the govt to allow reservation for Marathas from OBC quota, as proving that Maratha community is socially backward is difficult



Fuzzy Logic

ROHIT CHANDAVARKAR

India's financial capital, Mumbai, witnessed a huge agitation by members of the Maratha community during the past few days. The agitation ended in five days on Tuesday evening. Agitators were demanding reservation in education and government jobs for the Maratha community. Over the weekend and the first two days of this week, road traffic was crippled and public life was disrupted by this agitation in South Mumbai. The demand for Maratha reservation has been long-standing. But since the agitation resurfaced ahead of the much-awaited civic and district council polls in Maharashtra, it would be interesting to check who would benefit politically from this agitation. As the agitation concluded sooner than many expected, questions regarding its impact still weigh on the minds of people.

The leader of the agitation, Manoj Jarange Patil, has, over the past many years, been demanding that the only way to provide reservation to the Maratha community instantly is to list them as

members of the Kumbi community and extend the benefit enjoyed by the Kumbis to them. But the government has not been able to do this, as the move might get challenged in the courts and be blocked. Traditionally, the Maratha community has been the ruling and the landholding community in the region. However, because of fragmentation of the agricultural land and the agrarian crisis caused by climate change and other factors, the community now faces economic challenges and has shifted to jobs in urban areas. This has led to the question as to why the poor within the Marathas should not get the benefit of reservations similar to the OBCs in the state.

Though the agitation ended in five days, it generated a huge response. Now the question is, who stands to gain the most politically from it?

What needs to be understood is how the Maratha agitation, and its coverage in the national as well as regional media, has galvanised and polarised the OBC community in Maharashtra. Some of the OBC leaders are already speaking to the

media about how they are opposed to giving reservation to the Maratha community from the OBC quota in case the Marathas are listed as Kumbis. This galvanisation and polarisation is likely to affect the upcoming municipal and civic polls in Maharashtra.

The next thing that is to be factored in is how the BJP, in the past three to four decades, has cultivated the OBC community as their assured vote bank. In the 1980s and '90s, the BJP ideologue, Vasant Rao Bhagwat, designed the idea of taking the various OBC communities along and promoting leaders from them as BJP leaders. Some leaders, like Gopinath Munde and Annasaheb Dange, among others, were given prominence in the BJP government, which came to power for the first time in Maharashtra in 1995.

This made the BJP look like a party that enjoyed the political support of the OBC community in Maharashtra on a large scale. On the other hand, Sharad Pawar's NCP, since it was formed in 1999, always appeared as if the party was predominantly a political outfit of the Marathas. The Congress,

traditionally, had leaders mainly from the Maratha community and some from the SC-ST categories.

Now, this brings about an interesting observation and prediction about who will benefit from the Maratha agitation and the resulting OBC polarisation. Many observers feel that the BJP is set to gain politically, as the OBCs will likely get united and support the party in the upcoming polls. The other factor is that of the chief ministerial fate. Many argue that the Marathas are upset about Maharashtra having a Brahmin chief minister. But an interesting observation presented by some party insiders is that if the OBCs and the Marathas are divided over the reservation issue, both sides may prefer to have a face which will neither be Maratha nor OBC. This makes Chief Minister Devendra Fadnis's position in the current situation stronger!

The political impact of this agitation is going to be long-lasting. Though unpredictable as of now, many feel that in the upcoming civic polls as well as the district council polls that are likely to happen in Maharashtra in the first

quarter of 2026, the BJP is likely to gain ground due to polarisation of the Marathas and the OBCs.

It is very difficult for the government to allow reservation for the Marathas from the OBC quota, for, as various committees have said in the past, proving that the Maratha community is socially backward is very difficult. The Supreme Court struck down the reservation given to the Maratha community by the Fadnis government in 2019 on this very basis. But it is possible for the Union government to bring in some legislation and amendments to the Constitution to allow a higher percentage of reservation in Maharashtra, which will then open the channel for Maratha reservation. All this is a long-drawn process, and nobody has any clue as to when it will happen or whether it will happen. For the time being, the Maratha agitation is very much a political issue which the various political outfits are trying to benefit from.

Rohit Chandavarkar is a senior journalist who has worked for 31 years with various leading newspaper brands and television channels in Mumbai and Pune.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Kabul quake

A powerful earthquake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale struck eastern Afghanistan, with its epicentre in Nangarhar province at a shallow depth of just 8 km. The disaster caused large-scale devastation, wiping out entire villages. Official figures confirm over 800 lives lost and more than 2,500 injured, with the toll expected to rise as rescue operations continue. The tragedy highlights Afghanistan's vulnerability to natural disasters and the urgent need for sustained international cooperation in reconstruction and rehabilitation.

RS Narula, Patiala

Educate girls

In 2007, Safena Husain started Educate Girls from a handful of schools; the movement now stretches across 30,000 villages, touching over 2 million lives. She was honoured with this year's Ramon Magsaysay Award, Asia's highest tribute to public service. Through Vidya and Pragati, and the tireless devotion of 23,000

volunteers, Educate Girls nurtures confidence, dismantles barriers, and cultivates leadership where it was once unimaginable.

Vijay Singh Adhikari, Uttarakhand.

Teachers' worth

India celebrates Teacher's Day on September 5, honouring Dr S. Radhakrishnan. This day reminds us that education is not only about marks but also about shaping life and building character. Today, students often skip schools and colleges, rely heavily on private coaching, or spend hours on social media. Parents too see education only as a tool for jobs and grades. Modern technology provides easy answers but weakens students' thinking and creativity. Exams may test knowledge, but only teachers can teach us how to live.

Prof. Vijay Koshti, Sangli

Dirty politics

Appropos the report "PM tears into RJD-Congress over abuse to dead mom" (Sept 3). The recent episode during Rahul Gan-

A helping hand

Kind and compassionate India (though in the midst of a Trump Tariff dilemma) was the first to help Afghanistan, which was hit by a massive earthquake in which around 800 people died and over 2,800 were injured. The world's nations should unite to help the people there. Afghanistan has been facing infighting for decades due to internal strife under the Taliban rule and a drop in foreign aid. While foreign aid can be extended to tide over the recent crisis, what the country needs most in the long run is an elected government.

Sreelecha P.S., Telangana



Sanjay Chopra, Mohali

Great achievement

The recent presentation of India's first indigenous 32-bit chip, "Vikram-32", to PM Modi is truly a moment of pride for the nation. This is not just a technical breakthrough but also a solid step towards the vision of an Atmanirbhar Bharat. For decades, India has depended on foreign tech-

nology, but this chip—designed to withstand the toughest conditions of space missions—proves the strength of our scientists and engineers. This initiative will help India secure its place on the global semiconductor map.

Aradhya Singh, Azamgarh

E20 petrol

The Supreme Court, in its order, has rejected the appeal of ethanol-blended

petrol, challenging the centre's policy of rolling out 20% ethanol-blended petrol (E20) without providing consumers an option to purchase ethanol-free fuel. The policy violates the fundamental rights of vehicle owners whose vehicles are not compatible to E20. Also, the damage caused to vehicles by E20 is not covered under the insurance policy.

Dimple Wadhawan, Kanpur

THE ASIAN AGE

4 SEPTEMBER 2025

Maha govt buys peace on Maratha quota, for now

Mumbai heaved a sigh of relief after Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange declared "victory" and called his "peaceful" protest at the Bombay high court rightly noted was far from peaceful. Mr Jarange leveraged the numerical strength of the Maratha community to pressure the Devendra Fadnis-led government into accepting most of his demands. However, neither the government's assurances nor Mr Jarange's victory claims mean the Marathas will immediately receive reservation under the Other Backward Classes category. What has been accepted is Mr Jarange's demand for implementing the Hyderabad Gazetteer, a move that could allow Marathas from the Marathwada region to establish their Kumbi credentials — a step toward potential OBC inclusion.

With this, CM Devendra Fadnis has managed to calm the situation for now. But there is no guarantee that protesters won't feel betrayed and return to the streets in a few months. Besides, backlash from OBC groups is looming large. Many within the OBC community view the inclusion of Marathas as a dilution of their rights.

The Maratha reservation movement dates to the early 1980s. Although traditionally regarded as a dominant group in Maharashtra, many Marathas — especially in rural areas — have faced increasing economic hardship due to agricultural distress, unemployment and limited access to modern opportunities. While politically influential, poorer subgroups of the community often feel excluded from the benefits of development, particularly in education and employment. These grievances have fuelled calls for affirmative action as the solution to their problems.

While the concerns are genuine and deserve attention, whether the Maratha community qualifies for caste-based reservation remains contentious. Even if the government yields to political pressure, such a move may not stand up to judicial scrutiny. In 2021, the Supreme Court struck down the previous attempt to grant reservation to Marathas under the Socially and Educationally Backward Communities (SEBC) Act, 2018. The court ruled not only that it breached the 50 per cent cap on reservations but also that there was insufficient evidence to prove the community's social and educational backwardness.

A more constructive approach would involve conducting thorough, data-driven surveys to determine if certain Maratha subgroups genuinely meet the criteria for OBC inclusion. However, political parties and protest leaders avoid this path. There is also a concern that granting reservations to Marathas could open the floodgates to similar demands from other dominant communities, such as the Patels in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, Gujjars in Rajasthan and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh.

As elections approach, it is common for politicians to promise reservations to influential groups without fully assessing whether they meet constitutional criteria. These pledges, often unsupported by solid data, are frequently struck down by the courts — leading to more protests, social unrest and polarisation. Unjustified, unconstitutional reservation can deepen social divides. Communities excluded from quotas may feel resentment, further entrenching caste-based politics. The fight for justice must not turn into a race for quotas.

Succession battles within family-run regional political parties are never easy and usually leave even the winners fairly scarred. The one that has been unfolding in Telangana over the past few months in the Bharat Rashtra Samithi supremo K. Chandrashekar Rao's family — ostensibly among the family and extended family members — is no exception.

Chandrashekar Rao's suspension of his daughter, K. Kavitha, from the party on disciplinary grounds, coupled with her startling allegations of corruption against some top BRS leaders — packaged as a retaliatory move coinciding with her announcement of quitting both the BRS and the Legislative Council on Wednesday — promises an intriguing drama of palace politics in the days to come.

Brother-sister battles over political legacy, and the power and pelf that come with it, are not new to Telugu land. Not too long ago, people witnessed a straight fight between Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and Y.S. Shyamala for Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's legacy. The current one in Telangana began as a presumed supremacy fight between Kavitha and K.T. Rama Rao, the heir apparent to Chandrashekar Rao's legacy and the reins of the BRS. But it took a curious turn in the last few days, with Kavitha shifting her target from her brother to the extended family, particularly her cousins and Mr Chandrashekar Rao's confidants, T. Harish Rao and J. Santosh Kumar.

The daughter professes that it is not about power or legacy, but about how Chandrashekar Rao, a trusting man, is being bamboozled by those he trusts the most, and how both he and his son, Rama Rao, are in peril — just as the BRS itself is — falling victim to Harish Rao's machinations and villainy.

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And though Kavitha's charges about the corruption of Harish Rao and Santosh Kumar have put the BRS, and consequently Chandrashekar Rao, in a tight spot for the time being, the family feud has only fuelled speculation that the unfolding drama is a well-scripted drama by the core "Kavakunda" family, which might be united in its purpose to rid itself of potential risks from within but not of the family. Yet with the blood-letting on, what could remain is an already weakened BRS turning further anaemic.

THE ASIAN AGE

Kaushik Mitter

Editor

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Lateral entry: A reform lost in translation

When the Modi Sarkar unveiled its lateral entry scheme in 2018, it promised to shake up the ossified steel frame of Indian governance with an injection of fresh ideas and outside expertise. The pitch was seductive: Cut through the red tape by bringing in private-sector professionals who had navigated markets, managed scale and thought beyond the dusty rulebooks of North Block. Seven years later, the scheme finds itself in limbo, more a footnote to babu chatter than the revolution it once claimed to be.

The reasons are hardly mysterious. For one, the government stumbled headlong into the reservation debate. By defining lateral entry posts as "single-post cadres" and therefore outside the ambit of constitutional quotas, it invited criticism of bypassing affirmative action. Politically, that was never going to fly. Instead of addressing it head-on — say, by designing a transparent system of reserved slots — the government blinked, quietly withdrawing advertisements for 45 posts last year and pretending it was all part of a grand re-think.

Then there's the talent pool problem. Rather than attracting the best of India's boardrooms, applications have disproportionately come from PSU mid-managers keen to stay in Delhi. Add to that a salary structure pegged to government scales, which is far below what senior private sector leaders command. The only people willing to take the plunge are those who view it as a lifestyle

move, not a national calling. Even for those who did make it in, the experiment was underwhelming. Experts hired for their domain knowledge found themselves lost in the labyrinth of the notices and procedural niceties, their skills underused. Innovation can't flourish when you're reduced to navigating the same bureaucratic sludge as career civil servants.

What was meant to be a bold reform now appears to be yet another committee-bound exercise, caught between the imperatives of social justice, the realities of compensation, and the unwillingness to redefine roles. Unless the government creates a distinct lateral track with clear mandates, competitive pay, and built-in accountability, this scheme will remain exactly what it is today.

CURIOSITY COMEBACK OF URJIT PATEL
The irony is rich. Urjit Patel, the Reserve Bank governor who famously walked away mid-term in 2018, citing "personal reasons" while everyone whispered "government interference," is now India's man at the International Monetary Fund. The very establishment that once bristled at his autonomy structure has wheeled him back into the spotlight, this time with a global microphone.

This isn't just about Mr Patel. It's about India's shifting calculus on credibility. In a world where IMF boardrooms are weighing debt distress in Sri Lanka, precarious reserves in Bangladesh, and

the fiscal overhang of climate finance, New Delhi seems to have decided that reputation trumps resentment. Patel, with his inflation-targeting discipline and IMF pedigree, offers both gravitas and a familiar technocratic face.

But the backstory matters. His 2018 resignation was the first time in decades that a sitting RBI governor quit abruptly, sparking debates about the Centre's overreach. Shaktikanth Das' smooth succession only deepened suspicions of a "yes-man" preference. Fast forward to today, and Mr Patel's quiet rehabilitation raises uncomfortable questions: Has the government truly come to value institutional independence, or is this simply a case of redeploying a skilled insider abroad, where his autonomy won't sting quite as much?

Whatever the answer, the signal to the international community is clear: India is fielding a heavyweight at the IMF table. For Mr Patel, it's a redemption arc. For the Centre, it's a test of whether it can project technocratic credibility abroad while still wrestling with political interference at home.

Sometimes, the louder message lies not in the autonomy itself, but in the contradictions it quietly papers over.

THE LONE WHISTLE IN THE HIMALAYAS
In Uttarakhand, where every monsoon brings fresh reminders of the Himalayas' fragility, the

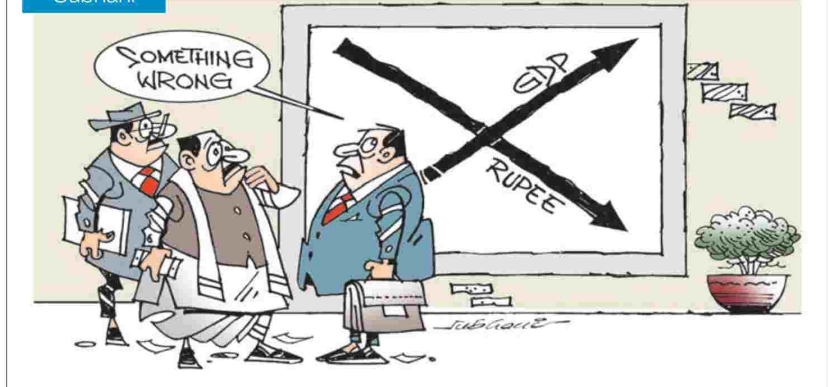
real story isn't just about a few illegal eco huts tucked away in Munsiyari. It's about the one man who refused to look away. Sanjay Chaturvedi, chief conservator of forests, has once again done what few babus dare — call out wrongdoing in black and white, no matter how powerful the players involved.

Mr Chaturvedi is not new to this. A Magaysay Award winner, he has made a career out of exposing corruption, whether it was in AIMS or the Haryana forest department, often paying the price through transfers, inquiries, and isolation. In Munsiyari, he flagged how rules were bent, approvals bypassed, and public revenue siphoned off under the guise of eco-tourism. More importantly, he named names and demanded real accountability, urging nothing less than CBI and ED investigations. That takes courage in a system where blowing the whistle often means blowing up your own career.

Interestingly, the Centre only stirred into action after his report landed on desks, ordering the state forest department to prosecute those responsible. Without Mr Chaturvedi's doggedness, the issue would likely have been buried under the usual rubble of "development" projects.

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Subhani



GST 2.0: A major reform or sops for hard-pressed?



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

P rime Minister Narendra Modi promised structural reforms of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime in his Independence Day address which would lower prices, increase consumption, and thereby boost GDP. This long-term reform strategy is made even more urgent by the American intransigence in imposing penal import tariffs on India. The GST Council, chaired by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, has met this week to determine a new structure for GST 2.0 to replace GST 1.0, a value added tax implemented in fiscal 2017-18 which consolidated multiple indirect taxes levied by the Union and state governments into a single tax applicable across the country.

The benefits thus far have been significant. The value-added format avoids the "cascading effect" of tax levied on the tax already paid, by making all tax on input purchase deductible from the final tax burden, by linking the purchase invoice with the sale invoice. This also creates an incentive to avoid cash payments without a bill, thereby enlarging the tax base and tax revenue.

There is, however, much to rectify. First, the existing GST has six rates — 0 per cent for agricultural unprocessed, unpackaged goods and social services, five per cent for high volume and low margin essentials and daily needs, 12 per cent for garments, processed food and telecom services, 18 per cent for electronic and electrical consumer durables, IT and business services and capital goods and 28 per cent for "sin" and luxury goods, including automobiles, tobacco products and coal. Plus, there is a special low rate of 1.5 per cent for gold, silver, cut diamonds and

jewellery. This multiplicity of tax rates encourages misclassification to evade tax and costs more administrative. Collection efficiency — the share of tax collected versus the potential — at about 60 per cent — reflects a common problem of economies with multiple rates in Europe, where collection efficiencies are similar. In Brazil, a developing economy like India, the efficiency is below 40 per cent. In comparison, New Zealand and South Africa, both with a single tax rate of 15 per cent, the collection efficiency is higher, at about 77 per cent and 98 per cent respectively. However, tax efficiency also depends on the composition of the tax base, which varies across countries, making a fair "apples to apples" comparison difficult.

The UK, with three tax rates, has a collection efficiency of 70 per cent, far higher than in Europe, illustrating that institutional differences also matter. In India, tax collection efficiency can be significantly enhanced by bringing alcohol and petroleum fuels under GST 2.0. These account for about five per cent of India's GDP. The addition of these goods can boost the tax base by 12 per cent from ₹140 trillion to ₹157 trillion and the revenue collected by 60 per cent from ₹25 trillion to ₹40 trillion. Sadly, the political economy is not supportive. These items are about 40 per cent of the "own revenues" of state governments and are key to their fiscal sovereignty. Only a grand bargain, giving more voting power to states within the GST Council, and holding them accountable for guaranteeing tax buoyancy, would be necessary, but perhaps not as generous as the 14 per cent promised in GST 1.0, given low inflation prospects in future. States should also

This is clever accounting, but far from structural reform. The objective of improving the efficiency of tax collection significantly remains compromised to manage the near time impact on consumers and protect government revenue.

consider that fast expanding electrification of transport can severely damage future revenues from petroleum fuels. Bringing agriculture under GST can become possible only once it evolves into a commercially-oriented and profitable sector.

GST 2.0 must optimise across the three primary objectives of reducing the incidence of tax on consumers; increasing its economic efficiency by reducing the number of rates; and generating more revenue via boosted consumption and growth.

An SBI research report suggests collapsing the existing six into five rates by ending the existing rate of 12 per cent and shifting products in the associated tax base (five per cent of total tax base) to the lower tax slab of five per cent. Similarly, the highest tax rate of 28 per cent (share in tax base of 15 per cent) could be ended. Two-thirds of the tax base moved to the lower tax rate of 18 per cent and the remaining five per cent share in tax base, moved to a new much higher rate of 40 per cent.

The net result is that for 80 per cent of consumers, the tax burden will remain the same. For 15 per cent of purchases, the tax burden will reduce by 7-10 per cent.

Just five per cent of purchases in luxury, automobiles and "sin goods" segment will attract a hefty 12 per cent additional tax. This restructuring fits well with the objective of benefiting the largest set of consumers or holding them

unharmful, whilst soaking the rich and the wealthy. The "sin tax" via a higher "sin tax", which partly pays for the tax reductions enjoyed by the middle class. Those at low-income levels

remain unharmful.

This is clever accounting, but far from structural reform. The objective of improving the efficiency of tax collection significantly remains compromised to manage the near time impact on consumers and protect government revenue. The inflation impact is assessed at an additional 0.25 percentage points. SBI anticipates an overall deficit initially of upto ₹1.1 trillion in the annual revenue collection, but expects this can be neutralised by the consumption boosting "income effect" of lower tax for consumers in 15 per cent of the tax base. Industry, however, is wary of demand compression in automobiles if they are included in the "sin tax" 40 per cent segment.

The weighted average rate of GST continues decreasing from 14.4 per cent at inception to 11.6 per cent in 2019 to 9.5 per cent in GST 2.0, illustrating the favourable direction of change in tax for a significant segment of consumers. Tax buoyancy will depend on how propensity to save windfall gains during tough times plays out versus the marginal propensity of consumers to spend (mostly in the higher income-tax brackets). The tax structure remains consistent with five rates, including a special rate for diamonds, jewellery and precious metals. Increase in the efficiency of tax collection will depend on the level of tax breaks given for products where demand is suppressed by income.

There is also the issue of neutralising the likely differential impact across states depending on their income and consumption profiles. A good first step for meaningful engagement, in the spirit of co-operation, would be for the finance minister to pledge that no state will be harmed by the change. Whether some will be benefited more than others would then be her discretion.

The writer is Distinguished Fellow, Chintan Research Foundation, and was earlier with the IAS and the World Bank

LETTERS

WAR CRIMINAL

Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu may never be forgiven by history for the genocide committed by him in Gaza resulting in the deaths of over 62,000 and the starvation and mutilation of countless young ones. India has recently passed a resolution against this heinous act. But what is the use of crying foul now, when the annihilation of the Gaza Strip as planned by Israel is almost complete? Doesn't it remind all of the adage, "closing the stable door after the horse has bolted"? Though the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement has gained new traction, it is too little and too late. Netanyahu deserves to be tried and severely punished, the earlier, the better.

Tharcus S. Fernando
Chennai

MANIPUR RECKONING

THE HOME ministry's renewed dialogue with Kuki-Zo insurgent groups, timed with the PM's impending visit to Manipur, is both overdue and significant. Since ethnic violence broke out in May 2023, the state has endured prolonged insecurity, highway blockades and eventually President's Rule. The PM's absence for over a year fed perceptions of neglect, while mistrust between Meiteis and Kukis-Zos deepened. Why the visit now? Pressures have mounted from civil society and global observers plus the imperative to restore vital supply lines to the Imphal valley. If highways reopen, it will be a practical step towards normalcy and a symbolic gesture of reconciliation.

Gopalaswamy J.
Chennai

INNOVATION HOPE

AS THE WORLD rewrites its destiny in silicon, India stands at a crossroads — will it remain a copycat of others or rise as an architect of the digital future? India marked a milestone at Semicon India 2025 with the launch of "Vikram", its first fully indigenous 32-bit microprocessor, designed and fabricated by IISc's Semi-Conductor Laboratory. Adding thrust, NITI Aayukta and PMEC Berhampur unveiled chips for IoT security, biomedical sensing, energy harvesting and AI-based face recognition. Promising as these strides are, India's semiconductor ecosystem, however, remains nascent. For globally, the race is relentless. Alibaba develops a next-gen AI inference chip amid US curbs on Nvidia, while Japan's Rapidus pushes toward 2 nm fabrication, challenging TSMC's supremacy.

Vijay Singh Adhikari
Nainital



THE GOAN EVERYDAY

You are the bows from which your children as living
arrows are sent forth.
Khalil Gibran

Loud and lawless: Goa's nightlife outshines justice

Goa's coastal areas, especially the Anjuna-Vagator belt, continue to be abuzz with noise pollution, highlighting a systemic breakdown in upholding the law despite clear court rulings and political commitments. The recent RTI information, which reveals the harsh truth of inaction amid increasing violations, illustrates how the system has failed to shield residents from relentless noise disturbances created by bustling nightclubs and restaurants despite assurances. This breakdown reflects a sorry state where economic benefits, tourism, and political collaboration have eclipsed the rights and well-being of citizens.

In the last four years, governmental records indicate a concerning trend: a rise in documented cases against clubs and venues violating noise regulations, yet an exceedingly low rate of charge sheets and fines. In 2025, despite 17 cases being recorded by August, no charge sheets had been filed. Previous years exhibited some movement—initial compliance from 2021 to 2023 appeared encouraging—but starting in 2024, cases accumulated with minimal follow-up. Repeat offenders continued their operations without consequence, disregarding legal limits as authorities remain indifferent.

This trend highlights a systemic stagnation — where cases are reported but enforcement is merely superficial rather than meaningful. Residents, who have endured sleepless nights and disrupted lives, express a sense of disillusionment: "Cases are just on paper," they remark. Despite the court's orders, which include the installation of sound monitoring devices and strict penalties, violations persist, particularly during peak tourist periods and national holidays. Every extended weekend illustrates this failure, with music blasting into the early hours, disregarding legally imposed restrictions.

The RTI reveals a chasm between policies and their enforcement. The judiciary has mandated actions such as real-time sound monitoring, penalties, and the display of decibel thresholds, yet these directives are either overlooked or poorly implemented. The police and pollution control authorities frequently ignore clear violations, often citing logistical issues or arguing that regulations impede tourism. It is increasingly clear that nightlife and tourism are priorities over peace and health.

The political discourse, led by the Chief Minister's promises of action, feels empty in light of the ongoing turmoil. If we may recall, the CM vowed once again a crackdown on noise pollution in the monsoon session of the Legislative Assembly. Despite pledges to crack down on noisy establishments and directives to apply existing laws, enforcement remains inconsistent and ineffective. The repeated inability to shut down or penalise offenders conveys the message that legality is flexible — an unwritten invitation for businesses to operate outside the law, often backed by political influence or economic motivation.

The systemic breakdown provokes key questions. Why are there laws if they are not upheld? How can the government rationalise ignoring violations that have a concrete negative impact on residents' health, sleep, and mental well-being? The struggles of locals — who are unable to access justice — should have taken precedence. Sadly, the law, which is intended to protect vulnerable communities, has become ineffective, unable to deliver justice or restore tranquility.

This circumstance calls for critical reflection on a scenario that is unfolding right before our eyes, yet there is no remedy. The political class feels it, and so does the government and the judiciary, but sadly, the issue lies much deeper. The ongoing turmoil indicates a breakdown in governance — a failure of accountability and political resolve. Without real enforcement, the issue of noise pollution will persist, silencing the voices of those yearning for peace.

OPEN SPACE >>

Watch needed on shops selling pre-owned mobiles

Kudos to the Goa Police for returning so recovered mobile phones to their rightful owners thereby bringing relief to citizens across the state who had reported theft or loss of their phones. Inspector General of Police (IGP) Keshav Ram Chaurasia has reportedly urged the public to verify second-hand phones before buying them. Possessing a stolen mobile phone can lead to arrest and punishment under Section 411 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) or Section 66B of the Information Technology Act (IT Act), with penalties including imprisonment, fines, or both. To avoid this, one needs to verify the IMEI number of any pre-owned phone, promptly report lost or stolen phones to the police and immediately deposit the handset at the police station. If one finds that the mobile is missing, the phone should be blocked across all telecom networks making the handset unusable with any SIM card. Filing a First Information Report with the police is essential to protect oneself from liability if the stolen phone is used in a crime. A close watch needs to be maintained on shops selling pre-owned phones.

ADELMO FERNANDES, Vasco

Is India headed towards total anarchy?

Individual as well as mob violence has become order of the day, mostly over frivolous reasons. Violence cannot be justified, whatever the reason



ABHAY MOKASHI

>The writer is a senior journalist and media trainer

Recent developments in Mumbai, Maharashtra and the country are a cause for concern for all those who have faith in democracy and wish to retain and maintain it. There are rising incidents of violence, of people taking the law into their hands, and of violation of law, as well as court orders. If such acts are not checked in time, we could be heading for anarchy.

Individual as well as mob violence has become the order of the day, most often over frivolous reasons. Even otherwise, violence cannot be justified, whatever the reason. It is shocking that in a land of Buddha, Mahavir, Gandhi, and so many others, more and more people are becoming violent, and an equal number, or more, are becoming victims of such violence.

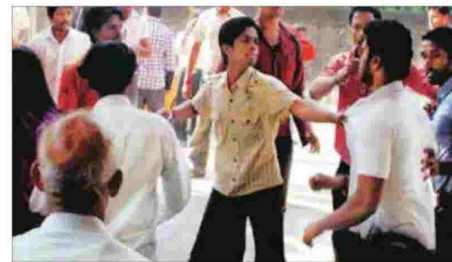
The violence must be seen in the light of increasing involvement of people in religious activities. While more and more people are getting attracted to their respective religions, it reflects less of spiritualism and more of fanaticism. This fanaticism is dangerous, and so is fundamentalism when it starts adversely affecting others. We see not just religious fanaticism but also political, lingual, and that of animal and bird lovers.

There is no absolute freedom guaranteed even in our Constitution. Freedoms come with restrictions, and that is the way it should be. It is time to evaluate some of the fanaticism existing in the society, not necessarily in the order of demerit.

Speaking Marathi

It is observed that some of the fanatics become active as elections near, like the linguistic and religious fanatics. The demand for the use of Marathi in the state, especially in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region, surfaces as different elections approach. With elections for several civic bodies in the region due, there is emphasis on the use of Marathi. There is nothing wrong with expecting residents of Mumbai or Maharashtra to speak in Marathi, even if they are migrants. It is a shame that those staying here for long periods of time, sometimes even for decades, proudly state that they do not know Marathi, the local language.

While more and more people are getting attracted to their respective religions, it reflects less of spiritualism and more of fanaticism



The reason why most of them got beaten up was not that they did not know Marathi but due to their arrogant statements that they will not learn or speak the local language. Yet, that is no justification for the violence by political activists or anti-social elements. Those who have any complaints about such issues should seek legal remedies instead of taking the law into their own hands.

Those indulging in such violence do not like to be called uncivilised or goondas. A case in point is that of a civil servant stating that members of a certain political party are goondas. Annoyed by the statement, some members of that political party violently protested against the statement in a way endorsing the view of the civil servant. Given their political thinking, nothing better could have been expected.

Illegal migrants

Just like the linguistic issue, raising religious issues or issues related to false nationalism or patriotism helps some political parties to polarise people and garner more votes. One such issue is that of alleged illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. A local leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party in Mumbai goes about identifying Bangladeshi people in the city with a gang of his stooges. If he has doubts about somebody's nationality, he should report the matter to the police instead of carrying out a house-to-house search, which he has no right to do.

It is not that the police will be judicious in their role. Almost all those who have been identified as Bangladeshi are Bengali-speaking Muslims, and it is a clear sign of religious persecution. The involvement of some police personnel in this game is clear from the fact that in the First Information Report (FIR) against these alleged Bangladeshi citizens, it has been mentioned that they speak the Bangladeshi language, instead of stating that they speak Ben-

gali. Some cases have come to light in courts of law that Indian Bengalis were deported to Bangladesh.

Yet another fanaticism is that of feeding dogs and pigeons. While one recognises the rights of animals and birds, the effect of such rights on humans has to be considered too. A recent news report stated that, on average, 78 cases of dog bites are reported from Pune every day. Efforts need to be made to ensure that there are no stray dogs and cattle on the streets.

Cruelty to animals

Those feeding cows and pigeons need to see that they are being cruel to those they feed. Not only do these animals become obese, but they also become dependent on humans for food and give up their natural way of foraging for food.

The same is the case with cows; they are being overfed, as the number of cows available for feeding is far less than the number required given the population of feeders. Force-feeding of cows is often seen in urban areas. To add to it, the cows are hardly taken for a walk, making them obese.

Most dogs have also been turned into vegetarians by those feeding them, or they are fed only biscuits. This should be looked at as cruelty.

Pigeon feeding must be stopped, as there are proven cases of lung damage due to pigeons. Without wanting to be personal, it should be stated that this author's wife's lungs had 80 per cent damage due to fibroids caused by the presence of pigeons that led to her early demise. It is shocking to note that leaders of a religion, which preaches non-violence, threaten to turn to violence if pigeon feeding is stopped.

The authorities should give priority to public health instead of their electoral needs while taking decisions on such matters in the state.

— FPJ

THE INBOX >>

Corruption in Goa is being masked as development

In early 2025, former BJP minister Pandurang Madkaikar accused members of his own government of "brazen loot" and being busy counting money. Later in 2025, minister Govind Gaude was removed from the cabinet after he alleged corruption within the tribal welfare department. Later he complained that this statement was being misinterpreted. He had also levelled charges that contractors were asked to pay slush money to get their works done. Minister Mauvin Godinho was acquitted in August 2025 in a 1998 power rebate scam case that was originally exposed by former chief minister Manohar Parrikar. The state's anti-corruption ombudsman, the Lokayukta, has been inactive since December 2024.

It shows that corruption is being masked as development, with questionable decisions and unchecked projects compromising both public trust and welfare. Past former Goa Governor Satyapal Malik had called Goa one of the most corrupt states in India. Fatorada MLA Vijay Sardesai, had exposed innumerable scams, small and big, that had dragged Goa down the path of irreversible ruin. These issues will always be shrouded in mystery with no clear starting point to uphold accountability.

KG VILPO, Chiorao

People do not mind electing leaders with fake degrees

This degree controversy has been going on for about 10 years now, so for the past 10 years, people are aware that it is a fake degree. All but the most stupid, know that. And, if they know that much, they also know that their Lord and master has lied. And during that period, they have voted for him twice. So, it's my educated guess that the said Lord and

Cases against Khalid, others seem built on sand

Can't get over the judgement delivered today. If they are guilty, conduct a speedy trial and give them the strictest punishment possible as per the laws of the land. But to keep them in jail for years together without a trial is a tragedy far bigger than just the unfair incarceration of a few. However big a disaster this is for Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam and the others, for India as a nation, it is bigger, it symbolises a precipitous fall, a negation of everything that a liberal, free and equitable society stands for. It may well be a portent of a fate that many nations have unfortunately been through, nations we had once mocked. This goes far beyond than being a travesty of justice, there is a sneaking feeling that maybe if a proper trial is conducted it might be revealed that the cases against them were built on sand. It is also to ensure that educated, articulate and rational Muslim youngsters always stay silent and never fight for what is right. The symbolism and message conveyed in this persecution comes across loud and clear. It's a shame.

VINAY DWIVEDI, Benaulim

master was knowingly voted because he is a liar and he is uneducated. The uneducated masses identify with him. He is their kin, that is why the chawala jibe backfired. And as for dishonesty, every time you see someone jump your queue, there you see dishonesty.

REKHA SARIN TREHAN, Benaulim

Why was PM silent over rapes in Manipur?

The media will not tell us what exactly was said, in what context and circumstances, where and by which insignificant person. No one reportedly agreed with what was said and the person concerned has long since apologized. Now the PM at a rally in Delhi reportedly pained by abuses hurled at his mother during the Voter Adikar Yatra in Bihar and while he may forgive the RID and Congress, voters in Bihar may never pardon them! Further that this is no big deal for those who insult mother India

and mothers and sisters of India. The BJP organizes rallies all over India, violence and ink thrown on Congress office, Rahul Gandhi must apologise and the mainstream media goes to town in the same vein! Where was all this when women were paraded naked and raped in Manipur and other atrocities? Old women and infants being raped and absolute silence from the PM? Let us have some balance in hate and instigation of discord, especially from those at the top of the power pyramid.

JOHN ERIC GOMES, Porvorim

Building approvals given but basics are not in place

On watching the Orlim Gram Sabha, there were some members like Kim Miranda and few others, who raised basic common sense queries/concerns with regards to the Orlim sarpanch, panchas approving multi-dwelling residences with regards to issues on sewage, parking, power, road width etc where it was clear that the panchayat approvals were given for the concerned builders to construct, despite the basics not being in place. I was aghast at seeing the apparent lack of common sense being shown by the sarpanch and his panchas. They do not have the basic thinking ability to challenge projects and even the TCP (Town and Country planning Dept) based on basic facts. It must be stated here that this is the similar thing happening at most Salcete panchayats including the Colva Panchayat where I have attended quite a few gram sabhas. The Panchayat Minister Mauvin Godinho seems to be pre-occupied with other things other than ministries he is in charge of like Panchayat, Transport etc. If he is unable to look at basic governance from these ministries, it's better he gives them to some other MLAs who hopefully can do a better job.

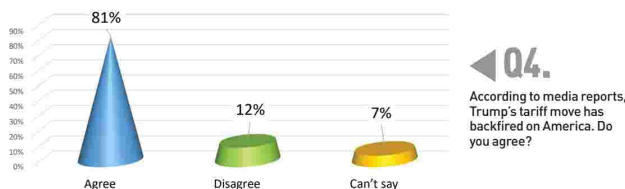
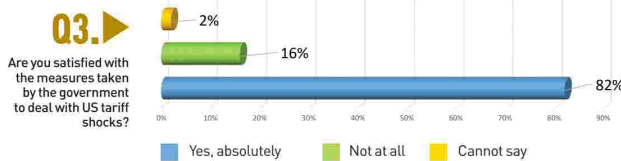
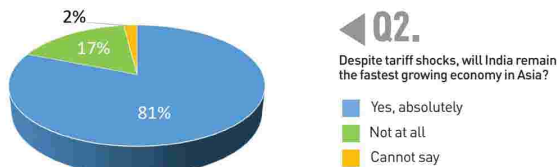
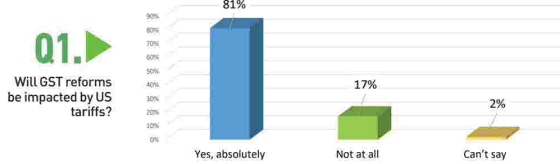
ARWIN MESQUITA, Colva

THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON US TARIFF IMPACT

81% respondents said that despite tariff shocks India, will remain the fastest growing economy in Asia.

The India News Survey on September 3, 2025, assessed the impact of US tariffs. Conducted with 256 participants, it revealed strong confidence in India's growth resilience and

government measures. Most respondents agreed Trump's tariffs backfired on America, with many also believing the US economy has already slipped into recession.



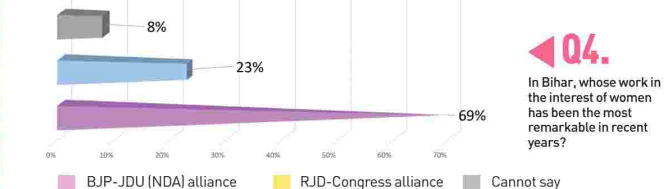
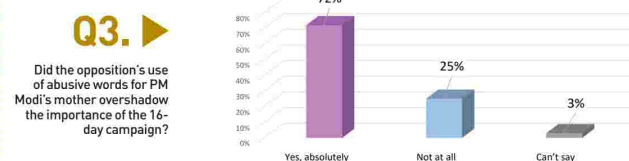
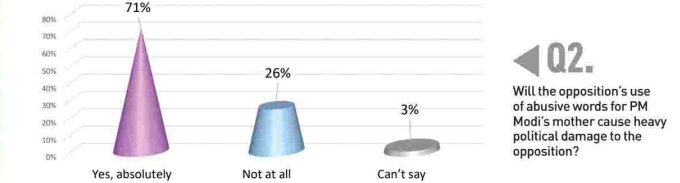
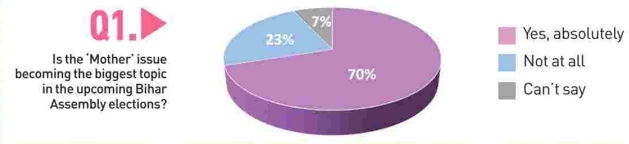
THE DAILY GUARDIAN SURVEY ON BIHAR ELECTION 2025

72% believe that opposition's use of abusive words for PM Modi's mother overshadow 16-day campaign.

The India News Survey on Bihar Election 2025 reveals the "Mother" issue has become central, with 70 percent calling it the biggest topic.

Seventy-one percent believe opposition remarks will cause political damage, while 72 percent say it overshadowed the 16-day campaign.

Additionally, 69 percent credit the BJP-JDU alliance for remarkable work benefiting women in recent years.



North India on edge as rains swell Yamuna, Jhelum and Punjab rivers

CONTINUED FROM P1

telecom firms have been ordered to maintain connectivity, and disaster funds have been activated to enable central assistance if required.

In Kashmir, the flood situation grew critical after the Jhelum breached the danger mark at Sangam. Irrigation and Flood Control officials said the water level

was rising by nearly 1.5 feet per hour. "The department is on high alert and all field teams are in place," said Chief Engineer Shovkat Hussain. A minor breach in Kulgam's Vecho Nala was contained, though authorities remain wary of further damage.

Chief Minister Omar Abdullah chaired a review meeting with senior officials, directing them to en-

sure immediate emergency responses. With rains continuing, residents across the Valley have been strongly advised to keep away from rivers and flood-prone areas.

With forecasts warning of more rainfall across the region in the coming days, authorities in Delhi, Punjab and Kashmir remain on high alert, bracing for further deterioration.

BJP to launch 'Maa Ka Samman Abhiyan' in Bihar

CONTINUED FROM P1

BJP and JD(U) campaigned heavily on women-centric issues and secured victory.

The current flashpoint came during the Congress-led Voter Rights Yatra, where remarks were made against the Prime Minister's mother from a joint Congress-RJD stage. While BJP had already begun highlighting the issue, Modi's emotional speech this

week signalled that the Bihar polls will now be fought around it.

Following his remarks, BJP leaders, especially women leaders, launched direct attacks on the Opposition. However, Congress and RJD have shown no signs of regret. RJD leader Tejashwi Yadav accused Modi of "playing the victim card" and demanded that the Prime Minister apologise first for his earlier

"DNA" comments.

BJP and JD(U) are now drawing up a more aggressive joint strategy, with Modi set to address a rally in Patna on 15 September, where key announcements are expected. Party insiders say the Prime Minister's visits will be increased in the run-up to the elections, with the Model Code of Conduct likely to be enforced in Bihar by the first week of October.

Bihar BJP leaders meet Amit Shah, seat-sharing tops agenda

CONTINUED FROM P1

the urgency for a corrective strategy. In light of this, party leaders are hopeful that the candidate list will be released well ahead of the poll schedule, rather than at the last moment as has been the trend so far.

Among those expected at the Delhi meeting are Deputy Chief Minister Samrat Choudhary, Vijay Sinha, state in-charge Vinod Tawde, co-in-charge Deepak Prakash, state president Dilip Jaiswal, and Union

ministers Giriraj Singh and Nityanand Rai.

The discussions will also cover feedback from the ground regarding government programmes, public response to Rahul Gandhi's recently concluded "Vote Adhikar Yatra," and the controversy over opposition workers abusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his mother.

The deliberations come just ahead of Modi's visit to Patna on 13 September, his seventh trip to Bihar in recent months.

CBI probe against KCR...

CONTINUED FROM P1

an era under KCR's leadership, particularly through irrigation projects that transformed the state into a green belt. "It is shameful to target the visionary leader who secured Hyderabad's drinking water needs for the next 50 years through projects like Mallanna Sagar and Kondapochamma Sagar," he said.

KTR accused both Congress and BJP of conspiring to malign KCR because they could not tolerate the people's affection for him. He recalled that when Telangana was formed, the state ranked 14th in agriculture, but under KCR's rule, mega projects such as

Kaleshwaram, Sitarama, and Palamuru-Rangareddy propelled it to the top ranks in food production. "Kaleshwaram, the world's largest lift irrigation project, carries 2 TMC of water daily and has changed the lives of lakhs of farmers," he asserted.

Highlighting what he termed "double standards," KTR said, "Rahul Gandhi once dismissed the CBI as Modi's pocket organisation, but today Revanth Reddy praises it. This hypocrisy shows the miserable state of Congress."

The BRS leader also criticised the Revanth Reddy government for failing to manage governance in just 21 months. "Farmers are

standing in long queues, leaving their shoes behind, just to buy urea. Telangana is in chaos under Congress misrule," he remarked.

On welfare, KTR said KCR had ensured schemes continued even during the COVID-19 crisis when revenues had dried up, unlike the present leadership which "finds excuses instead of solutions." He also reminded that the BRS government fulfilled most demands of Singareni coal workers.

Welcoming senior Congress leader Prabhakar Rao from Manuguru, along with his followers, into BRS, KTR urged party cadres in Khammam district to strengthen the organisation.

Gavai: Dignity at heart of Indian democracy

CONTINUED FROM P1

respecting disagreement as much as in asserting belief."

CJI Gavai, delivering a 45-minute speech, located dignity at the heart of India's constitutional democracy. "Where I am today is all because of the Indian Constitution and Dr. Ambedkar's vision that I could hold this august office and get an opportunity to serve the nation," he said.

He stressed that "human dignity was the central concern for the makers of the Constitution. The indignities of various kinds led to the design of the Constitution as a remedy. The text explicitly situates dignity alongside liberty, equality, fraternity and justice." Dignity, he added, is what allows citizens "a sense of belonging, mutual respect, and solidarity which are essential for maintaining national unity and harmony."

While the term "dignity" does not appear in the list of fundamental rights, Gavai noted that the Court had steadily recognised it as a foundational principle. "The prohibition of arbitrariness under Article 14 ensures that state actions respect reason, fairness and equality, thereby safeguarding the individual's sense of self-worth. Similarly, the rights against discrimination under Articles 14 and 15, and the guarantee of equality of opportunity under Article 16, seek to affirm the inherent dignity of every person," he said.

He linked dignity to freedoms under Article 19, "which protect individuals' autonomy in expressing themselves, associating and moving freely," and most significantly to Article 21. "The right to life and personal liberty has been

interpreted expansively to encompass the right to live with dignity, including personal autonomy, bodily integrity, and freedom from degrading treatment."

The CJI drew from precedent to show how dignity had shaped Indian jurisprudence. He recalled Sunil Batra v. Delhi Administration, where the Supreme Court warned that "in the eyes of law, prisoners are persons and not animals." The judgment, he said, underscored that imprisonment "does not strip an individual of their humanity" and that "the forcible denial of fundamental rights constitutes an institutional outrage." He also cited Prem Shankar Shukla v. Delhi Administration, which struck down routine handcuffing of under-trials, with the Court holding that depriving a person of dignity was "an affront to their very humanity, striking at the core of Articles 14, 19 and 21."

Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, who followed with a 10-minute address, lauded the lecture for "reminding us that dignity is the soul of our democracy and the measure of our constitutional morality." He underlined the importance of respecting institutions and constitutional values in sustaining public trust.

Singhvi's son, Advocate Avishkar Singhvi, gave the concluding remarks.

SCBA President Vikas Singh and DHBCA President N. Hariharan presented mementoes to CJI Gavai and Speaker Birla respectively. Attorney General R. Venkataramani, Solicitor General Tushar Mehta and several sitting and former judges of the Supreme Court and Delhi High Court attended the lecture.

India bars foreigners convicted of anti-national acts

CONTINUED FROM P1

impose specific conditions.

On mountaineering expeditions, the MHA said no foreigner or group of foreigners may climb any peak in India without prior written permission specifying the route, attachment of a liaison officer, and the use of photographic or wireless communication equipment.

In addition, foreigners must obtain permits to enter or stay in protected or restricted areas. How-

ever, persons of Afghan, Chinese, or Pakistani origin will not be allowed to visit such areas. Restricted zones include the entire states of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Sikkim, along with parts of Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, and Rajasthan.

The Bureau of Immigration will maintain updated lists of foreigners barred from entry into or departure from India.

For arriving seamen and

aircraft crew who are foreigners, a landing permit or shore leave pass will be mandatory if they do not hold a valid Indian visa.

The MHA added that individuals may be denied permission to leave India if required by a court, if suffering from diseases dangerous to public health, if their departure may adversely affect relations with a foreign state, or under specific orders issued by the central government, law enforcement, or other designated agencies.

Cabinet clears Rs 1,500 cr scheme

CONTINUED FROM P1

it can supply minerals to Indian industry. In the near term, recycling secondary sources is a prudent way to ensure supply chain sustainability, a Ministry of Mines release said. The scheme will run for six years, from FY 2025-26 to FY 2030-31. Eligible feedstock will include e-waste, lithium-ion battery (LIB) scrap, and other scrap such as catalytic converters from end-of-life vehicles. Beneficiaries are expected to include both large, established recyclers and smaller or new recyclers, including start-ups, for whom one-third of the scheme's outlay has been earmarked. The scheme will apply to investments in new units as well as capacity expansion, modernisation, and diversifica-

tion of existing units. It will provide incentives for the recycling value chain involved in the actual extraction of critical minerals, but not for operations limited to black mass production. The incentives will include a 20% capex subsidy on plant and machinery, equipment, and associated utilities for commencing production within the specified timeframe, beyond which a reduced subsidy will apply. An opex subsidy will also be offered, linked to incremental sales over the base year (FY 2025-26)—40% of the eligible subsidy in the second year and the remaining 60% in the fifth year, from FY 2026-27 to FY 2030-31, subject to achievement of specified incremental sales thresholds.

BULLDOZING TRIBAL RIGHTS IN GREAT NICOBAR

'In the Great Nicobar, development redefines displacement, forest rights, and consent.'

OPINION

UTKARSH YADAV &
TEJASWINI KAUSHAL

A decade ago, the Supreme Court in *Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd. v. Ministry of Environment and Forests* (2013) declared that the consent of the Gram Sabha is obligatory for diversion of forest land. It established the Scheduled tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA) as the overriding law that prevails over existing statutes and prior rulings, and affirmed tribal communities as custodians of their ancestral lands.

This framework is at the heart of the Rs 72,000-crore Great Nicobar project controversy, which involves a transhipment port, airport, power plant, and township. Though the Island's administration alleged tribal rights under the FRA were resolved to facilitate forest diversion sanctions in 2022, it was contested by the Tribal Councils of Little and Great Nicobar, who claimed their rights were disregarded and Gram Sabha meetings

staged.

This prompted the Nicobarese Tribal Council to withdraw its no-objection certificate. Union Minister Jugal Oram initially denied awareness of objections, insisting the project would not harm tribes or the environment and would affect only 7 square kilometres of reserve land. This was contradicted by the tribal councils and independent assessments, citing a lack of consent and FRA violations. Oram has since said his ministry is reviewing objections and verifying the Gram Sabha process, while the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes and the National Green Tribunal have flagged procedural and environmental lapses, exposing administrative failure and casting doubt on the project's legitimacy.

The project's legal foundations, thus, remain shaky, resting on conflicting claims, neglected consent provisions, and failures of consultation. However, beyond mere administrative short-

comings, a fundamental issue surfaces: are statutory protections for vulnerable communities being reduced to empty rituals?

STATUTORY SAFEGUARDS REDUCED TO FORMALITIES?

The FRA mandates that the Gram Sabha, with a quorum, certify any diversion. Consent cannot be *post facto* or replaced by bureaucratic certification without eroding one of the Act's central safeguards. Not obtaining the consent would violate Section 5 of the FRA.

The Island's administration argued that PATS6 obviates the FRA, but this does not withstand legal scrutiny. Section 4(I) of the FRA begins with a non-obstante clause, "Notwithstanding anything contained in any other law for the time being in force," making clear that FRA rights prevail over conflicting statutes. As a subsequent, specific law, it requires recognition of rights and prior Gram Sabha consent before diversion. The Supreme Court in the *Orissa Mining* case affirmed this, holding that the decision of affected Gram Sabhas is indispensable before forest land can be diverted. By certifying rights as settled without genuine proceedings, the administration acted in violation of the FRA's framework.



The project's legal foundations, thus, remain shaky, resting on conflicting claims, neglected consent provisions, and failures of consultation. However, beyond mere administrative shortcomings, a fundamental issue surfaces: are statutory protections for vulnerable communities being reduced to empty rituals?

Moreover, while PATS6 prohibits alienation of tribal land except under the narrow "public interest" in Section 4(b), expanding the island's population from 8,000 to 3.5 lakh exceeds this justification, exposing

the project's commercial character and fragile legal basis. The government's failure to consult the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes as mandated by Article 338A(9) further undermines the project's

legitimacy.

FRAGILE ECOLOGY AND FISCAL RATIONALITY

The ecological and legal infirmities of the Great Nicobar project are grave. Nearly

13,000 hectares, about 18 per cent of the island's forest, are slated for diversion. Official estimates cite 8.5 lakh trees to be felled, while independent studies suggest 32 to 58 lakh. Endangered species, including the leather-

back turtle, Nicobarese megapode, and robber crab, face critical habitat loss, and thousands of coral colonies marked for translocation face uncertain survival.

The FRA-guaranteed habitat and resettlement rights of the Nicobarese and the Particularly Vulnerable Shompen are also at risk. Administrative shortcuts like denotification of the Galathea Wildlife Sanctuary, realignment of national park borders, and reclassification of coastal no-construction areas add to the destruction. Compensatory afforestation in distant Haryana provides no real substitute. The Island's seismic instability in the Pacific Ring of Fire raises further questions about the enduring viability and fiscal prudence of the project.

REMEDYING THE WRONG

The Great Nicobar project has no standing in law or principle since the FRA's foundational requirements were not met, with community rights unsettled and consent manufactured rather than genuinely obtained. It must return to the drawing board with rights properly recognised and consent legitimately secured, or else the protections guaranteed under the Act risk becoming meaningless, reduced to empty words against executive convenience.

Shadows across borders: The global migration crisis and Assam's warning

OPINION

DEBIKA DUTTA

Across Europe and North America, the debate over migration has reached a fever pitch. In London, Paris, and Berlin, tens of thousands have taken to the streets—some demanding stricter border controls, others defending humanitarian responsibilities. In Britain, the government's controversial Rwanda deportation plan has triggered fierce political battles, with protests erupting in major cities. France has seen demonstrations both against rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and against the perceived inability of the state to integrate newcomers. Germany, reeling from violent clashes linked to asylum-seekers, is witnessing the far-right AfD gaining ground, riding on anti-immigration sentiments. Meanwhile, Italy, on the frontline of Mediterranean crossings, faces unending pressure as boats packed with migrants from Africa and the Middle East arrive daily, testing both resources and political patience. Even the United States is not immune—record crossings at the Mexican border have sparked widespread polarization, with immigration shaping electoral politics more than ever.

What ties these seemingly disparate geographies together is a deep unease over identity, security, and demographic change. Western democracies that once celebrated diversity as a strength are now grappling with the limits of assimilation and the anxieties of their native populations. Economic burdens, competition for jobs, cultural clashes, and even fears of radicalization are pushing the migration issue to the heart of national debates. It is no longer merely about humanitarianism or open borders; it is about the sustainability of societies as they try to reconcile compassion with national interest.

Yet for India, particularly Assam, this global unrest feels strangely familiar. The anxieties shaking London or Berlin today have been Assam's lived reality for decades. The state, sitting on a porous international border with Bangladesh, has long faced pressures of unchecked migration. The demographic shifts, recorded since the early 20th century, have left deep social, political, and cultural imprints. Unlike Europe, where the crisis has unfolded dramatically over the past decade, Assam has

navigated this delicate balance for generations, often with little global acknowledgment.

Assam's predicament is not abstract. Census figures, political accords, and social tensions all testify to a demographic transformation that has altered villages, districts, and electoral rolls. The Assam Accord of 1985 was a milestone, promising to address the issue of illegal migrants. Yet, even decades later, the problem persists, fueling debates around citizenship, rights, and identity. To some, migration is purely an economic story—people seeking better lives across porous borders. But for many in Assam, it is also a question of cultural survival and security, not unlike the fears voiced today by protestors in Paris or Rome.

The parallels are striking. In France, questions of whether newcomers embrace French identity or remain culturally separate dominate public discourse. In Germany, the 2015 refugee influx under Angela Merkel's "open-door" policy is now cited as a turning point, blamed by many for today's political instability. In Britain, the Brexit vote itself was shaped in large part by concerns over migration and sovereignty. In Assam, too, migration has redrawn cultural boundaries, raising questions of assimilation, representation, and preservation of indigenous heritage. The emotional charge is similar: the fear of being overwhelmed, of one's way of life fading



In Assam, too, the security establishment has flagged concerns about radical organizations gaining a foothold in pockets where illegal migration is concentrated. The worry is not just economic strain but potential destabilization, as hostile actors may exploit unsettled communities.

under demographic pressure.

Security is another dimension where Assam's story mirrors the West's present dilemma. European leaders often point to migrant vulnerabilities to spread extremist ideologies. In Assam, too, the security establishment has flagged concerns about radical organizations gaining a foothold in pockets where illegal migration is concentrated. The worry is not just economic strain but potential destabilization, as hostile actors may exploit unsettled commu-

nities. The lesson here is clear: ignoring the security implications of unchecked migration is perilous, whether in Hamburg or Hojai.

Economically, too, migration stirs complex debates. In Italy and Spain, migrants fill labor shortages in agriculture and construction, even as native populations resist their presence. Similarly, in Assam, migrants are often engaged in hard labor, cultivation, and small trades. Their contribution to the economy is undeniable, but so too are the tensions it generates in job competi-

tion, land ownership, and social services. This paradox—migrants sustaining economies while destabilizing communities—is one reason why migration remains such a contentious subject across borders.

For India, the global crisis offers both warning and validation. It warns that even wealthy nations, with their resources and governance capacities, are struggling to absorb migrant influxes without societal unrest. If the UK and France are battling polarization despite robust institutions, it underscores how fragile the balance is in a region like Assam, where resources are limited, and cultural anxieties run deep. At the same time, it validates Assam's long-standing concerns. What many dismissed as parochial fears decades ago are now echoed on the streets of Brussels and Washington. The world is catching up to a truth Assam has known all along—that migration

is never just numbers on a border ledger; it is about the delicate fabric of identity, belonging, and trust.

The challenge, therefore, is to find a middle path. Neither extreme exclusion nor blind acceptance offers a sustainable answer. Europe's convulsions suggest that unless migration is managed with foresight, fairness, and firmness, societies will fracture under the weight of unresolved tensions. Assam, in its own way, has experimented with frameworks—whether through accords, legal processes like NRC, or community negotiations. These efforts, however contested, reflect an acknowledgment that migration cannot be left to chance. It requires political will, social dialogue, and constant vigilance.

What national policymakers in Delhi must recognize is that Assam is not a distant frontier problem; it is India's frontline in a global battle. If Western

nations, with far fewer porous borders, are tightening policies and recalibrating strategies, India cannot afford complacency. Protecting Assam's cultural heritage, ensuring fair opportunities for its indigenous people, and maintaining security are not just regional imperatives; they are matters of national integrity. A weak response in Assam today could well become India's own version of Europe's turmoil tomorrow.

Ultimately, the story of migration is the story of survival—of individuals seeking hope and of societies struggling to preserve coherence. Balancing the two is among the most difficult tasks any democracy faces. The world is searching for answers, from Washington to Warsaw. Assam, with its lived history, stands as both a warning and a guide. It reminds us that compassion must walk hand in hand with vigilance, that hospitality cannot come at the cost of identity, and that national interest is not opposed to humanity but its necessary foundation.

As the world debates how to handle waves of people crossing borders, Assam's experience tells us this: the question is not whether migration happens—it always has, and always will—but whether societies have the foresight and courage to shape it rather than be overwhelmed by it. Europe today is learning that hard lesson. India, and especially Assam, cannot afford to learn it too late.

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{ OUR TAKE }

No normalising jail without trial

Pre-trial detention for long periods without any conviction, as in the case of some Delhi riots accused, risks unacceptable delaying of justice

A disquieting mix of stringent legal provisions, judicial deferments and scuttled hearings have kept some people accused in connection with the 2020 Delhi riots behind bars for the better part of five years. That detention is set to get longer after the Delhi high court denied bail to student activists Sharjeel Imam, Umar Khalid, Gulfsa Fatima, Khalid Saifi, Athar Khan, Mohd Saleem Khan, Shifa-Ur-Rehman, Meeran Haider, and Shadab Ahmed, holding that their roles appeared "prima facie grave".

In its 133-page judgment, the court ruled it didn't matter if Khalid or Imam were not present when violence broke out, held that it couldn't be said that the evidence was weak, and said both made speeches meant to instigate the Muslim community. Importantly, it noted that the "bail is rule and jail is exception" guideline depended on the facts and circumstances under a special statute such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), which ordinarily makes bail very difficult. It also said that the trial was progressing at a natural pace.

Terrorism or inciting violence cannot be condoned. Grave charges have been levelled against the student activists. But the judiciary should not allow prosecuting agencies to use stringent provisions to keep people jailed, while not proceeding towards a trial. In the case of Imam, Khalid and others, five (or more) years have elapsed since their incarceration, giving enough time to the police to collect and present evidence. The interminable delay in the trial, as well the repeated adjournments and deferments in hearings of petitions filed by the accused, is jarring and runs contrary to the top court's championing of personal liberty. The top court has spoken eloquently about the dangers of agencies weaponising statutes such as the UAPA to incarcerate individuals. Moreover, in cases involving the Delhi riots, lower and constitutional courts have repeatedly rapped probe agencies for shoddy work and flimsy evidence.

In cases granting bail to some of Imam and Khalid's co-accused, the courts have also found the prosecution wanting. If the police's position is that these nine people were central to fomenting violence that killed 53 people, it must make its case in court within a reasonable timeline. But pre-trial detention for long periods without any conviction cannot be permitted to become the norm. Adages seldom are true, but in this case, justice delayed is in danger of becoming justice denied — both for the accused as well as the victims.

The Maratha quota conundrum, again

The Devendra Fadnis government's deft handling of the latest agitation by Maratha reservation activist Manoj Jarange-Patil has defused a flashpoint in Maharashtra politics; but for how long, remains to be seen. The decision to legalise the use of the Hyderabad (1909) and Satara (1884) gazettes to verify Maratha families' Kunbi ancestry, and use this to grant them reservation under the OBC quota has been welcomed by the protestors — but OBC communities upset at this eating into their pie could likely challenge it in court.

Maharashtra has 52% reservation for SC, ST, and OBC communities. In addition, like other states, it has a 10% quota for the economically weaker sections (EWS), and in 2024, the Eknath Shinde government granted Marathas 10% reservation under the socially and educationally backward caste (SEBC) category, which has been challenged in court. The demand for reservation for Marathas, numerically and politically the state's dominant community, largely emanates from the agrarian belt of Marathwada that has remained educationally backward and desperately poor. The agitation by Jarange-Patil, a farmer from Marathwada, has struck a powerful chord in the community; quota under the OBC category, in addition to education and jobs, will give them assured political representation.

Given the Supreme Court-mandated cap of 50%, Maratha reservation will likely remain an intractable issue for any government. However, what is in the government's hand is an upliftment of Marathwada. Deepening educational and physical infrastructure and creating subsidies for industry to flourish will go a long way in alleviating distress and reducing the dependence on the agrarian economy. Whether that's expedient for political parties, is the question.

An India-China tango is unlikely at present

There are legitimate questions about the assessment that there are far more convergences than differences between the two countries

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's first visit to China after seven years and his meeting with President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit have generated much excitement and yielded modest gains in the ongoing process of rebuilding bilateral relations that had slid post Gwalan. It also highlights the challenges in navigating this complex relationship amid an exceptionally uncertain global landscape that is to India's disadvantage.

A revealing contrast lies in how each side is framing external pressures: Modi emphasised that bilateral ties "should not be seen through a third country lens" while Xi warned against "external interference".

During foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to New Delhi, Chinese read-outs claimed that India had joined China in opposing "unilateral bullying", a barely disguised reference to the US.

This divergence is not semantic — it reflects differing strategic objectives. India, even while confronted with exorbitant tariffs, President Donald Trump's tantrums, and other negative signals from Washington, seeks to preserve its strategic partnership with the US. China, facing containment pressures and sensing India's vulnerability, would like to project a common stance against the US. Both seek greater

manoeuvrability, but structural problems in ties do not offer space for strategic realignment. The answer to India's current predicament vis-à-vis the US does not lie in revising its assessment of China as its primary strategic challenge, unless facts suggest otherwise.

That is why it is surprising that the rhetoric of India and China being "development partners and not rivals", much favoured by Beijing, has been resurrected by us. There are legitimate questions about this formulation and the assessment that there is far more convergence than differences between the two countries. Are such conclusions plausible, after China's extensive support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor, continued heavy deployment of troops along its border areas, denial of critical products to India, initiation of the world's largest hydro-power and infrastructure project with serious downstream impact on India, and other outstanding issues?

China wants India to reiterate the "One China principle", and Taiwan "being part of China", something we have not done for the last 15 years. Indeed, Chinese read-outs of Wang's recent meetings in New Delhi claimed that Indian leaders had reaffirmed those positions. After the external affairs minister clarified that there is no change in India's position on Taiwan, the Chinese Foreign Office spokesperson bluntly stated, "...the Indian side's so-called 'clarification' came as a surprise. We find it inconsistent with the facts. It would seem that some people in India have tried to undermine China's sovereignty on the Taiwan question and impede the improvement of China-

India relations. China expresses serious concern and firmly opposes that."

India needs to be less inhibited about speaking out on China's battlefield collision with Pakistan and other issues. That can be done even while pursuing stable and constructive relations with China. Both countries have much to gain from bringing the relationship back to a more normal footing. But that can only be achieved in a calibrated manner, without ignoring inconvenient truths.

The focus on people-centric initiatives, such as direct flights, resumption of border trade, augmentation of Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage, and easing of visas, is sensible. Quietly, we have worked to ease the supply of critical inputs from China, with some success. However, weaponisation of dependencies by China, the US, and others, underlines the imperative of addressing our vulnerabilities through economic de-risking vis-à-vis China (and others). Given China's pole position in global value chains, closer trade and investment links should also feature in the strategic dialogue.

During Wang's India visit and Modi's meeting with Xi, a dual-track approach appears to be emerging, where India is pushing for progress on border related issues even while moving towards normalisation of relations. In his meeting with Xi, Modi "underlined the importance of peace and tranquillity on the border areas for continued development of bilateral relations", but the Chinese readout cited Xi as saying that "two countries must not let the border issue define" the overall relationship. While this divergence will persist, China seems to have tactically acknowledged that the border issue has



Ashok K. Kantha



A more normal footing for the relationship is beneficial for both countries, but that can be achieved only in a calibrated manner.

AFP PHOTO/PH

returned to the centre stage of bilateral relations.

However, China seems keen to revive its "early harvest" proposal to show progress in boundary negotiations. China wished to limit this "early harvest" to Sikkim — unacceptable to India as this piecemeal approach was not consistent with the "package settlement" envisaged under the 2005 Agreement on Political Parameters and Guiding Principles for Boundary Settlement. Besides, China would press for the boundary in the Sikkim Sector to be on the basis of the Convention of 1890 between Great Britain and China on Sikkim and Tibet, which shows the starting point of the boundary at "Mount Gipmochi" (Gyemochi), a position not acceptable to India. It is not clear whether the scope of the "early harvest" will include both Sikkim and Middle Sectors or only the Sikkim Sector. If it is the latter, the revival of a proposal rejected earlier for good reasons is puzzling.

The two sides have also agreed "to discuss de-escalation, beginning with the principles and modalities thereof". Any de-escalation must keep in mind India's disadvantages vis-à-vis the nature of terrain and infrastructure and, thereby, the longer re-induction time needed.

Article III (3) of the Agreement on

Confidence Building Measures in the Military Field of November 1996 stipulated that ceilings on forces deployed in specific pockets shall be determined "with due consideration being given to parameters such as the nature of terrain, road communication and other infrastructure and time taken to induct/de-induct troops and armaments". Any numerical equivalence in force levels will put India at a serious disadvantage.

The future trajectory of ties will be determined by China's willingness to acknowledge India's interests, concerns, and aspirations as an ascendant power. Current evidence is not encouraging. At the SCO summit, China reiterated its preference for a "multipolar world", while India batted for a "multipolar world and a multi-polar Asia". Xi spoke of "dancing of the dragon and the elephant" as the right choice for both China and India, but this tango does not acknowledge the need to accommodate India's rise as a major power. The present situation demands strategic clarity on assessments, strategic patience in seeking outcomes, and strategic autonomy as our overall compass.

Ashok K. Kantha is a former Indian ambassador to China. The views expressed are personal

In Ola's battery efforts, a shift in Indian innovation

When I visited Ola Electric's Battery Innovation Centre in Bengaluru, I expected a modest setup, a typical R&D lab focused on incremental improvements. What I encountered instead was a full-scale effort to reimagine and industrialise one of the most complex and strategically important technologies of our time — the lithium-ion cell. Nearly 500 researchers were at work, many with experience in labs and companies across South Korea, Japan, Germany, and the US. They weren't tweaking specs on imported components; they were building a new type of battery from the ground up.

At the centre of this effort is the 4,680-format cylindrical cell, a design originally popularised by Tesla. This format is known for higher energy density, improved thermal management, and structural integration in electric vehicles (EVs). But Ola has taken a riskier path by developing its own version using dry electrode manufacturing, a technique that avoids the toxic solvents and energy-hungry steps of conventional production. Rather than coating materials in wet slurry, Ola's method presses a dry mix directly onto the current collector. It is faster, cleaner, and more energy-efficient, eliminating solvent recovery origins, improving consistency, and lowering costs.

The company says it has spent three years building this capability from scratch and has achieved consistent, high-volume production for both cathodes and anodes. While companies in China, Korea, and the US are still struggling to scale this technology, Ola claims it has already made it work at volume.

The performance specs are bold: Over 275 Wh/kg energy density, more than 2,000 charge-discharge cycles, and 10 years of shelf stability. Most striking is the charging speed, from 20% to 80% in just 15 minutes — enough for a 60% top-up during a short break. These cells are already being produced at pilot scale and are now being transferred to Ola's Gigafactory in Krishnagiri, Tamil Nadu. The first 5 GWh phase is operational, with plans to scale to 20 GWh and eventually 100 GWh. That would put Ola among the largest battery manufacturers in the world.

Particularly impressive is Ola's goal to own the full stack of intellectual property. Most Indian firms rely on Chinese licences and imported tools. Ola is doing the opposite by developing its own cell chemistries, production equipment, and control software. This is part of a broader strategy it calls "India Inside," a push to reduce dependency while creating export-ready innovation. That is easier said than done, but the company has filed over 250 patents and is running rapid

development loops between its R&D lab and factory floor. The tight integration allows breakthroughs to move quickly from prototype to real-world deployment.

Bhavish Aggarwal, Ola's founder, has drawn plenty of criticism. The company's electric scooters have faced reliability issues, and Aggarwal's online persona has often added fuel to the fire. Customers have complained about buggy software, missed deliveries, and inadequate service. These are real challenges, but also common ones for start-ups racing to scale frontier tech.

I remember the early days of Tesla. I was one of the first buyers of the Model S. The car looked like the future, but the door handles failed, the software was faulty, the service network was overwhelmed, and Elon Musk consistently over-promised.

My Tesla even crashed into my garage while on autopilot. Yet behind all the drama, real innovation was underway in battery chemistry, manufacturing, and software. Today, Tesla leads the global EV market.

What Ola is attempting is no less ambitious, despite the constraints. It is building not just a vehicle company, but a battery-technology platform inside an ecosystem that has historically lacked the infrastructure and incentives to support deep tech. That alone deserves recognition.

Globally, the stakes are rising. While the West is still focused on Tesla, the scale story now lies in China. Chinese companies produce over 90% of the world's lithium-ion cells and export low-cost EVs at a staggering pace, supported by vertically integrated, state-subsidised supply chains. But safety concerns are endemic. Recalls are common, batteries often underperform in real-world conditions, and reports of fires from scooters to buses — have become routine. The aggressive drive for volume has left quality an afterthought, with deadly consequences.

This creates an opportunity for India, if it can deliver products that combine affordability with reliability and safety. Ola's battery programme is a promising first step. What is unfolding in Bangalore is serious engineering work aimed at solving a global problem in a distinctly Indian way.

If Ola succeeds, the impact will go well beyond scooters or cars. These batteries could power grid storage systems, industrial equipment, drones, and even electric aircraft. India could become a serious player in global energy storage, an industry central to everything from climate resilience to national security. That kind of platform power is rare, and it is worth pursuing.

India has long led in software and services, but its record in industrial technology and applied science has lagged. That is beginning to shift. A wave of deep tech ambition is rising, focused on leapfrogging rather than imitation. Companies like Ola, powered by Indian talent but thinking globally, are showing that India is poised not just to join the energy revolution, but to lead it — and to set safety, reliability, and innovation standards that China has repeatedly failed to meet.

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



Vivek Wadhwa

| CHRISTINE LAGARDE | PRESIDENT, EUROPEAN CENTRAL BANK

Geopolitical fragmentation, climate change and rapid digital innovation are reshaping where finance flows and through which channels

At the ninth annual conference of the European Systemic Risk Board



Letters to financial inclusion, India's postal system delivers

The Indian postal system is proving that growth is rooted in evolution. The department of posts, with its network of over 160,000 post offices, is redefining its growth. While its journey to become the world's largest logistics network forms its pedigree, its epitome is about the delivery of tools of financial independence, economic empowerment, and opportunity across India. Yesterday's postman now brings the promise of financial access and dignity to every doorstep in the country.

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to empower rural India, the India Post Payments Bank (IPPB) has quietly become a national pioneer by ensuring the digitalisation of all its rural accounts. By integrating technology, expanding partnerships, and diversifying services, the IPPB is transforming post offices into comprehensive financial hubs, proving that even the oldest institutions can evolve in step with a rapidly-changing world.

Eight years ago, the IPPB was established with a commitment to ensure that no Indian, irrespective of geography, gender, or circumstance, is excluded from the formal economy. Beyond opening accounts, it was about unlocking opportunity and empowerment. Today, IPPB serves 120 million customers, nearly 80% of whom are from rural India — 59% of these accounts belong to women, marking a quiet revolution in gender empowerment through financial inclusion. The pace of this transformation is equally striking: Every two seconds, a new person joins this journey. This is a measurable transformation, where banking has been systematically democratised and woven into the socio-economic fabric of the country.

The IPPB's performance is extraordinary — deposits are now nearing ₹20,000 crore and revenue alone has grown to ₹2,200 crore, with profits and savings amounting to ₹34 crore. Digital transactions worth ₹13 lakh crore have been executed, contributing to India's status as a global leader in real-time digital payments. The IPPB is also facilitating the largest Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) flow in the country, ensuring subsidies, wages, and pensions reach citizens instantly and trans-

parently. By integrating rural India into the digital economy, it has become an engine of national economic empowerment. Notably, it is in the Northeastern Region (NER) where PM Modi's "Act East" vision resonates all through financial inclusion. Since its inception, IPPB has opened more than 5.1 million accounts in the NER, served by over 8,500 postmen and *gramin dak sevaks* (GDSs) who walk miles through forests and across rivers to reach villages where a bank branch was once a day's journey away. In Assam and Meghalaya, women-led self-help groups are accepting QR payments, transforming their small ventures into growing enterprises. In Arunachal Pradesh, subsidies and pensions flow directly to households, with transparency and dignity. In every such act, the IPPB is weaving the financial mainstream of India, fulfilling a promise that no Indian is too far to be seen, served, and empowered.

The IPPB's innovation is not faceless. Every service is Aadhaar-enabled and paperless, delivered by trusted postmen and women integral to their communities. Along with financial dignity, they also deliver the confidence of knowing that every rupee, every subsidy, and every pension is secure, accountable, and accessible to the consumer. Over one billion doorstep services have been completed, each a small story of empowerment contributing to making the IPPB the largest doorstep banking network in the world. In a way, the IPPB has transformed the role of GDSs into guardians of financial inclusion, making the bank's digital promise tangible and profoundly human.

In the eighth year of the IPPB, it is not the rise of another institution alone that is to be celebrated, but trust, service, and persistence engendered by the erstwhile postal network. It is a story still being written in India's villages, towns, and cities.

This is also Bharat's revolution that is being carried forward in the hands of every postman and postwoman.

Jyotiraditya M Scindia is the Union minister of communications and POWER. The views expressed are personal



Jyotiraditya M Scindia

OUR VIEW

MY VIEW | OTHER SPHERE



It's time to lure tempest tossed talent back home

As Trump-rattled scientists and researchers in the US review their career options, we should act swiftly to attract them to India. Tamil Nadu has a plan that could well be improved upon

What is common to Albert Einstein, James Franck, Erwin Schrödinger, Hans Bethe, Felix Bloch and Max Born, apart from the fact that they were all Nobel awardees in physics? They all fled Nazi Germany for refuge in other countries, notably the US, America, Western Europe and the Soviet Union vied to attract intellectuals falling prey to Hitler's anti-Semitism. These scientists went on to contribute immensely to their new host nations and their R&D efforts—including America's Manhattan Project to develop a nuclear bomb before Germany. This bit of history is validation enough for the Tamil Nadu government's 'Tamil Talents Plan', which primarily seeks to attract scientists whose research work has been (or risks being) left in the lurch by US policies under President Donald Trump, whether it is the sudden squeeze of government funds for studies at universities and state-run labs or withdrawal of a welcome long extended to foreign-born talent. Under Trump, a country whose Statue of Liberty bears a plaque asking for the world's "tempest-tost" has stirred up a storm against immigrants, as if their return home would "Make America Great Again."

As reported, Tamil Nadu is setting aside funds to incentivize returning scientists, while identifying centres of excellence and research chairs in state universities to absorb this talent. It is also setting up two advanced centres for basic research in science and mathematics. All this is welcome. Yet, the plan suffers from two defects. One, its focus is exclusively on overseas talent of Tamil descent. Does the state want to exhibit the same kind of xenophobia that inspires this 'reverse brain drain'? Can its institutions not

gain from non-Tamil talent? People who work at the frontiers of knowledge are likely to be discouraged rather than attracted by such a display of identity-based insularity. The scheme should be a Tamil Nadu Talent Plan, not Tamil Talents Plan. The second problem is Chennai's decision to absorb returning researchers in existing labs and varieties. This overlooks the fact that India's current research system has a frail institutional framework that is rigidly hierarchical and tends to inhibit individual freedom in pursuit of valid aims. Granted, modern work is done by largish teams, as the legions of authors who appear jointly in scientific journals attest, but at least team leaders should be free to pursue a flash of insight, instead of being deterred by the chain of bureaucratic approvals it would take.

That said, it is good that Tamil Nadu wants to promote basic and not just applied research. India's shortfall glares out. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute tracks 64 critical technologies. China not just leads in 57 of those today, but is on the verge of securing a monopoly in several. This is underwritten by basic research. India has the human resources to match China, but has still lagged behind. With the advent of artificial intelligence, its application could pluck reasonably low-hanging fruit. Precision robotics is one such field. Another is synthetic biology that draws on the work of AlphaFold, a Google DeepMind project, to forecast the shapes of millions of protein molecules. From a strategic point of view, it makes sense to deploy the bulk of any 'brain gain' made in fundamental research. To catch up with rivals, India needs armies of methodologically sound researchers. Many of them could be recruited by India Inc and buzzy startups that are ready to venture into applied research.

Education accountability: Trust teachers, dump classroom cams

Intrusive surveillance will hurt an endeavour that thrives on professional ethics and human bonds



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bility is far more real. In other words, it is 'internal accountability', which involves holding yourself accountable to a professional ethic and purpose.

This notion is not at odds with teachers being significantly responsible for the learning of our children; just that it adequately acknowledges that such learning is also significantly influenced by a complex interplay of other factors such as socioeconomic conditions, societal expectations, public investment, the system's culture and more.

If we are serious about building a reasonably effective accountability system in school education, how should we proceed? The starting point is the recognition that we must try to build an internal accountability system, not a mechanistic one that will not enable good education. We must also account for the fact that people have a range of characteristics and even wider range of behaviours. For the rest of this piece, we will use the 'internal accountability' meaning of the word.

First, let's get one basic thing out of the way. We need quick and decisive management of consequences for specific wilful transgressions and bad behaviour. Meting out corporal punishment to students, unauthorized absenteeism, goofing off, coming to school inebriated, discriminating against castes and the like must be dealt with swiftly. The intent of this narrow stream of action is not to control but to weed out unacceptable behaviour. Unfortunately, we are bad at doing this, and we must improve—these are table stakes. Egregious behaviour left uncorrected corrodes any system and its culture.

Second, let us consider our scale. Our school system has over 10 million teachers and more than 1.4 million schools. The foundational principle for managing such a colossal system is that it cannot be centralized at any level—neither the state nor district level. Any effective oversight mechanism for accountability must be as close to the school as possible, ideally at the block,

panchayat and ward levels.

This requires two counterbalancing subsystems. One is within the official departments of education, disaggregated and empowered at the panchayat and ward level. The other, just as crucial, is a governance system that embeds each school within its local community. It is this local community ownership—with its inherent interest in the school's effectiveness—that can provide the sustained engagement needed to support the right actions and ensure accountability. It is impossible for any distant administration to replicate this deep, contextual and everyday oversight.

Third, we must begin with a fundamental approach of trust. The enterprise of education demands a unique combination of technical expertise, human sensibilities and operational capacities. It cannot be reduced to a set of standardized procedures. If you trust teachers, more often than not, they will rise to meet that trust. If you approach them with mistrust, you will inevitably erode their morale and agency. Note that the very nature of teaching—being responsible for children and their future—instils in most teachers a deep sense of purpose and responsibility. This inherent feeling of responsibility is our greatest asset, which we must harness and not destroy with suspicion. Systematically building the professional identity of a teacher as a practitioner of the most complex of human crafts and its purpose of helping create a good society is the most effective route to an effective accountability system.

Without doubt, we need a functional accountability system in education. But we will get there if we build everything on the realization that at its core, education is a social-human endeavour. It thrives on connection, trust and a shared sense of purpose. A camera in the classroom does not just watch; it silently undermines the foundation upon which true education is built. We must choose to build that foundation up, not surveil its erosion from afar.

10 YEARS AGO



JUST A THOUGHT

Science knows no country, because knowledge belongs to humanity, and is the torch which illuminates the world.

LOUIS PASTEUR

THEIR VIEW

Household debt must ease before it constrains demand

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The aphorism commonly attributed to John F. Kennedy that "a rising tide lifts all boats" refers to the idea that an improved economy will benefit all participants and that economic policy should focus on broad economic efforts. GDP growth and poverty reduction in India draw a striking parallel with this, as our fast-growing economy has shown spectacular success in combating poverty. The government notes the lifting of 171 million people out of extreme poverty as "one of the most remarkable achievements of the past decade." In conjunction with the economy's rapid expansion, this hints at the existence of sizeable domestic demand that can propel growth at a time when external demand is uncertain. Unconstrained domestic demand is key to retaining the growth momentum required for sustained poverty reduction.

Household consumption, an important component of domestic demand, could come from income earned or borrowings, or a combination of the two. Households bor-

row to smooth out consumption, but continued borrowings can result in the accumulation of household debt, undermining future consumption and economic growth. Recent research demonstrates that a high level of household debt is not only a good predictor of a financial crisis, but also a key determinant of the intensity of a recession likely to ensue. Further, it points to a key role played by household debt servicing costs in predicting the future vulnerability of a country to stress in the banking system. Cross-country evidence suggests that debt boosts consumption and GDP growth in the short run, with the bulk of the impact of increased indebtedness passing through the economy in the space of one year. However, the long-run negative effects of debt eventually outweigh its short-term positive effects, with household debt accumulation ultimately proving to be a drag on growth.

In India, the per capita debt of individual borrowers has grown from ₹3.9 lakh at the end of March 2023 to ₹4.8 lakh as of 31 March 2025. That's a sharp 23% increase in two years. At the macro level, over the past 10 years, India's household debt as a proportion of GDP has almost doubled to reach 4%. Though the country's household debt-to-GDP ratio is lower than it is in most large

economies, it reveals some worrying trends.

First, an increasing number of households are taking loans for consumption purposes; that is, to fund their everyday expenses such as shopping and bill payments. These expenses fall under the 'non-household retail loans' category and account for a lion's share (or 54.9%) of total household debt as of end-March 2025. Estimates also show that in March 2024, typical borrowers spent 25.7% of their disposable income on paying off these loans. Note that loans under this category do not lead to any asset creation.

Second, the share of loans that create assets and generate income is too low. Housing loans account for 29% of total household debt as of end-March 2025, while agriculture and business loans account for the remaining 16.1%. This points to a build-up of unproductive debt.

Third, the first round effects of borrowing are reflecting in savings. The gross saving rate, which was 34% in 2012, has fallen to 30% in 2023-24. Household savings contin-

ued their downward trajectory for the third straight year, slipping to 18.1% of GDP in 2023-24. On the other hand, household financial liabilities surged to 6.2% of GDP, nearly doubling over the past decade, reflecting a growing reliance on credit to meet consumption needs. Thus, households

are relying on credit to maintain consumption expenditure.

Economic logic tells us that rising household debt is explained by inadequate income growth. Slower growth of income in relation to growing consumption needs would result in a mismatch between required and actual levels of consumption. A widening of the gap between the two leads to deprivation.

There are two ways in which this gap can be narrowed. The first is through government transfers in either cash or kind or the provision of minimum days of employment. Most poverty alleviation policies take this route. The second is through the own efforts of households. That is, while the first set of measures provide the basic

minimum, borrowings are used to smoothen consumption. In India, households taking the second route seem to be growing in number. Between end-March 2021 and end-March 2024, household disposable income grew by only 43%, whereas consumption grew by almost 50%. Households resorted to loans to fill this gap. Over the same period, personal loans by banks and retail credit extended by non-banking financial companies grew by a staggering 70-75%.

There have been two recent household consumption expenditure surveys that form the basis for today's evidence of poverty reduction. The first was conducted from August 2021 to July 2023 and the second from August 2023 to July 2024. The period of these surveys coincides with the period of increased household borrowings. As households may have borrowed for consumption to relieve their indigence, in the coming years a larger share of their disposable income would go into loan repayment. Hence, income needs to grow more rapidly. Else, it would affect future consumption and savings, and the economy would face a demand constraint in the medium-term. Mitigating this risk is crucial to counter negative global shocks.

These are the author's personal views.

A flurry of loans taken for consumption rather than asset creation could weigh against growth



MY VIEW | ECONOMIC GRAVITY

MINT CURATOR

India's FDI challenge: Let us turn success into sustainable growth

Our net FDI drop was partly on account of profit repatriation and we must pitch India's high potential to lure fresh inflows



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After years of steady growth, net flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into India declined sharply from \$39 billion to less than \$1 billion between fiscal years 2021-22 and 2024-25, a stunning reversal that has attracted attention. This decline mirrors trends in other emerging markets, including Asian peers like China and Thailand. Yet India's share in world net FDI has fallen by 2.5-3.0 percentage points. However, there is more to this trend than the headline numbers suggest. India's net FDI drop stems equally from increased outward investment by Indian companies (up 60%) and decreased inflows from foreign investors (down 50%). The oft-cited 100% decline refers to net flows, or the difference between inward and outward investments, both adjusted for profit repatriations.

The underlying dynamics reveal a more complex picture. Based on available data, gross FDI inflows have fallen by only 13% (from \$82 billion to \$71 billion, peak to trough), while repatriation of profits by foreign companies has surged 64% (from \$27 billion to \$44 billion). This repatriation surge is the primary driver of declining net FDI inflows.

The equity component of FDI tells the clearest story. Net equity FDI declined by \$38 billion, driving the overall drop. Gross equity inflows fell 25% from \$61 billion to \$46 billion, while equity repatriations increased by more than half. Traditional sources, including the US, have reduced their investments, while Japan, the Netherlands and Mauritius have increased theirs. The services sector, primarily computer services and R&D, accounts for much of the decline.

Neither increased repatriations by foreign companies nor higher outward investment by Indian residents should cause alarm. Both may partly reflect India's economic maturity. Foreign firms are extracting profits from India operations through dividends, share buybacks and technical fees, thus demonstrating confidence in the profitability of their investments.

Our challenge isn't to reverse repatriation, as that is perhaps a natural outcome or even a paradox of our success. We should focus on increasing gross inflows to fuel continued growth. With India's massive infrastructure and development financing needs, current gross FDI levels remain well below potential.

Over-reliance on traditional partners may have created vulnerability. While punitive tariffs on Indian merchandise exports to US markets pose challenges, they could also present an opportunity to look beyond traditional partners for both trade and investment. We could establish a dedicated task force to engage with the world's top 50 companies, offering compelling reasons to choose India over competitors. This may also require pro-



India's FDI story must regain strength

Gross inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) have held up but rising repatriation of funds has reduced net inflows.



Note: Net inflows are from the Balance of Payments and defined as Gross Inflows less Repatriation of profits by foreign companies. *Provisional

Source: Reserve Bank of India

active diplomacy that highlights India's unique advantages: political stability, macroeconomic strength and a vast domestic market potential, factors that could partially offset tariff challenges.

Research by The Foundation for Economic Development on Special Economic Zones (SEZ) reveals how policy reversals, like the 2012 introduction of minimum alternate tax and removal of dividend distribution tax exemptions, coincided with structural declines in SEZ growth. Foreign investors seem to prize predictability above all else. Every policy change should undergo rigorous impact assessment to ensure it does not inadvertently signal instability.

Global surveys consistently identify political stability and macro fundamentals as primary FDI drivers. India excels in both, but could leverage these advantages more effectively. The government's electoral mandate and demonstrated economic management offer compelling selling points.

More action is needed on easing the regulatory environment, improving logistics and enhancing workforce skill. The World Bank's Logistics Performance Index, for example, placed India at 38th position in 2023, based on six parameters. Closing these gaps could yield substantial FDI returns.

We can learn from success stories within India and the stark disparity between states. Tamil Nadu, for example, receives a whopping 250 times more FDI than Bihar in absolute terms, likely due to advantages in governance, infrastructure and business facilitation. States can study and adapt successful models from leading states. Internal competition for FDI benefits the entire country.

Investment climate improvements, streamlined regulations and reduced bureaucracy have created

momentum that must be sustained. The next phase requires deepening existing reforms, rather than introducing new ones that might signal policy uncertainty. Credit rating upgrades could help, as foreign investment and sovereign ratings have shown a strong historical correlation globally. India's continued economic resilience, commitment to fiscal consolidation and reform trajectory position it well for potential upgrades that could unlock new investor interest.

Our FDI challenge reflects success as much as a struggle. Companies are extracting profits from successful Indian operations, while apparently hesitating to make fresh commitments amid global uncertainties. Instead of lamenting increased repatriation and outward investment by residents, we must expand the pipeline of new investment by using policy stability as a competitive advantage, aggressively courting global companies and learning from internal success stories. According to UNCTAD's *World Investment Report 2025*, India ranked fourth globally in the number of greenfield projects announced in 2024. Their implementation is important.

Our economic fundamentals remain strong, domestic market continues to expand and demographic dividend persists. FDI strategies must be bold, consistent and globally competitive. The data shows foreign companies can succeed in India, but we must convince them to start more new ventures. A window for action is open, but it won't remain so indefinitely. We must move decisively to transform the FDI challenge into the next chapter of our economic growth story.

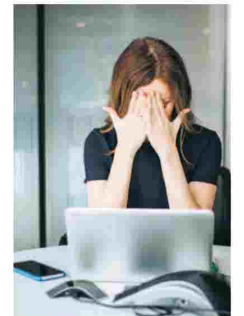
Yitushi Balakrishnan contributed to this article. These are the authors' personal views.

Employee creativity cannot be bought: It needs to be fostered

It depends on self-motivation much more than incentive structures



GAUTAM MUKUNDA
writes about corporate management and innovation.



Intrinsic motivation works better than threats or fat pay cheques.

From return-to-office sabre-rattling to hectoring memos declaring the end of rewarding employee loyalty, it's clear that chief executive officers (CEOs) are feeding their oats. A slowing US economy is shifting power back to the corner office after years of tight labour markets gave workers extraordinary pull. And leaders aren't hesitating to put that juice to use. They're swearing off warm and fuzzy cultures and instead channelling one of Don Draper's most memorable *Mad Men* lines: "That's what the money is for."

Wanting to reassert this kind of top-down control over their organizations may be a natural instinct, but it's also a profoundly counterproductive one. Management that relies primarily on fear as a stick—and financial incentives as a carrot—stifles creativity and innovation.

Examples of CEOs cracking down in ways that would have been incoherent a year or two ago are now legion. Consider Cognition, an AI startup whose leader followed up an acquisition by telling his new employees they are now expected to work 80-hour weeks and that many of his people "literally live where we work." Then there's a recent memo from AT&T CEO John Stankey, in which he doubled down on the company's return-to-office mandate and declared that he will no longer reward loyalty. Employees, it implies, are expected to show total commitment to AT&T, but it will offer none to them in return. Earlier this year, Meta's Mark Zuckerberg laid off about 5% of his workforce by labelling them "low performers," despite the fact that many insisted they had never received a bad evaluation; some speculated that the cuts "were a scare tactic to dissuade employees from dissent."

There's something seductively simple about this approach. Do what I say, and I'll pay you. Don't, and I'll fire you. After all, isn't it the job of employees to execute their CEO's vision?

Stankey claims that "management science" supports moving from what he calls "familial cultural norms" to a "competitive market-based culture." Speaking as a management scientist, though, nothing could be further from the truth—especially for companies where innovation is a priority. To see why, we need to look at the work of the legendary management scholar Teresa Amabile, who studied the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on creativity. She defines intrinsic motivation as when people are motivated "primarily by their own interest and involvement in the task." Extrinsic motivation is when they are

"motivated primarily by external goals such as the promise of reward or the expectation of evaluation." Her findings: People who accomplish tasks due to intrinsic motivations are much more creative and innovative than those with extrinsic ones.

This won't surprise anyone who has worked with a gifted scientist, engineer or artist. The most innovative and creative people have always been driven by love for what they do.

But surely it helps when managers provide a little extra incentive, right?

Not quite. Amabile found that extrinsic motivations actually cancel out internal ones. If you take an intrinsically motivated person and layer on an extrinsic driver—like a bonus for success or fear of punishment for failure—then extrinsic factors take over; the person ends up less motivated, less interested in the task and, crucially, less creative.

You can't pay people into being creative. And you definitely can't scare them into it. What you can do is create a culture that fosters free thought and innovation.

What does that look like? Innovative workplaces tend to invest in developing their people, have strong and consistent cultures, are highly adaptable and willing to take risks, and have a clear sense of mission. They also prioritize psychological safety—the feeling that you can disagree without fear of punishment. Ultimately, they're places where people come to work because they feel motivated and fulfilled, not because they feel threatened or as if a trade-off for a fat paycheck.

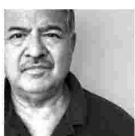
What does that mean for a company like Meta, which was recently described by departing senior AI researcher Tijmen Blankevoort, as having "a culture of fear"? Any organization that lives or dies on its ability to innovate must cultivate an environment where intrinsic motivators rule. That doesn't mean scare tactics—or the types of pay packages that would make LeBron James blush (not that those are working anyway).

It means fostering a culture where creative people feel supported to pursue their life's work. Any CEO who feels the temptation to squeeze the levers of top-down control should remember that creativity and innovation will also get trampled in the process. **©BLOOMBERG**

THEIR VIEW

Don't leap into RCEP: Let Trump's tariff game play out

MANOJ PANT



is former director, IIFT, and visiting professor, Shiv Nadar University.

Indian exporters now face an additional 50% duty on exports to the US on top of earlier tariffs. Half of this is a penalty imposed by Washington for India's oil trade with Russia. Under Section 232 of the US Trade Expansion Act of 1962, tariffs can be raised on national security grounds, though strategic exemptions apply to some products. Indian exports of textiles, leather goods, gems and jewellery and other items now stare at tariffs of around 60%. As some of these sectors have as much as half their output exposed to the US, many businesses will not survive. True, these exports enjoyed a temporary boom as US buyers made pre-emptive purchases ahead of the tariff deadline, but that respite is short-lived. Already, advance orders are drying up.

For the US, such tariffs are self-defeating. Optimistic forecasts suggest tariff revenues of \$21 trillion over the next decade, but that pales beside the \$4.5 trillion budget gap created by US President Donald Trump's tax cuts, leaving the fiscal deficit set to swell by

\$3 trillion. The market for Treasury bonds will feel the pressure, debt levels will rise and long-term stability will suffer (as has happened before). Trump's promise of a manufacturing revival collides with a labour shortage of his own making. His hard line on immigration has deprived farms and small businesses of workers, forcing his administration to quietly relax enforcement. In high-skill sectors, hiring has stagnated as companies turn to AI-driven productivity.

American consumers are already paying for Trump's policies, as the prices of everyday staples—eggs, chicken, meat—climb while restrictions on imports from Mexico and China ripple through grocery stores. Industries too are hurting. The automobile sector illustrates the problem vividly. Ford has reported \$800 million in losses, while General Motors has lost over \$1 billion. The reason: tariffs on imports from its own plants in China and Canada stand at 25%, far higher than the 15% levied on rivals from Japan or the EU. Trump's erratic bilateral deals will accelerate "tariff shopping" as firms shift operations to low-tariff jurisdictions and re-export to the US, blunting the very impact that Trump has sought. What then drives a trade policy framework that seems so bad for the world as well as the US?

One must recognize that these tariffs are not merely a reflection of Trump's personal whims, as is often made out in the media. His policies are driven by a circle of advisors steeped in protectionist thinking and are a continuation of past attempts at geopolitical change (see my article, "Trump and Trade; the turmoil continues," *Mint*, 18 April). In a speech on 7 August, US Trade Representative James Green condemned the "nameless global order dominated by the WTO," for which "the US has paid with the loss of industrial jobs and economic security." Trump's trade confidant Peter Navarro went even further, branding India's import of Russian crude oil and export of refined products a conspiracy rather than the result of a comparative advantage.

The persistence of US tariffs, which are unlikely to be reversed despite a recent court order, has less to do with simple economics and more to do with politics and ideology. Trump often invokes former presi-

dent William McKinley, whose 19th-century protectionism sought to shield US industry behind high walls. In today's interconnected world, such ideas seem anachronistic; yet, they double as political theatre. Tariffs are not just about trade; they are symbols of national assertion and personal vindication.

India's response must be clear about what has changed under Trump and what conditions are likely to endure

Trump's quest for recognition—including the elusive Nobel Peace Prize—sometimes seems to bleed into his trade policy. His frustration with Russia's war in Ukraine has fuelled punitive measures against India, with these moves undermining US supply chains. In this sense, tariffs are also a signal to China and Russia, with Indian exports caught as collateral damage.

So, how should India respond? In the short term, the priority must be to cushion the blow taken by small enterprises, that will be hardest hit by larger producers. Relief could come through tax measures, such as placing vulnerable export products in the lower 5% GST bracket, at least temporarily. In the longer run, India must diversify its

export markets toward the EU, UK, and even China, while pursuing a trade deal with the US that carves out specific sectors for protection. Diplomatically, managing Trump's ego will be as important as managing his policies. Symbolic gestures—especially if they lay claim to brokering peace in Ukraine—may be as effective as formal negotiations in restoring goodwill. Political retaliation must be tempered with the realization that India's service exports (mainly to the US) now exceed commodity exports and are not affected by reciprocal tariffs. We do not want attention diverted to that.

The irony could not be sharper: Trump's tariffs hurt US consumers and producers more than foreign competitors. Yet they persist because they serve his political ambitions, ideological instincts and vanity. For India, the lesson is clear. It must prepare for the uncertainties of Trump's economic nationalism not by reacting in panic but by hedging carefully. Jumping into trade blocs like RCEP in haste would weaken India's bargaining power elsewhere. Have the reasons why India opted out in 2019 been altered by Trump's tariffs? It's better instead to diversify, negotiate shrewdly and let the internal contradictions of Trump's policy play themselves out; 2028 isn't so far away.



WORDLY WISE
A LAW IS VALUABLE NOT BECAUSE IT IS
LAW, BUT BECAUSE THERE IS RIGHT IN IT.
— HENRY WARD BEECHER

The Indian EXPRESS

FOUNDED BY
RAMNATH GOENKA

BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

An EPIC exclusion

EC's refusal to accept the identity card it created, in SIR
in Bihar, appears arbitrary and self-contradictory



SY QURAISHI

INJUSTICE

Denial of bail to Umar Khalid and others in Delhi riots case, five
years later, violates due process

IN A RULING that raises serious concerns about due process, and the disturbingly low bar for evidence, and for the standards by which it should be proven in a court of law to justify the prolonged incarceration of individuals, the Delhi High Court has declined bail to Umar Khalid and nine others in the Delhi riots case, more than five years after arrest. The 133-page ruling is a blow to the liberty of the individuals who have been loosely accused of "conspiracy". It is also a moment to pause and ask fundamental questions — about what constitutes a "terrorist act", what is the threshold of evidence necessary for the state to label someone a terrorist, and the rigour of the court's scrutiny of the prosecution's inferences and claims. The ruling, which announces at the outset that it would confine itself only to a "surface analysis of the evidence", goes on to give the prosecution the benefit of every doubt, disregards the apparently flimsy nature of its evidence, and shows little or no sensitivity to the grave consequences of denying bail to the accused, without trial, years after incarceration.

The prosecution has argued that the accused conspired to organise "chalka jams", or road blockades, with the intention of "striking terror" in the national capital. Yet much of the so-called evidence rests on WhatsApp chats, and the testimony of "protected witnesses", who were present in "secret" meetings and whose statements cannot be tested through cross-examination. Consider, for instance, the account of a protected witness codenamed Pluto, who testified that while delivering briyani to the accused in a North-East Delhi basement, he overheard plans to "burn Delhi using firearms, petrol, and other means and funds had already been arranged for the said purpose". There are other witnesses who testify that the accused, Sharjeel Imam, told a crowd that the government is anti-Muslim, or that the Citizenship Amendment Act "targets only Muslims". In the case of Gulfiisha, an activist, the court treats her act of creating WhatsApp groups to organise women at protest sites as a conspiratorial assault on the state itself. The court's refusal to make vital distinctions — between constitutionally protected freedoms, which include the freedom to dissent, and a direct incitement to violence — is extremely disturbing. Instead of interrogating whether any of the accused explicitly incited the riots — a clear standard set by the Supreme Court in past rulings — it accepts the state's theory of a shadowy conspiracy as sufficient grounds to continue their detention under the stringent Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. "If you're doing something against the nation, you better be in jail till you are acquitted or convicted" — Solicitor General Tushar Mehta's statement fits in the face of the constitutional guarantee of due process. The court's abdication lies in stand unchallenged.

Over the last three years, this batch of bail pleas has travelled from one bench to the other in the Delhi High Court. The court does not hold itself accountable for this delay. Instead, it derides the petitioner's plea to consider it as grounds for granting bail: "A hurried trial would also be detrimental to the rights of both the Appellants and the State". The Supreme Court always underlines that bail is the rule and jail the exception. A former Chief Justice of India said, proudly, that he granted bail from "A to Z". The highest court must live up to such words and prevent the miscarriage of justice in the Delhi riots case.

TO MANIPUR, FINALLY

Prime Minister's proposed visit to the state is welcome, if
belated. It must pave the way for revival of the political process

THAT PRIME MINISTER Narendra Modi has not visited a state torn apart by ethnic violence, in which over 250 people have lost their lives and thousands have been displaced, for more than two years, has created a conspicuous absence. The Centre intervened in Manipur, albeit unsuccessfully, going on to impose President's Rule earlier this year, after removing N Biren Singh as chief minister. But the prime minister stayed away. It is welcome that this may now change, if belatedly, with reports suggesting that he will visit the northeastern state later this month following his trip to Assam and Mizoram.

The violence has taken a high toll and the state has also suffered from the Centre's apparent neglect since May 2023. In Parliament, too, the continuing crisis was not given its due attention during the Budget session in April. It was allotted barely 41 minutes, and that too in the dead of night, after 14 hours of debate and voting on the Waqf Bill. It is in this context that people on both sides of the divide in the state express a loss of faith in the institutions responsible for keeping the peace. Sections have arrogated to themselves the power to take up arms, leading to a vicious cycle that has made it harder to achieve a resolution that lasts. Now, the PM's proposed trip provides an opening to build on the current lull in the violence and to initiate fresh negotiations between the Centre and Kuki militant groups (under the Suspension of Operations agreement) aimed at the free movement of people and goods. Of course, there are deep structural problems that will not be solved overnight: Roughly 3,000 looted farms still unaccounted for; nearly 57,000 people residing in over 280 relief camps; the continued absence of a popular government.

The violence that erupted more than two years ago exposed fault lines that had been widening for years. President's Rule and the removal of an unpopular chief minister were necessary measures, but the Centre failed to build on them. It must be hoped that the Prime Minister's visit becomes a significant step towards rebuilding trust and restoring a political process that alone can lead the state back to normalcy. At the very least, it will send a message to the people of the besieged state that the nation acknowledges their crisis, and that the fact that it continues is a scar on its conscience.

SERVING UP AN ACE

At the US Open, Coco Gauff and Naomi Osaka
showcase an ethic of solidarity and care

IN 2019, 15 and a wild-card entrant to the US Open, Coco Gauff had been steam-rolling her way through the championship till she ran into Naomi Osaka. World number 1 and defending champion. The match was unremarkable: Osaka won 6-3, 6-0. But it was what came after that made it unforgettable. Osaka, 21, went up to the weeping teenager and invited her to participate in the post-match interview with her. In the tear-eyed session that followed, Osaka said, "...the fact that both of us made it, and we're both still working as hard as we can... is incredible." Six years later, at this year's Open, not much seems to have changed, except for the status of the players. Osaka, now World number 24, making a comeback after a motherhood break, defeated World number 3 Gauff 6-3, 6-2. At the post-match interview, the script of their solidarity remained unchanged.

What made the match striking was the emotional undercurrent that binds the players' relationship. Both players model a version of strength that runs counter to the culture of cutthroat ascendancy. Gauff and Osaka are, by their own admission, not friends. They admire each other as colleagues. They are both players of colour in a sport with a history of exclusion. Osaka has lived through the long shadow of early fame on her mental health; Gauff still struggles with her prodigious — and erratic — genius. Together, they serve a reminder that resilience is not always loud, that empathy is not incompatible with excellence.

In 1950, Althea Gibson became the first Black woman to play in what was then the US National Championship. Her legacy paved the way for Evonne Coolidge, the Williams sisters and countless others who followed. By holding each other up, Osaka and Gauff honour Gibson's struggle and offer a narrative of stewardship in which an ethic of care illuminates the path forward and along which they become visible, often vulnerable, examples of change.

FEW DOCUMENTS in independent India have so profoundly shaped the democratic experience as the Electors Photo Identity Card (EPIC). Introduced by the Election Commission of India (ECI) in the 1980s, the EPIC has transformed the way we vote, conduct elections, and even prove who we are in daily life. It is therefore astonishing that the very institution that created the EPIC now refuses to accept it.

In July, the ECI announced a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar. A welcome step in principle: Voter lists have historically been vulnerable to errors, duplication and under-registration. A clean and credible roll is the bedrock of a free and fair election. But the details of the exercise contain a startling twist.

Applicants for enrolment or correction have been asked to furnish any one of 11 specified documents to prove their residence and identity. Conspicuously absent from this list are the EPIC — the Commission's own flagship identity card — and Aadhaar, the nation's most widely-used proof of identity. The omission has rightly raised eyebrows, triggered litigation, and prompted the Supreme Court to express surprise.

The exclusion of the EPIC and Aadhaar from Bihar's SIR was challenged in the Supreme Court. During hearings, the Court was openly puzzled: "EPIC and Aadhaar are readily available documents. Tomorrow, 10 out of 11 accepted documents could also be false — that cannot justify blanket exclusion of these", said Justice Surya Kant. The Bench repeatedly urged the ECI to focus on mass inclusion rather than exclusion, and specifically suggested that the EPIC and Aadhaar be accepted.

However, surprisingly, in its final order, the Court directed only Aadhaar's inclusion (that too for the 65 lakh deleted voters and not for all 7 crore applicants). It stopped short of mandating the EPIC's acceptance. This decision has allowed the ECI to claim compliance with judicial directions while still refusing to rely on its own most powerful tool of voter identification.

It is important to remember that the EPIC was not a bureaucratic whim — it was a reform born of conviction and confrontation. In the late 1980s, concerns about imperson-

ation and bogus voting were eroding public trust. Under the redoubtable TN Seshan's uncompromising leadership, the ECI launched an ambitious programme to photo-identify every voter.

The project met with immediate resistance. It required substantial funds and political backing. When Seshan approached Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao for funding, Rao reportedly refused, citing budget constraints. Seshan, in characteristic style, is said to have warned that unless the request was granted, he would not call the by-election Rao needed to contest to continue as Prime Minister — a constitutional requirement under Article 75(5). The funds were sanctioned within days.

This episode is more than an anecdote. It symbolises the assertion of the Commission's independence and its determination to strengthen the integrity of elections. The EPIC was, from its inception, a reform secured against odds — not a gift of political generosity but the fruit of institutional insistence.

The current exclusion is not only baffling — it is deeply symbolic. Every year on January 25, India celebrates National Voters' Day, an event created precisely to encourage enrolment. Millions of young voters receive their EPICs at polling booth level on this day. At the national function, no less than the President of India personally hands over EPICs to a select group of new voters — a moment of pride telecast across the country, in the presence of over 30 election commissioners of the world.

That the very card ceremonially handed over by the Rashtrapati is now disqualified as proof of identity in Bihar's revision process is a bitter irony. It risks turning a proud democratic ritual into an open spectacle. If the EPIC is good enough for the nation's first citizen to bestow with such pomp, surely it must be good enough for the Commission to recognise.

Besides, there is a very important question: In the coming election, will the EPIC be required or accepted from each voter? Moreover, if it has been discarded by its creators/owners, will they issue EPICs to the new voters as was always done? The practical consequences of excluding the EPIC, the most possessed ID, are serious.

If the EPIC is good enough for the nation's first citizen to bestow with such pomp, surely it must be good enough for the Commission to recognise. Besides, there is a very important question: In the coming election, will the EPIC be required or accepted from each voter? Moreover, if it has been discarded by its creators/owners, will they issue EPICs to the new voters as was always done? The practical consequences of excluding the EPIC, the most possessed ID, are serious.

with high migration and large numbers of rural poor. Many citizens possess only the EPIC as their proof of identity. Denying its validity risks making the process cumbersome, dissuading participation, and disenfranchising genuine voters.

Given its rich history, the exclusion of the EPIC from the SIR document list is baffling. It creates a paradox: The same card that was good enough to run the 2024 General Election, with 642 million voters participating, is suddenly deemed inadequate for revising the rolls. When the rules appear arbitrary or self-contradictory — when a card used to elect a government cannot be used to stay on the roll — public confidence erodes.

The solution is straightforward. The EPIC should be reinstated as an admissible document with reasonable safeguards as ECI may choose. This approach would protect roll purity while ensuring no genuine voter is excluded for lack of alternative documents like passport or driving licence. The ECI must also communicate clearly with voters. Why was the EPIC excluded? Is there evidence of large-scale misuse that justifies this step? How will the Commission guarantee that legitimate voters are not struck off?

By answering these questions explicitly, the ECI can turn controversy into a moment of civic education — restoring confidence and proving its commitment to impartiality. The EPIC was conceived as a weapon against electoral malpractice. It has been celebrated globally as a symbol of India's democratic capacity. To sideline it now, without a compelling explanation, sends the wrong signal.

The credibility of an election depends as much on the perception of fairness as on the mechanics of the process. In a country of India's scale, no institution can afford to appear arbitrary or inconsistent. It is time for the Election Commission to reaffirm its faith in the card it created — and in the voters whose faith it must protect.

The writer is former Chief Election Commissioner of India and the author of *An Undocumented Wonder — The Making of the Great Indian Election*



AVIJIT PATHAK

You, Me & A LONELY CROWD

Life in the city is being drained of love and enchantment

WHAT SORT OF society are we creating — particularly, in big cities — that normalises loneliness, psychic stress and the all-pervading fear of the other? I live in a metropolitan city, and it has enriched me in many ways. I find good schools, colleges, hospitals and vibrant cultural centres that keep me intellectually alive. Yet, I experience a sense of pain and existential anguish. Huge skyscrapers and gated communities frighten me, and the constant movement of cars and other vehicles on impersonal highways intensifies my stress. However, I am not alone. In fact, the pathology of our contemporary urban existence is becoming the new normal, but the mainstream "development" discourse seldom notices it.

Let me refer to what a hugely stratified/unequal society like ours has normalised — the segregation of the rich and the upwardly mobile aspiring class from the larger society. And this segregation manifests itself in the mode of living which the real estate industry mythologises as a "gated community" — a space that normalises the culture of surveillance and cultivates the fear of the "other". In these gated communities, the entry gates are always closed for the "outsiders", unless they carry appropriate "class symbols", and convince the security guards that they have indeed come to meet someone who resides there. By its nature, a gated community is against informal interactions, mutual trust and intimacy. It appears to be an island of the privileged that seeks to distance itself from the "chaotic" larger society. In this circumstance,

IN GOOD FAITH

Are we fast losing the art of direct face-to-face communication? Is technology, far from emancipating, enslaving us? When I travel in a metro, I experience something that sociologist Georg Simmel, in his essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', regarded as 'heartless indifference'. I experience the coldness of the 'lonely crowd'. Seldom do fellow passengers greet one another. There is hardly any conversation — a pleasant exchange or a life-affirming smile. Instead, everybody is engrossed in his/her smartphone.

the maids, cooks, plumbers and electricians — they are not even allowed to use the same lift — are discriminated against.

Ironically, there is hardly any interaction among the "visitors". Even an exchange of a pleasant smile in the lift is rare. Everyone's identity seems to have been reduced to their apartment numbers. Loneliness is an inevitable outcome. A 2021 study suggests that more than 40 per cent of urban Indians feel lonely.

Likewise, as I see the overflow of cars and the intoxication with speed, I wonder whether a pedestrian like me has the right to exist in a megacity. As pedestrians, we carry no carbon emissions, particularly at a time when the horror of the climate emergency is haunting us. However, there is hardly any space for a pedestrian to walk freely without any obstruction or fear. A footpath is now a parking space for two-wheelers and cars. It is a business city. Tea stalls, fast food shops and hawkers occupy it without the slightest hesitation. Electricity poles, transformers, small religious structures, and even open manholes add to these existing obstacles. No wonder pedestrian fatalities account for almost 20 per cent of all crash fatalities in India. Yet, there is no public debate on this issue. Meanwhile, we continue cutting trees, destroying the ecosystem, expanding our highways, and tempting the aspiring class to buy more and more cars.

According to the Delhi Statistical Handbook 2023, more than 2.07 million private cars are registered in Delhi, whereas 2.31 million private cars contribute to Bengaluru's

notorious traffic jam. A conflict-ridden society is facing yet another kind of conflict — the dispute over the parking space leading to assaults, abuses and even shootings. Chronic anger and psychic stress characterise our everyday interactions in big cities.

There is another kind of anxiety that haunts me. Are we fast losing the art of direct face-to-face communication? Is technology, far from emancipating, enslaving us? When I travel in a metro, I experience something that sociologist Georg Simmel, in his essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', regarded as 'heartless indifference'. I experience the coldness of the "lonely crowd". Seldom do fellow passengers greet one another. There is hardly any conversation — a pleasant exchange or a life-affirming smile. Instead, everybody is engrossed in his/her smartphone. Amidst our almost neurotic obsession with virtual "likes" and "followers", we miss the warmth of human touch. With time, technologies will become increasingly sophisticated; the miracle called "Artificial Intelligence" will further separate us from human interactions, and the "hidden persuaders" will succeed in tempting us to buy the latest gadgets. Do we realise that we are dying from deep inside?

The irony of our contemporary urban existence is that we are becoming more and more "efficient" and "productive" — yet, lonely, indifferent, anxiety-ridden and devoid of love and enchantment.

The writer taught sociology at JNU

SEPTEMBER 4, 1985, FORTY YEARS AGO

TAMIL EX-MPs KILLED

THREE PROMINENT LEADERS of the Tamil United Liberation Front were kidnapped and murdered by unidentified persons in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, while the fate of two others kidnapped is not yet known. The bullet-ridden bodies of V Dharmalingam and M Alalasundaram were found near their residence. The body of T Rasalingam was found near Valvetithurai in northern Sri Lanka.

ANTULAY ABSOLVED

THE FORMER MAHARASHTRA Chief Minister, A R Antulay, was acquitted of all three charges of abuse of office and deception of the Cabinet,

Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council, in the sanction of Rs 2 crore by the state government to the Indira Gandhi Pratibha Pratishthan (IGPP). Delivering his order in the case filed by the Janata Party leader, P B Samant, Justice D N Mehta of Bombay High Court said, "The prosecution has failed to bring home the case under the section 5(1)(D) and 5(1)(E) of the Prevention of Corruption Act. The main charges under section 5(1)(D) have failed... Resultantly, the accused is acquitted of the charges framed against him."

AKALI CANDIDATES

THE AKALI DAL (Longwa) released the list of candidates for 99 Vidhan Sabha constituen-

cies, leaving nine for the Janata Party and expressing the resolve that none of the remaining nine seats would go uncontested. The party also released the list of candidates for 11 of the 13 Lok Sabha seats. It is not contesting the Ferozepur and Phillaur (SC) Lok Sabha seats. The seats left for the Janata Party are Amritsar (South), Phagwara (SC), Dasuya, Mukerian, Jalandhar, Jalandhar (Central), Pathankot, Sujanypur and Narot Mehta (SC).

TERROR ATTACK

SUSPECTED TERRORISTS STRUCK at three places in Amritsar and Hoshiarpur districts, killing three persons and injuring eight others, three of them seriously.



THE IDEAS PAGE

America, don't lose India

It's time for the United States to call off its tariff war, and restore the strategic partnership that both nations desperately need, and the world benefits from



THAROOR THINK

BY SHASHI THAROOR

IN THE LATE 1940s and early 1950s, the United States was convulsed by the "Who lost China?" debate. A political uproar occurred in the American foreign policy establishment following the Communist takeover of China in October 1949, when the People's Republic of China was declared by Mao Zedong after defeating the Nationalist forces of the Kuomintang, led by Chiang Kai-shek, who fled to Taiwan. This was seen by many Americans as a major failure of US foreign policy and a catastrophic blow in the early Cold War struggle against communism.

A few years from now, if New Delhi finds itself in the embrace of China and Russia and alienated from America, might there be a new blame game in Washington DC, with finger-pointing American pundits angrily asking the question, "Who lost India?"

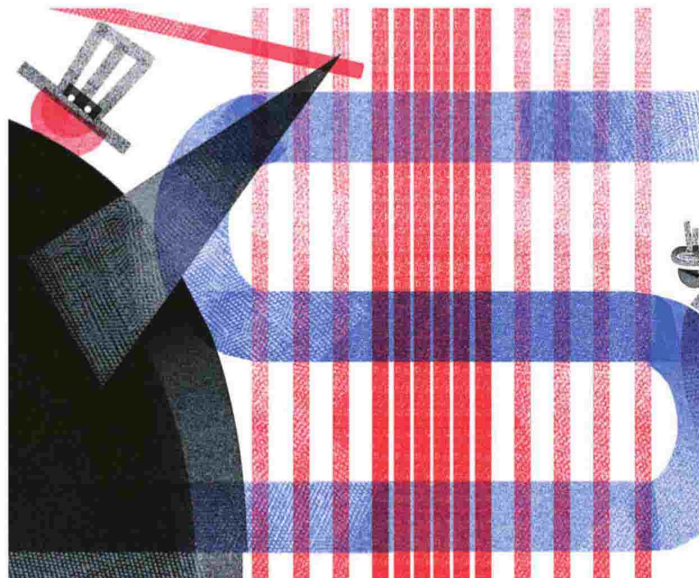
President Donald Trump is acting as if he doesn't care. But by any measure, the US-India relationship has been one of the most consequential strategic partnerships of the 21st century. From defence cooperation and technology-sharing, to joint efforts in the Quad to secure a free and open Indo-Pacific, Washington and New Delhi have built a foundation of mutual respect and shared interests.

Yet today, that foundation is cracking under the weight of Trump's punitive tariffs and dismissive rhetoric – and the resultant diplomatic friction in India, reeling in shock from finding itself the most highly tariffed country in the world – at 50 per cent, when China faces only 30 per cent and India's other competitors in the US market are between 15 and 20 per cent – is understandably strengthening its dialogue with Moscow and Beijing. The grave has already been dug for the burial of the much-vaunted "strategic partnership" that had defined the Indo-US relationship for the past quarter of a century.

But it's not too late to salvage the partnership – if Washington wants to. It's time for the United States to abandon its path of confrontation and restore the strategic partnership that both nations desperately need – and the world benefits from.

As of midnight on the night of August 26-27, the US doubled tariffs on Indian goods, affecting over \$48 billion in exports (out of a total Indian export list to America of \$87 billion). These measures hit critical sectors like textiles, gems and jewellery, leather, seafood (especially shrimp), and auto components, while – so far – exempting pharmaceuticals and electronics. The rationale is based on India's continued purchase of Russian oil and military equipment, which Washington claims indirectly funds Russia's war in Ukraine – a charge New Delhi firmly rejects as unjustified, especially since China buys far more oil and gas from Russia, and EU imports \$67 billion worth of other items from there, while neither faces comparable levels of tariffs.

But these tariffs are not just economic



C R Sasikumar

penalties – they're political signals. And they're being read loud and clear in New Delhi. Strategic autonomy is being punished, rather than (as heretofore) respected. The consequences are severe. Indian exporters are losing competitiveness, risking thousands of jobs in hubs like Tiruppur, Surat, and Visakhapatnam. US buyers are already shifting to suppliers in Vietnam, Ecuador, Thailand and Turkey, while American consumers face higher prices. Investment sentiment in India is faltering, and capital expenditure decisions are being delayed. A lakh and a half jewellery-workers have been laid off in Surat, and garment workers in Tiruppur and shrimp exporters in Vizag are looking at job losses as well.

This is a lose-lose scenario. The longer it persists, the deeper the damage to bilateral trust and economic resilience will be.

The irony is that despite the trade war, defence cooperation remains robust. The US-India COMBAT initiative, launched in February 2025, aims to deepen military collaboration, co-produce advanced equipment, and conduct joint exercises like "Tiger Triumph". Plans for a new 10-year Framework for Major Defence Partnership are underway, and India is in advanced negotiations to purchase major US military equipment, including the Stryker armoured fighting vehicle and the Javelin anti-tank guided missile. But these efforts are being undermined by the tariffs, which signal distrust and coercion.

India is not just a trading partner – it is a pivotal player in the Indo-Pacific. Alienating New Delhi risks weakening the Quad, whose summit India is supposed to be hosting later this year, destabilising regional security, and pushing India closer to the US' adversaries, like China and Russia.

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gional security, and pushing India closer to the US' adversaries, like China and Russia.

The US must recognise that strategic autonomy is not defiance – it's sovereignty. Punishing India for its energy choices or defence procurement decisions, which any country can only do based on its vital national interests, is shortsighted and counterproductive. Instead, Washington should lift punitive tariffs immediately, especially on labour-intensive sectors, which were already vulnerable at the baseline 25 per cent tariff and are totally impossible to sell at 50 per cent; accelerate free trade negotiations, offering India a viable alternative to dependence on other markets by constructively discussing mutual concessions that could bring India down to the 15-19 per cent level enjoyed by its Asian rivals; re-engage in high-level diplomacy, including direct leader-to-leader dialogue. President Trump could, for example, call Prime Minister Modi on his birthday this month to break the chill that has set into their bromance. A good conversation on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly could work wonders; expand technology and defence cooperation, reinforce mutual trust and shared interests.

India is not just a partner of convenience – it is a partner of consequence. The US must treat it as such. The current path of confrontation threatens to unravel two decades of strategic convergence. It's time to recalibrate, restore trust, and rebuild the partnership that can shape the future of global stability.

The writer is Congress MP (Lok Sabha) for Thiruvananthapuram

WHAT THE OTHERS SAY

"All relevant parties must set aside maximalist demands and unite behind the commitment to the February polls, as the stability of Bangladesh depends on it."
— THE DAILY STAR, BANGLADESH

Making them play by the book

The National Sports Governance Act will ensure sports bodies do not function as fiefdoms, serve interests of sportspersons



JANAY JAIN

IN THE MONSOON Session of Parliament, 15 bills were passed. Amongst them was the National Sports Governance Act, 2025. While the Act, which regulates and recognises national sports bodies in India, is not likely to find a place in the list of political "hot potatoes", its importance cannot be overstated. This is because several national-level sporting federations today enjoy a monopoly and are directly concerned with the selection of teams to represent the country. Though India, while it was under colonial rule, was the first Asian nation to participate in the Olympics in 1900, it was not until this Act was passed that the country had a comprehensive legislation to govern sports bodies.

Before the Sports Governance Act was passed, the administration of sports federations was guided by the National Sports Development Code of India. The Code was, in fact, a set of makeshift rules, hastily drafted by the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports.

The situation of the sport at that time was deplorable. Sports federations, ranging from national to district associations, became the fiefdom of political satraps and their cronies. Electoral malpractices and misconduct were the norm. Several post holders overstayed their term, and tenure limits were blatantly disregarded. In 2014, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Human Resource Development observed that the majority of the national sporting federations were dominated by non-sportspersons. More than 350 cases related to malpractices in the governance of various sporting federations are currently pending before different courts. In some cases, the courts were compelled to intervene and appoint a Committee of Administrators (CoA) to govern federations as a stop-gap measure. After the position of the erstwhile office bearers had become legally untenable.

Some national sporting federations faced penalties from global agencies. The Wrestling Federation of India was suspended in 2023 due to its failure to hold timely elections. The Amateur Kabaddi Federation of India was also suspended in 2024, as it lacked an elected body. Additionally, in 2022, FIFA suspended the All India Football Federation because it was being governed by court-appointed administrators. The cost of such mismanagement was exacerbated when the Indian Super League 2025-26 was placed in limbo because of litigation pertaining to the AIFF – the Supreme Court directed the agency not to make any major policy decisions until the matter was resolved.

The political satraps do not bear the ultimate cost for such a terrible state of affairs. They merely face the occasional setback of

not being able to extend their already extended tenure. The real victims are, in fact, the sportspersons, whose careers are bound by the unforgiving constraints of time and age, and who find their aspirations stifled by misgovernance and unending litigation concerning their federations.

The passing of the Sports Governance Act is, therefore, a timely relief and represents a watershed moment. It will hopefully address the above-mentioned shortcomings. The Act empowers the Centre to establish a National Sports Board, which will grant recognition to various national sporting federations and their affiliate units. This provision, in particular, will put an end to the protracted battles for legitimacy waged by rival federations within the same sport.

This Act also establishes the National Olympic Committee, the National Paralympic Committee, and the National and Regional Sports Federations for each sport. Each of these bodies has also been mandated to establish a code of conduct in line with the international best practices prevailing in each sport. The Act also mandates that the Executive Committee for every sporting federation must consist of up to 15 members, with at least two outstanding sportspersons and four women. Moreover, the age and tenure limits are also defined to ensure that fresh talent and vigour is inducted in sports administration and the few offices bearers from a particular region, religion, or political affiliation do not have a monopoly over the administration of a sport.

A National Sports Tribunal will be constituted to adjudicate disputes pertaining to sporting federations. This is a landmark provision as it would streamline sports-related litigation by enabling matters to be decided by subject experts. Further, the unending rounds of litigation would be reduced as an appeal against a decision of the National Sports Tribunal would only lie before the Supreme Court. The Sports Governance Act also ensures the oversight of elections of sporting federations, both national and regional, as it seeks to establish a national panel of electoral officers to oversee elections of national sports bodies. It calls upon national sports bodies to constitute a panel to oversee the elections of their affiliates. Disqualification is a significant deterrent for non-compliant federations to ensure that the Act's provisions are complied with.

As India aspires to host the Commonwealth Games (hopefully with greater integrity, this time) and the Olympic Games in the near future, it is necessary that the infrastructure developed in the country is all-encompassing. Such infrastructure must not be confined merely to brick and mortar, but must also encompass a robust legal framework that places good governance in sporting federations at the forefront. The Act will ensure that sports federations will not remain representatives of the aspirations of a select few political satraps, but of sportspersons of the nation.

The writer is an advocate at the Bombay High Court



SOHINI CHATTOPADHYAY

A COHORT of bickering, praying, gossiping – in other words, wholly regular – schoolgirls reaches their push-looking private school, eats at their cafeteria and undergoes a palpable transformation. The laughing, chattering hum of the cafeteria turns to silence. Their breathing changes – shallow, noisy breaths – as the girls' faces tighten with anxiety. No one talks or looks at each other any longer. The camera zooms in, invoking a sense of claustrophobia. Then, a blurred male figure walks in and orders 10 schoolgirls to jump off the ledge of the school's terrace. One by one, they all leap to their deaths. This begins a reign of terror unleashed by a cohort of schoolgirls under the spell of a demonic hypnotist in the superb thriller/horror film *Vash Level 2*, made in Gujarati and dubbed in Hindi for release across major cities.

As the day progresses, the girls wreak havoc: Bludgeoning citizens on the roads with anything they can get their hands on, setting petrol pumps ablaze, bringing traffic to a careening stop. The school authorities and city police have no effect on the possessed. The demonic hypnotist, hiding in plain sight in the cafeteria, has them under his control. He demands access to another demonic hypnotist, his guru, now locked in a citizen's dungeon, his tongue sliced out so he can no longer communicate.

The politics of horror

Gujarati film 'Vash Level 2' is a parable of the violence of blind obedience

A mass hypnosis on ordinary human beings that makes them turn on their fellow human beings to unleash violence and extreme anarchy in society. An apparently normal society that turns tense and fearful abruptly. An outwardly poised man with an aura so powerful that people do his bidding with the fervour of the possessed. At one crucial point in the film, the current hypnotist calls out to one of the schoolgirls he has sent out to kill a man sleeping on the street with a rock. Bloodied and blank-faced, she stares back at him but doesn't come his way. So potent is the spell that even the hypnotist can no longer fully control the possessed. They are out there, addicted to the blood on their hands and faces.

The horror and fantasy genres are never not political. When the classic German Expressionist film *Nosferatu*, widely recognised as the first major *Dracula* adaptation on screen released in 1922, the spectre of Nazism was rising across Europe. In his essay for *The Tablet*, film critic J. Hoberman notes that "... *Mein Kampf*, published in 1925, makes multiple references to Jews as vampires, bloodsuckers and parasites..." Critiques of the film point to Count Orlok's rat-like characteristics; the analogy between pestilential rodents and Jews is common to a number of anti-Semitic propaganda films. And what of the original

novel? Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is read variously as the threat of the Turkish or East European other to the Liberal West, the vestiges of maladjusted feudalism in a capitalist liberal order, the rise of Irish and other nationalisms, often led by old landed elites with interests to protect their influence, against the Empire. Equally, you could read into Count Dracula the spectre of the Empire sickening and out of time, infecting victims against the modern, liberal ideas of the 20th century.

Indeed, one of the pleasures of the fantasy genre is the amorpheness of its form. Overthinking, some might say, *Dracula* is just a solid creepy story featuring an unforgettably supernatural character. Hard to argue with that, given *Dracula*'s undying appeal. Ditto for *Frankenstein*. I could read into it a warning against modernity's scientific and technological arrogance, creating artificial life with little regard for its consequences. (This is a premise beautifully revisited in Kazuo Ishiguro's English-language novel *Never Let Me Go*.) *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* (GGBB), Upendra Kishore Ray Chaudhuri's children's story filmed unforgettably by his grandson Satyajit Ray, could be read as a terrific ride about the travels of two minstrels into a happy kingdom and a sad kingdom. Or, I could read it as a comment about enlight-

ened and despotic pre-modern rulers.

In fact, it was GGBB that put *Vash Level 2*'s political narrative in my mind. In GGBB, an evil magician burns a concoction whose fumes cause the kingdom's populace to lose their speech. Later, on the instructions of the minstrel heroes, he burns another concoction whose fumes return speech to the populace. The spell is broken. In *Vash Level 2*, it is something in the meal served to the schoolgirls that brings them under the control of the hypnotist. But it is not something edible that breaks the spell. In an inventive play, it happens only once the means of communication are snapped.

Isn't this what contemporary critics say about the media? Turn away from these peddlers of propaganda, and sense will prevail. It's impossible to disagree with when you think about the genocide unfolding in Gaza – every prestige news outlet in the West has capitulated to Israel's propaganda. A technologically-advanced nation that has itself suffered the trauma of a monster's hypnotism has revived his memory. This, of course, is the subtext I read into *Vash Level 2*. What else could it be?

Chattopadhyay is the author of *The Day I Became a Runner: A Women's History of India Through the Lens of Sport*. She works at Cept University, Ahmedabad

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WHITHER DIPLOMACY

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'Sound and Fury' (IE, September 3). The statements by White House trade advisor Peter Navarro about India is a manifestation of diplomatic anarchy and the failure of the "new world order" envisioned by the proponents of globalisation. The world is now facing conflicts and natural calamities on a large scale. The comments by former NSAs Jake Sullivan and John Bolton showcase the dangers of alienating India. The recent court decision on the President's powers to impose tariffs also shows how such actions can be counterproductive for the US.

Vasant Nalawade, Sattara

AFTER SCO

THIS REFERS TO the article, 'China's parade, Asia's divide' (IE, September 2). India knows well that the Tianjin summit is largely symbolic, as the contentious issues between India and China are too wide to be narrowed down. It moved cautiously, making Japan a prior stop before China, and stood firm in its non-agreement with China's BRI. The SCO grouping shares complex dynamics, but its shifted focus from Central Asia to global matters signals China's parallel international governance movement. Still, all members are at the table with the SCO. India's stance on the tariff stand New Delhi is buying time, mindful of its recent lesson from the US, and is adhering to a policy of multilateralism by resuming a working relationship with China. Washington needs to understand

that by alienating India, it is helping no one but China.

Madhusree Guha, Kolkata

PUNJAB FLOODS

THIS REFERS TO the editorial, 'What Punjab needs' (IE, September 2). The flood situation in Punjab paints a tragic picture. Heavy monsoon rainfall coupled with the release of water from dams is leading to extensive flooding, especially across seven districts of Gurdaspur, Kapurthala, Amritsar, Pathankot, Ferozepur, Fazilka, and Hoshiarpur, submerging nearly three lakh acres of agricultural land, primarily paddy fields. The situation remains volatile, with a high toll on human and animal life along with widespread property destruction. Given the scale of devastation, governments at the Union and state levels should set aside politics and provide all the necessary support, including finances, manpower, and logistical resources, to the people as soon as possible.

Vaibhav Goyal, Chandigarh

BELATED VISIT

THIS REFERS TO the report, 'Modi plans Manipur visit, warning groups say expect to be heard' (IE, September 3). The visit to the strife-torn state for the first time since ethnic violence erupted in May 2023 might be "too little, too late". There is no denying that the "one-engine-sarkar" in New Delhi is completely collapsed under its own failures despite a strong mandate. The neglect of Manipur has deepened the pain, distress, and agony of all the communities in the state.

SS Paul, Nadiya

Delhi riots: Why UAPA accused jailed for 5 yrs were denied bail

VINEET BHALLA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 3

DELHI HIGH Court on Tuesday declined to grant bail to Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, Gulifisha Fatima, and seven others charged as key conspirators of the February 2020 Delhi riots, saying the riots were a "premeditated, well-orchestrated conspiracy".

The accused have been charged under various provisions of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA), including Section 16, which prescribes the death penalty for committing a "terrorist act". They have spent more than five years in jail, and the trial is yet to begin.

The prosecution's case

The prosecution has argued that the riots were a result of a "deep-rooted" and "well-orchestrated" criminal conspiracy hatched by the accused. Fifty-four people, including a senior police officer and an Intelligence Bureau official, were killed, and

more than 1,500 properties were damaged. Section 15 of UAPA criminalises any act "with intent to threaten or likely to threaten the unity, integrity, security, economic security, or sovereignty of India or with intent to strike terror or likely to strike terror in the people or any section of the people in India". Striking terror could be by use of "bombs, dynamite or other explosive substances or inflammable substances or firearms... or any other means".

The prosecution's case is that a "chakka jam" that the accused allegedly conspired to organise over WhatsApp messages and in "secret meetings" would fall under the definition of "any other means".

Evidence with the police

Court records show that the evidence is heavily reliant on inferences from WhatsApp chats and testimony of "protected witnesses" who were present in "secret" meetings.

The identity of the protected witnesses is not revealed, and their statements cannot be tested through cross-examination. Court

records show that witnesses identified as "Radium" and "Sodium" stated that in "secret meetings", there were "open discussions regarding escalation of violence and setting paths of Delhi on fire".

All accused argued that the statements of protected witnesses were unreliable, lacked specific details, and had been obtained belatedly after the accused were arrested.

The court did not refute these claims, but noted that at the bail stage, the credibility of the evidence cannot be examined, and it must be presumed to be true.

The specific charge against Gulifisha Fatima is that she created WhatsApp groups to organise women at protest sites. A protected witness has testified that Sharjeel Imam allegedly told a crowd that the government is anti-Muslim and the Citizenship Amendment Act "targets only Muslims".

The court had to distinguish whether the evidence shows participation in a protest, which is a constitutionally protected right, or a larger conspiracy.

Reasons to deny bail

The definition of "terror" will be tested only during the trial. Grant of bail in UAPA cases is restricted by law and court rulings.

The state has to pass a very low threshold for a court to deny bail — if there are grounds to believe that the accused is prima facie true, bail can be denied. The High Court denied bail to each of the accused because it found reasonable grounds to believe the accusations against them were *prima facie* true.

"A comprehensive examination of evidence at this stage may adversely affect the trial. The explanations advanced by the appellants in respect of the various statements of the protected witness cannot be considered in isolation, especially in cases involving conspiracy. A mini trial at the stage of consideration of bail is impermissible," the court said.

The accused argued that they deserved bail on grounds of parity with co-accused Devangana Kalita, Natasha Narwal, and Asif

Iqbal Tanha, whose bail by the HC in 2021 was upheld by the Supreme Court.

However, the court said that the SC had directed that the HCs bail to Kalita, Narwal, and Tanha "shall not be treated as a precedent and may not be relied upon by any of the parties in any of the proceedings".

The accused also argued that their actions at worst fell under Section 13 of UAPA, which deals with "unlawful activities", which is a lesser offence to which the bar of Section 43D(5) — under which bail can't be granted without hearing the public prosecutor — does not apply.

To this, the court said that exercising its appellate jurisdiction in bail proceedings does not empower it to conduct a "detailed analysis of the evidence for determining the validity of the accusations".

Delay in the trial

The Supreme Court in its 2021 decision in *Union of India v K.A. Najeeb* granted bail in a UAPA case where the accused had been in jail for more than five years, and 276 wit-

nesses were still to be examined.

Referring to the restrictive bail conditions in Section 43D(5) of the UAPA, the court held that "the rigours of such provisions will melt down where there is no likelihood of trial being completed within a reasonable time and the period of incarceration already undergone has exceeded a substantial part of the prescribed sentence".

The trial court in Delhi is currently hearing arguments on the preliminary question of whether these charges can even be framed against the accused. However, the question of bail is important because prolonged incarceration, even before charges are framed, is a violation of liberty.

The HC dismissed concerns about the delay in trial and said that "a hurried trial would also be detrimental to the rights of both the appellants and the State". The bail pleas were filed in 2022, and were passed on to three different Benches. Twice, they had to be heard afresh since judges who reserved the verdict did not pronounce the order and were subsequently transferred.

EXPLAINED GLOBAL

U.S. ICE AGENCY GETS ACCESS TO SPYWARE 'GRAPHITE': WHAT IS IT?

THE TRUMP administration has unfrozen a stalled Biden-era contract with Paragon Solutions, a spyware company founded in Israel, whose products have been allegedly used to facilitate the surveillance of activists and journalists in Europe.

The move will give the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) access to the company's powerful hacking software — known as Graphite — which can hack mobile phones and encrypted messaging applications.

The spyware

Graphite is designed to gain remote access to a mobile phone and essentially take control of it. The user of the spyware can not only access the mobile user's photos, read their messages, and track their whereabouts, but also monitor encrypted messages sent on platforms such as WhatsApp and Signal.

The spyware also enables the phone to be used as a listening device by manipulating its recorder, according to a report by *The Guardian*.

The company behind Graphite is Paragon Solutions, which was co-founded by former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak. In late 2024, AE Industrial Partners, a Florida-based investment group, acquired the company for \$900 million, according to a report by *Bloomberg*. AE also owns cyber-intelligence company REDTactix, which has several former CIA officials on its management board.

Allegations of hacking

Paragon Solutions claims it sells its products to only governments and law enforcement agencies for the purposes of fighting serious crime. The company also claims that it has a zero-tolerance policy for governments that use the technology to target members of civil society.

However, Paragon Solutions was forced to terminate its contract with Italy this February after Meta Platforms, which owns WhatsApp, said that the company's spyware was used to target 90 people in two dozen countries, including journalists and activists, in 2024. The individuals who were targeted included journal-



ICE has been conducting a crackdown on undocumented immigrants in the US, Reuters

The stalled contract

Under the Biden administration, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which oversees ICE, entered into a \$2 million contract with Paragon Solutions for one year in September 2024.

However, the contract was put on hold the next month due to concerns that it potentially violated the administration's March 2023 executive order, which had limited the US procurement of spyware. The pause mandated a robust review of Paragon Solutions and Graphite to address concerns regarding security and improper use as well.

The Trump administration has now done away with this pause, helping ICE gain access to Graphite. Experts worry that the spying tool would help ICE expand its crackdown on undocumented immigrants. The agency has repeatedly been accused by civil and human rights groups of violating people's due process rights.

Nadine Farid Johnson, policy director at the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, told *The Guardian*, "Spyware like Paragon's Graphite poses a profound threat to free speech and privacy... The quiet lifting of the stop work order also raises the troubling prospect that parts of the executive branch are acting without adherence to the government's own vetting requirements."

ANAGHA JAYAKUMAR

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9 Noida	12 सितंबर सुबह 11:30 बजे	18 Sep 11:30 AM
9 Lucknow	28 अगस्त सुबह 8:30 बजे	28 Aug 8:00 AM
9 Prayagraj	18 सितंबर शाम 6:00 बजे	18 Sep 5:30 PM
9 Jaipur	27 अगस्त सुबह 8:00 बजे	27 Aug 8:00 AM
9 Indore	8 सितंबर सुबह 8:00 बजे	2 Sep 8:00 AM

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AMRITA NAYAK DUTTA
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 3

LINGERING DIFFERENCES of opinion within the defence services leadership over the structure of a theatre commands — which are among the major reforms that the Indian Armed Forces intend to implement — were in evidence at a tri-service seminar at the Army War College in Dr Ambedkar Nagar (Mhow), Madhya Pradesh, last week. Air Chief Marshal A P Singh cautioned against rushing the theatreisation plan, and stressed instead on creating a joint planning and coordination centre in Delhi under the Chiefs of Staff Committee to bolster "jointness" among the three services.

The next day, August 27, Admiral Dinesh Kumar Tripathi said the Indian Navy is committed to integrating its command and control, communications, and combat capabilities with the Army and Air Force to align with the theatreisation goal.

Chief of Defence Staff (CDS) General Anil Chauhan, who is spearheading the theatreisation plans, pledged to address any "dissidence" within the services on the creation of theatre commands.

The seminar, Ran Samwad 2025, has reviewed discussion on the biggest reform in operations and administration in the history of the Indian Armed Forces. The final structure of the proposed theatre commands is yet to be greenlighted by the government.

What is theatreisation, and how will it change the current organisational structure of the services?

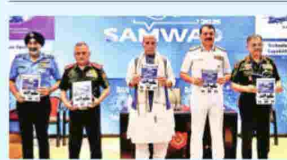
The theatreisation plan seeks to integrate the Army, Navy, Air Force, and their resources into specific 'theatre' commands, for deployment under a single, unified command structure. Each command will be assigned a specific geographical region, combining the resources of the three services for operational roles.

The Army and IAF currently have seven commands each, and the Navy has three. In addition, there are two tri-service commands — the Andaman and Nicobar Command and the Strategic Forces Command (SFC), which manages India's nuclear arsenal. There is also the Headquarters Integrated Defence Staff (HQIDS), which was created after the Kargil conflict to fulfil the need for an institutional framework for higher management of defence.

Why is India attempting such an exercise?

The exercise is being attempted as part of higher defence reforms in line with the

JOINT OR THEATRE COMMANDS AROUND THE WORLD



At Ran Samwad 2025 last week, (from left) Air Chief Marshal A P Singh, CDS Gen Anil Chauhan, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Navy Chief Admiral D K Tripathi, and Army Vice Chief Lt Gen Pushpendra Singh. X/ @HQ_IDS_India

changing nature of modern warfare. However, there are differing views on whether creating theatre commands is the only way to integrate the three services and create jointness among them.

The Army, Navy and Air Force have been taking other steps to promote jointness, including cross-postings among themselves, creation of joint logistics nodes, and ensuring jointness in procurement, training, and staffing through joint planning and integration of their requirements.

When and how did the idea of theatreisation come about?

In his Independence Day speech in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the new post of Chief of Defence Staff, saying the country's entire military must work together, without a fragmentation of its prowess. This paved the way for discussions on theatre commands and their possible structure.

That December, the Union Cabinet approved the creation of the post of CDS in the rank of a four-star general. In a statement, the government said the CDS would head the Department of Military Affairs (DMA) — to be created under the Defence Ministry — as its secretary. The DMA was mandated to:

CHINA, US, Russia, UK, France are among the militaries that operate with the theatre command concept.

CENTCOM of US operated in the two Iraq wars, among other operations.

■ Promote jointness in procurement, training, and staffing for the services through joint planning and integration of their requirements;

■ Facilitate the restructuring of military commands for optimal utilisation of resources by bringing about jointness in operations, including through the establishment of joint/ theatre commands; and

■ Promote the use of indigenous equipment by the services.

What discussions on theatre commands took place in the years that followed?

Since 2020, when Gen Bipin Rawat took charge as India's first CDS, the proposed structure of theatre commands has undergone multiple iterations, and new models have been discussed. The initial plan was to create four theatre commands — an air defence command, a maritime theatre command, and two land-based theatre commands, one each for the western and eastern sectors.

Gen Rawat was killed in a helicopter crash in December 2021. In view of the IAF's objections to the initial plan, Gen Rawat's successor, Gen Anil Chauhan, asked the services to look afresh at the proposed reform.

The new plan proposed advisory-based joint theatre commands instead of four defined theatre commands. This would involve carving out from the 17 service-specific military commands operating under the three services, integrated theatre commands for the northern and eastern borders with China, another for the western borders with

Pakistan, and a third maritime command to tackle threats in the maritime domain.

In the earlier discussions, the roles of raising, training, and sustaining were assigned to the service chiefs, while operations would be entrusted to the theatre commanders. Later, the possibility of service chiefs retaining some operational roles was also discussed.

Since then, multiple deliberations, studies and tabletop exercises have been carried out by the services to examine the employment of theatres in various operational scenarios.

Plans have been drawn up on the structure of the theatre commands, their operational areas, the location of their headquarters, the lead service under which each theatre command would operate, the reporting structure of the theatre commanders, and whether the Andaman and Nicobar Command and SFC can be subsumed into the existing commands.

What are the challenges to creating theatre commands?

The creation of theatre commands entails dismantling existing structures of the service-specific commands under the three services, which have been functioning for more than seven decades.

The IAF has expressed reservations, primarily on the ground that it would further divide the scarce command assets of the Air Force — even as it has maintained that it supports jointness and integration of the three services.

Former IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal RKS Bhadauria (ret'd) had contradicted the late Gen Rawat, saying that the IAF is not just a support arm, and that air power has a huge role.

"We are totally committed to the theatre command, but we must get it right. And that is the focus area with which we are dealing all our deliberations. And there are issues that are being looked at. There are deliberations between the three services with the CDS," he had said.

ACM Bhadauria's successor, Air Chief Marshal V R Chaudhary (ret'd), said the IAF is not opposed to the theatreisation process if the doctrinal aspects of the force is not compromised. Theatre commands should be future-ready to deal with emerging forms of warfare in the space and cyber domains; they should not increase decision-making chains from the existing levels, ACM Chaudhary had said.

Last week, ACM Singh reiterated the IAF's long-standing view of favouring jointness without dismantling existing structures. He cautioned against blindly following the example of militaries like that of the US in rolling out theatre commands.

"Everybody has their own requirements. We need to think about what we need there, and then only we should go about it. Otherwise, we will go wrong," he said.

What UGC draft curriculums say, why some states have objected to them

ABHINAYA HARIGOVIND
NEW DELHI, SEPTEMBER 3

STATES RULED by the Opposition have objected to the draft curriculums for undergraduate courses that the University Grants Commission (UGC) published last month. The UGC has invited comments on the drafts, and Karnataka and Kerala have set up panels to examine the curriculums.

Proposed curriculum

Draft curriculums for nine subjects — anthropology, chemistry, commerce, economics, geography, home science, mathematics, physical education, and political science — have been published so far.

These are "learning outcomes-based curriculum frameworks" (LOCFs), which means that they specify the concepts and

skills that students are expected to acquire in each course.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP) envisions 4-year programs of "multi-disciplinary" undergraduate education with the option of exiting the course at various levels. The draft curriculum frameworks specify the credits for each paper.

The NEP calls for incorporating "Indian Knowledge Systems" in the school and higher education curriculums. The draft curriculum for mathematics, suggests an elective course called 'Kala Gana' (timekeeping, as it was used in ancient Indian traditions) for BA and BSc students who have mathematics as a major or minor.

The course objectives include exploring "the astronomical basis for Indian time measurement and calendar systems", the development of lunar, solar, and lunisolar calendars in India, and analysing the com-

ponents of *panchanga* (the Hindu calendar), including determining "auspicious and inauspicious muhurtas".

In another suggested elective course at the same level called 'Philosophy of Indian Mathematics', students will "briefly study the Vedas, Vedangas, Puranas and Darshanas as a branch of knowledge and learning".

The 'Bharatiya' curriculum

The draft LOCF for chemistry says "a key aspect that distinguishes this LOCF from previous initiatives is the smooth incorporation of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into the curriculum".

Thus, in a course on "food chemistry", the new curriculum recommends a unit on "traditional Indian dietary practices as described in ayurveda", and prescribes a book

called *Ayurvedic Cooking for Self-Healing*. The old LOCF for chemistry has a similar course, but it does not include ayurveda in the chemistry of food.

The draft commerce curriculum recommends a first-year course on Indian management principles and practices, with "Indian (Bharatiya) Scriptures and Management — Bhagavad Gita and Management, Lessons from Ramayana on Management, Vedantic and modern perspectives on Management, Contribution of Bharatiya Scriptures to the evolution of Management concepts" — as a unit. The old LOCF did not have this.

An official said UGC has previously released subject-specific curriculum frameworks for 38 subjects, which were aligned with the choice-based credit system, and were developed from 2019-20 onward.

Discussions on the LOCF following the rollout of the NEP prompted a fresh curriculum framework, the official said.

According to the NEP, a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) will frame learning outcomes for higher education programmes, and specify a curriculum framework within which higher education institutions may prepare their own curricula. However, this higher education regulator is yet to be constituted.

Opposition to curriculum

Kerala's Higher Education Minister R Birud has said the draft curriculum contains unscientific ideas, and ideas steeped in "Hinduism ideology". She has pointed to the mention of "Ram Rajya" — the curriculum for commerce says concepts like Ram Rajya (equitable governance) can be explored in the context of corporate social responsibility.

Also, the recommended reading for the first-year "Freedom Movement in India" course in the draft curriculum for political science includes *Hindutva* icon V D Savarkar's *The Indian Way of Independence* (1908). The draft curriculum also has a separate elective course on Savarkar.

Karnataka Higher Education Minister M Sudhakar has alleged that the curriculum framework is an attempt by the Centre "to seed their ideologies among students".

The UGC official quoted above said that universities retain autonomy to adapt or redesign modules in line with institutional priorities and regional needs. When the earlier LOCFs were developed, UGC wrote to vice chancellors of universities asking them to revise their curriculums — and universities, including University of Kerala, had updated their curriculums to align with the LOCF.



Rain and repeat

Excess rain is no excuse for damage caused by neglect of sluices

The heavy rains and flooding across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana this season underline how extreme weather interacts with governance. In 2024, Andhra Pradesh recorded 27% of its annual rainfall in two days; this August, Vizianagaram logged a 46% excess, with some parts reporting up to 90%. Consecutive years of extreme precipitation signal a shift in the monsoon's behaviour. Reservoir and barrage systems in river basins are designed to manage seasonal inflows but the timing and intensity of recent rain events matter. At one point this year, Srisailem was 94% full and Nagarjuna Sagar 96%, leaving little room for additional inflow. The crisis is really excess rainfall plus its concentration into short bursts when reservoirs are already nearly full. Last year, Budameru, a rivulet with a capacity of 7,000 cusecs, received 35,000 cusecs and flooded Vijayawada. The recurrence points to how minor tributaries and drainage channels, which are often neglected in policy, become debilitating choke points. While sheer volume explains part of the flooding, infrastructural weaknesses magnify the damage. At the Prakasam Barrage, one gate damaged last year remained unrepaired well into this season, hampering smooth water release. Along the Godavari, flood-banks near Bhadrachalam sank or collapsed in places, raising anxiety among residents on both sides of the border. In urban areas, partly desilted drains, encroached stormwater channels, and concretised surfaces have restricted water absorption. Overall, infrastructure exists but is not maintained or upgraded with urgency.

The disaster management apparatus in both States is mature and saved many lives. Yet, institutions remain less agile at reducing risk. Year after year, large sums are sanctioned for immediate relief (Telangana recently released ₹1 crore per district at short notice) but strengthening flood-banks and completing diversion channels remain unfinished. In 2024 and 2025, extreme rainfall arrived late in August and early September. Both times, the Krishna and Godavari systems were severely strained and Vijayawada was inundated. Both times, protests followed, highlighting incomplete Budameru works and opaque relief fund uptake. Extreme rainfall cannot be prevented but its consequences can be moderated by anticipating it. Reservoir management, for example, needs to incorporate real-time hydrological modelling so that water levels are drawn down before a deluge, creating flood cushions. Urban planning must prioritise drainage networks and reserve permeable land for water absorption, moving beyond cosmetic desilting drives. Flood banks and sluices require continuous, not episodic, maintenance, and their upkeep should be insulated from political cycles. Neither State is wrong to argue that extraordinary rains can overwhelm even robust systems, but both risk fatalism if they use this as an excuse to avoid reform.

Family politics

Kavitha is jostling for power within the BRS, not waging an ideological fight

The decision by the Congress-led Telangana government to seek a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) inquiry into alleged irregularities related to the Kaleshwaram Lift Irrigation Project has triggered a feud in the family of Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) patriarch K. Chandrashekar Rao. Mr. Rao, the first Chief Minister of Telangana, who served two terms, is facing an uphill struggle for political survival after losing power to a resurgent Congress in 2023. K. Kavitha, his daughter, has publicly blamed her cousins – senior leader T. Harish Rao and former Member of Parliament J. Santosh Kumar – for her father's plight. The two leaders have been known to be close to the patriarch as well as his son and anointed successor K.T. Rama Rao. Mr. Rao is not a novice and he knows better than to be misled by anyone else. Ms. Kavitha's accusations are, hence, more about a tug of war within the family for inheritance and the spoils of power. Despite losing the Assembly election, she was given a party nomination as a Member of the Legislative Council (MLC), but she evidently thinks she deserved better. With her father, brother and cousins not willing to oblige her, Ms. Kavitha went public with the charges, and the party suspended her. Ms. Kavitha has resigned from the party and her position as an MLC.

Ms. Kavitha's outburst against her father's candidates may turn out to be politically suicidal for her. In fact, unrealistic political calculations run in the family, it appears, going by the senior Mr. Rao's missteps ahead of the 2023 election. Claiming a national role for himself, he had changed the party's name to the BRS – paradoxical for a leader and a party that had little more than regionalism as its key source of legitimacy. Far from realising any national role in the 2024 general election, Mr. Rao found the ground falling out from under his feet and corruption charges swirling around him. In May 2025, Ms. Kavitha had reportedly questioned her father's muted position with regard to the Bharatiya Janata Party. Her exit from the BRS marks a sign of crisis for a regional outfit that frittered its promise too soon. With a resourceful and dynamic State under its rule, the BRS and the Rao family could have left behind a stellar legacy in governance and development. By reducing electoral and organisational politics to crass power bargains and transactions, the BRS did itself and the new State considerable damage. In politics, a second chance is always possible for leaders and parties. But, as of now, the BRS stands diminished.

Concealing a judge's dissent, eroding judiciary's authority



Subhrit Parthasarathy
is an advocate practising in the Madras High Court

Constitutional democracies are sustained not only by written laws but also by what the South African professor of law, Willemse Mureinik, first described as a "culture of justification". That is, the idea that every exercise of public power must be explained and defended. As Mureinik put it, "The leadership given by government rests on the cogency of the case offered in defence of its decisions, not the fear inspired by the force at its command."

Judges in India have routinely invoked this principle to demand accountability from the state. But with reports surfacing in the media of the dissent by Justice B.V. Nagarathna of the Supreme Court of India, on the Collegium's recommendation to elevate Justice Vipul M. Pancholi to the Court, it appears that this culture of justification ends at the Collegium's door. When it comes to the Court selecting its own members, the public seemingly have no right to know.

An indictment of the system

A dissent of this kind ordinarily would represent a moment of reckoning. But the Collegium and its total opacity has meant that the opposition has proven not so much a failure as a futile exercise. The resolution uploaded on the Court's website, displaying the recommendation, suggests unanimity. It makes no mention of dissent. We only learnt of Justice Nagarathna's objection through reports in the media. The note that she wrote remains hidden, but we are told that her reservations were "grave." It is unclear whether the dissent was even shared with the Union government, which, within 48 hours of the recommendation, went ahead and notified the appointment.

This gulf, between what we know happened and what we are permitted to know, epitomises the flaws inherent in the system governing how we appoint members to our courts. One of India's senior-most judges may have believed there were compelling reasons why the candidate's elevation should not have gone through, yet both her reasoning and the majority's response remain unknown. No doubt the dissent might only concern a single appointment. It is possible that the other members in the Collegium had overwhelming reasons to support the proposal. But the fact that the public is told nothing at all is itself an indictment of the system – its lack of transparency, its democratic deficit, and its refusal to explain itself to the people in whose name it acts.

The Collegium has been resistant to transparency from its inception. It is a product of judge-made law. Created in the "Second Judges Case" (1993) and entrenched in the "Third Judges

A judiciary that subjects itself to the same standards of openness it demands of others will only gain greater trust and confidence of the people

Case" (1998), the system vests primacy in the five senior-most judges of the Supreme Court to appoint members of the higher judiciary. They deliberate in private, record decisions with minimal disclosure, and rarely explain their reasoning.

Beginning in 2017, the Collegium began publishing its resolutions. But these were skeletal at best and amounted to little more than formal announcements. For a short period in 2018, the Court uploaded fuller reasons for the Collegium's choices and rejections. However, the experiment was short-lived, with the explanation that disclosure might damage reputations.

Justice Nagarathna's dissent reveals the cost of this retreat to secrecy. If even an objection from a serving Supreme Court judge is deemed too sensitive for the public, then we must ask whether the Collegium has not simply embraced opacity but crossed into outright rejection of accountability.

The weak defence

The defence of keeping its reasons confidential has always rested on two claims: that openness can harm the reputation of candidates who are not selected, and that it would expose the system to political pressures. On reasonable scrutiny, both claims collapse.

No doubt, marrying transparency with reputational fairness requires careful handling. But other constitutional democracies seem to manage it better than India does. Britain's Judicial Appointments Commission, for instance, sets out its criteria openly and issues reports explaining how candidates were assessed. In South Africa, candidates for higher judicial office are interviewed by the Judicial Service Commission, and their suitability debated in public. Neither system is flawless, but both proceed from the recognition that legitimacy flows from openness.

India, by contrast, persists in treating the Collegium as a private conclave. Even the existence of dissent reaches us only through leaks. If reputational harm is a genuine concern, the answer must lie in carefully structuring disclosure to mitigate it. Denying justification altogether cannot be the solution. And if political pressure is feared, then secrecy has hardly prevented it. The executive, after all, continues to delay and stonewall inconvenient Collegium recommendations. It can return a name for reconsideration or, on re-recommendation, simply keep the file pending, stopping short of issuing the presidential warrant of appointment.

The stakes here go to the heart of India's democracy. Judges chosen today will shape the outcomes of India's most urgent constitutional questions that range from issues concerning civil liberties to the limits of executive power and the

division of authority between the Union and the States. When citizens are informed only that a judge has been elevated, without reasons, or when a dissent by a sitting Supreme Court judge is shrouded in secrecy, institutional legitimacy withers. We quite rightly expect our courts to insist on accountability from other branches of the state. But in doing so, can they claim immunity for themselves?

Justice Nagarathna's dissent has not halted Justice Pancholi's elevation. Indeed, it is possible that the other members of the Collegium had good reasons to support his appointment. What they were, we will never know. But the larger issue here extends beyond a single name. It concerns whether the Court is prepared to live by the very principle it seeks to impose on every other organ of the state: that every exercise of public power must be justified.

In many democracies, anxieties about unelected judges striking down laws are framed as a counter-majoritarian difficulty. How can a system be democratic if those not chosen by the people wield such authority? At first blush, the concern seems real. But it mistakes what democracy truly is. Democracy is not simply majoritarian rule by numbers. Properly understood, it is something more: a partnership between citizens that secures rights and ensures that liberty and equality structure public life. Unelected judges play an essential role here, by interpreting the law and by protecting rights against majoritarian excesses.

It is for this reason that the Constitution vests extraordinary prerogative power in an unelected judiciary. Judges are meant to act as independent arbiters, to check and balance government, to protect fundamental liberties. In doing so, they do not undermine democracy but only fulfil its highest aspirations.

The Collegium must accept reform

However, for the judiciary to retain its standing, the process by which judges are appointed must itself meet the strictest standards of accountability. The Collegium has too often withdrawn into a culture of concealment over justification. Unless it embraces reform, it risks diminishing the very legitimacy on which its authority rests. Too many opportunities for change have been spurned in the past, every step forward has been followed by two steps back, with each retreat eroding the values of transparency and integrity on which democracy depends.

A judiciary that subjects itself to the same standards of openness it demands of others will not weaken its autonomy. On the contrary, it will anchor its independence more securely in the trust and the confidence of the people.

India's recent maritime reforms need course correction

The passage of the Indian Ports Bill, 2025 in the Rajya Sabha, on August 18, marks a pivotal moment in India's maritime legislative history. Intended to repeal and replace the Act of 1908, it comes alongside the newly enacted Coastal Shipping Act, 2025, the Carriage of Goods by Sea Bill, 2025, and the Merchant Shipping Act, 2025, a legislative package that the government hails as critical to streamlining maritime governance and bringing India's shipping regulation in line with global practices.

Progress but with pitfalls

At first glance, these new laws represent a comprehensive attempt to modernise India's maritime governance. India's maritime regulation is fragmented and outdated, with modern shipping finance, offshore operations and international conventions long having outpaced the legal and operational frameworks in place. For India to expand its trade, attract foreign investment and enhance its maritime standing, aligning with global best practices is indeed necessary. In particular, the Indian Ports Act has been hailed as a facilitative law – one that enables ease of business, promotes sustainable port development, and brings coherence to India's otherwise disjointed regulatory environment. Even so, the Bill's passage without a serious parliamentary debate or referral to a standing committee raises questions, underlining the absence of political consensus and public scrutiny.

Notably, the Ports Act, 2025, has been criticised for centralising power at the expense of the States, diluting safeguards meant to protect Indian sovereignty. Critics point to its main feature, the Maritime State Development Council (chaired by the Union Minister of Ports) as a centralised policy-making authority with the power to direct States to follow central guidelines. Far from an illustration of cooperative federalism, they contend, the new Ports Act is an example of federal subordination, designed to ensure that States align their port development with central plans, such as Sagarmala and PM Gati Shakti regardless of their own priorities. Critics point to the Maritime State Development



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Council's structure and intent, where State maritime boards cannot adjust their own frameworks without central approval, as stripping coastal States of fiscal autonomy and flexibility, even while burdened with tight port management responsibilities.

The criticism is not confined to federal concerns. Experts warn that the new law introduces vague, discretionary regulatory powers that could saddle smaller operators with unmanageable compliance burdens. Equally troubling is the approach to dispute resolution: Clause 17 of the Bill bars civil courts from hearing port-related disputes, forcing parties into internal dispute resolution committees created by the very authorities they are contesting. Analysts caution that the absence of impartial, independent judicial review could deter private investment and erode trust in the regulatory system.

The issue about ownership

The Merchant Shipping Act, 2025, is not free from flaws either. It seeks to modernise registration, ownership rules, safety standards, environmental obligations, and liability frameworks, with some admittedly notable pluses: expanding vessel definitions to cover offshore drilling units and non-displacement crafts; tightening oversight of maritime training institutes; and aligning India's liability and insurance rules with international conventions. Yet tucked into the fine print is a loophole in ownership safeguards. Under the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, Indian-flagged vessels had to be fully Indian-owned. The new Act permits "partly" Indian ownership including by Overseas Citizens of India and foreign entities while leaving the actual thresholds to be decided later by government notification.

The law also formally recognises Bareboat Charter-Cum-Demise (BBCD) registration, intended to let Indian operators lease foreign vessels with a view to eventual ownership. While legitimate as a global financing tool, the BBCD could test India's regulatory capacity to ensure that transfers actually occur. Without clear, enforceable rules, foreign lessors may retain effective control indefinitely. Further, the Act

mandates registration of all vessels, regardless of size or propulsion, without regard to the bureaucratic burdens that this places on small operators. What is most troubling is that it hands the executive a blank cheque to dilute ownership requirements whenever convenient, raising the risk of India sliding into a flag-of-convenience jurisdiction where foreign owners control ships flying the Indian flag.

Endangering smaller players

The final component of India's maritime reform package, the Coastal Shipping Act, ostensibly aims to clarify and strengthen cabotage rules, ensuring that only Indian-flagged vessels engage in domestic coastal trade. Though well-intentioned, it gives the Director General of Shipping sweeping discretion to licence foreign vessels on vague grounds such as "national security" or "alignment with strategic plans" – open-ended clauses that invite arbitrary or selective application. The real burdens are likely to fall on small operators, particularly in the fishing industry, who will struggle to comply with mandatory voyage and cargo reporting requirements in the absence of clear guidance on how such data will be used or protected. Members of Parliament from the Opposition have warned that the Act hands too much control to the Centre, potentially undermining local autonomy – a concern that applies equally to the centrally mandated National Coastal and Inland Shipping Strategic Plan.

None of this is to deny the need for an updated legal framework. India certainly must modernise its maritime legislation. But reform should not come at the expense of federal balance and fair competition. Ownership thresholds and licensing rules ought to be clearly specified in law, not left to executive discretion. As it stands, too many of the provisions are arbitrary – from dispute resolution that lacks judicial independence to excluding States from any meaningful role in planning. These measures may be a beginning, but without significant amendments, they risk delivering ease of doing business for the few while eroding the federal compact and weakening India's long-term maritime security.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'Emotions' and politics

It is time that politicians stop playing with the emotions of people for their own gains. The "emotion card" is now being used as a "masterstroke" to divert attention from the real issues facing the common man, which include poverty,

unemployment, inflation, income inequality and corruption. Raising irrelevant issues before an election to sway public opinion is nothing but a political gimmick. To quote Abraham Lincoln, "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the

people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." Let wisdom guide the electorate on such issues.

Dr. Biju C. Mathew,
Thiruvananthapuram

Rail passengers face danger
Hundreds of travellers at

Ankola railway station in Uttara Kannada district, Karnataka are forced to risk their lives by climbing down from platform 1 and crossing multiple tracks to board their trains. What is alarming is the railway authorities' apparent acceptance of this

dangerous practice. Some even say that political intervention might be required to have an additional platform built. On August 30, passengers, including elderly and disabled individuals, were directed to use a temporary ladder to descend from

platform 1 and cross live tracks to reach their train, diverted to a non-existent "platform 2".

Gurudatt Badgeri,
Ankola, Karnataka

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

Reviving MGNREGA in West Bengal

On June 18, the Calcutta High Court ordered the resumption of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in West Bengal from August 1, in a case filed by Paschim Banga Khet Majoor Samity (PBKMS). The order offered hope. However, according to reports in regional media, the Union government has since appealed to the Supreme Court, where the matter is yet to be listed. Reporting on the High Court's order, *The Hindu* noted that the court observed the scheme "cannot be kept in cold storage for eternity" and directed the Centre to resume implementation while allowing it to impose "special conditions" in West Bengal. Yet, after three years of silence, the resumption risks being a hollow gesture unless urgent groundwork is laid to restore the scheme to function.

Actionable steps to be taken
MGNREGA is predominantly funded by the Union government. Enacted in 2005, it guarantees 100 days of paid employment per year to every rural household that demands it. For millions — especially women, Dalits, Adivasis, and landless workers — it is a vital buffer during lean agricultural seasons and economic distress.

When the Centre halted MGNREGA funds to West Bengal in March 2022, it cited "widespread irregularities." However, an RTI filed by the author revealed that this sweeping suspension was based on findings from just 31 worksites, even though the State had received over ₹10,000 crore under MGNREGA in 2020-21. Halting a lifeline for millions on such limited evidence was not only disproportionate but also devastating.

The fallout has been immense. In the first year alone, West Bengal's rural workforce lost over ₹4,000 to 6,000 crore in potential wages, according to policy research group LibTech India. But the deeper damage is



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institutional. Restarting MGNREGA requires more than a green signal — it demands trust-building, logistical preparation, and administrative muscle.

A foundational task is the identification and planning of work. Each year, State governments must prepare a shelf of works at the village level well in advance. Whenever works are eventually resumed, these preparatory measures will be essential to ensure that the scheme is meaningful and not a hollow gesture. Without identifying feasible works, no projects can be undertaken.

This task is further complicated by national-level changes introduced during West Bengal's exclusion. Over the past three years, the Centre has implemented several technology-driven reforms aimed at transparency and accountability.

Chief among them is the Aadhaar-Based Payment System (ABPS). Under ABPS, workers are paid only if their Aadhaar is correctly linked, authenticated, and mapped through the National Payments Corporation of India.

As of June 21, 2025, official data show that over 43 lakh of West Bengal's 2.56 crore registered workers are not ABPS-compliant. Even among the 18.5 lakh marked as active — those who worked at least once in the last three years before the suspension — over 2.3 lakh remain ineligible. Without a rapid compliance campaign, lakhs could be excluded. A practical step would be for the Centre to temporarily allow account-based payments alongside ABPS until full compliance is achieved.

Worker deletions are another pressing concern. In 2022-23, over 83 lakh workers were removed from West Bengal's rolls — nearly 15% of national deletions. Identifying and reinstating them is essential. Yet, with only one login per block, district, and State, processing this backlog is unmanageable. The Centre must expand login access and streamline reinstatement.

Meanwhile, the National Mobile Monitoring System — a mandatory attendance app requiring real-time, geo-tagged photos — remains a bottleneck. In West Bengal, where frontline officials have not supervised worksites for three years, expecting them to adapt overnight is unrealistic. A temporary exemption and paper-based attendance are necessary until training and infrastructure catch up.

Equally urgent is the human resource gap. Field supervisors are paid like workers but expected to manage attendance, site measurements, and daily records. After years of inactivity, many have moved on. The State must re-engage them through financial incentives, refresher training, and recognition.

Reviving MGNREGA is about preventing the same failures from recurring. Systemic reforms — such as stronger grievance redressal, timely payments, open-access dashboards, and regular social audits — must be implemented in spirit, not just on paper.

This is also an opportunity to initiate a consultative process between the administration and civil society organisations that have long engaged with MGNREGA's implementation and reform. A revitalised State Employment Guarantee Council could act as a platform for dialogue, accountability, and course correction in real time.

Legal uncertainty

With the Centre's appeal now before the Supreme Court, the legal uncertainty only reinforces the central point: whether or not the High Court's order ultimately stands, MGNREGA's revival in West Bengal hinges on rebuilding trust, capacity, and systems rather than merely ticking bureaucratic boxes.

The Centre, State, and local bodies must act now to restore this lifeline — ensuring that no worker is left behind. Failure would betray the rural poor once more. They deserve swift action, not empty assurances.

The Centre, State, and local bodies must act now to restore this lifeline — ensuring that no worker is left behind

Onam and the true Kerala story

Onam embodies Kerala's story of harmony, inclusivity, and resilience

STATE OF PLAY

P. A. Mohamed Riyas

Kerala indeed has a story to tell — a story that reflects the character, camaraderie, and spirit of fellowship that permeates its social structure from time immemorial: the iconic festival of Onam.

A celebration of the true Kerala story, Onam is an enduring tale of togetherness, intertwined with the nostalgia of a social order where all people lived in perfect harmony.

The idea of Onam has, since ancient times, instilled in Malayalis' minds an intense longing for an egalitarian society, free from exploitation, greed, lies, and deceit. That was a society united by shared values and a strong sense of belonging. This nostalgia has had a deep impact on Kerala's history, culture, and politics.

The symbolism attached to the festival is both unique and fervent. The legend has it that Onam marks the annual visit to Kerala by King Mahabali, who reigned over the land of plenty eons ago — a land in which everyone was equal and everything was fair. Along with the legend of 'Maveladan' (The land of Mahabali), Onam also resonates with hope, resilience, and inclusivity.

Over time, Onam has evolved into an occasion for all to celebrate, transcending barriers of class, caste, and creed. This sense of togetherness has gained further strength since Kerala started its transformation into a modern, progressive, and aspirational society.

What makes the Kerala story fascinating and ever relevant is its celebration of social harmony in a pluralistic setting.



Since its formation as a State of the Indian Union, Kerala has emerged as a successful model of social development and inclusion. Total literacy, universal education, and a strong public healthcare system are some of the key features of the famed Kerala model. What makes it exceptional is its inclusivity.

A few days back, Kerala crossed yet another critical threshold in socio-economic inclusion by attaining full digital literacy, the first in India.

This profound transformation was not a miracle pulled off by governments alone. The State has built on the ground prepared by the social reform movements led by trailblazers such as Sree Narayana Guru. Of course, the State's left-oriented politics has also been a key driver of this transition.

Distorting the true image

Amidst all these irrefutable facts, it is unfortunate that recently there have been some malicious attempts to depict Kerala as a strife-torn society and a fertile ground for recruiting youngsters for radical activities.

It is also a matter of concern that these falsified narratives often gain entry into even prestigious events and are bestowed with national honours.

As a society that prides itself on its secular ethos, Malayalis have rejected outright such vicious attempts. Still,

the vested interests out to polarise the society on communal lines need to be called out. This is essential to remove whatever little misunderstanding this ill-motivated propaganda has left in the minds of the non-Malayali communities.

The idea of Onam, the way it is longed for, greeted, and celebrated by all sections of people, is a strong counter to the evil designs of polarising forces. This is an occasion for our writers, filmmakers, theatre personalities, and artists of all genres to come out and celebrate Onam in its true spirit.

A community festival

Apart from celebrations at home, Onam has become a community festival. Many of its cultural expressions associated with Onam have moved to community spaces. This enables all sections to be part of the festival and to cement the social solidarity.

The week-long Onam celebrations organised by the State government have been an annual feature. Helmed by the Tourism department, the festival showcases the best of Kerala's classical, folk, and ethnic art traditions in the state capital and scores of venues. The festival has become a major tourist attraction during the season, besides drawing local crowds to enjoy dance, songs, and dramas for an entire week.

Onam has sustained Kerala's traditional art, craft, and rural sports. The season marks the commencement of Kerala's snake-boat races.

It all sums up the central message of Onam — social harmony and inclusivity, celebrated gracefully.

P. A. Mohamed Riyas is Minister for Tourism and Public Works, Kerala

Less than 40% of disabled persons have ID needed for benefits

Delay in processing UDID applications is one of the reasons for low coverage

DATA POINT

Nitika Francis

Less than 40% of India's projected population of Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) have been issued a Unique Disability ID (UDID) Card, which enables access to government benefits, data show. Over 11 lakh applications for UDID cards are still pending, with more than 60% pending for over six months.

The UDID sub-scheme, under the Union government's Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD), is implemented for creating a national database for PwDs. These cards allow persons with disabilities to access key benefits from schemes. One such scheme is the Assistance to Persons with Disabilities (ADP), which helps them procure wheelchairs, crutches, prostheses, hearing aids, Braille slates, and more. It also allows them to opt for scholarships in educational institutions and for reservations in government jobs.

Less than half of PwDs in 23 States have received the card, with the share crossing the 50% mark only in Tamil Nadu, Meghalaya, Odisha, and Karnataka (Map 1). West Bengal stands out, with only about 6%. Relevant data for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were not available separately.

The figures used by the DEPwD to calculate the UDID card coverage are based on PwD population projected using the 2011 Census and NSSO 76th round's numbers, according to Shashank Pandey, lawyer and founder of Politics and Disability Forum.

The implementation of the UDID sub-scheme was staggered, according to Mr. Pandey. Prior to the introduction of this scheme, only State-specific disability certificates were issued at the district or taluka level. Mr. Pandey says that when the UDID system was rolled

out, the shift to this new form of identification was not effectively communicated at the ground level.

The delay in processing UDID applications, as noted earlier, is also one of the many reasons why the coverage numbers are low. Of the 34 States/UTs for which data was analysed, over half of the applications for UDID cards have been pending for over six months. As shown in Map 2, over 80% of applications were pending for over six months in Himachal Pradesh, the highest such share among major States. The delayed application crossed the mark in Ladakh (UT) and Mizoram.

Mr. Pandey explains that, as the UDID card can only be applied for through a website, another aspect hindering the issuance is digital literacy. "Not everyone is that well-versed in terms of navigating the digital interface," he explains.

The online UDID application expects the applicant to upload scanned documents to the portal. Latest government survey data show that only 60% of India's population above the age of 15 displayed the ability to use copy and paste tools to duplicate or move documents, using mobile or computer-like devices (Chart 3).

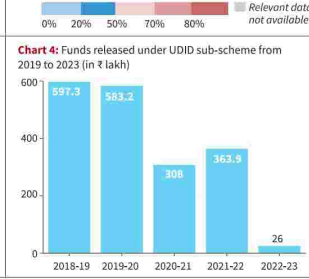
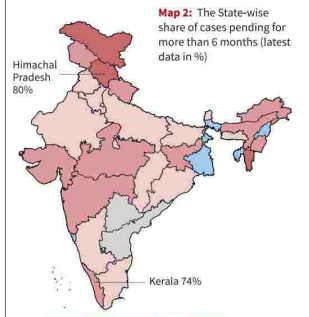
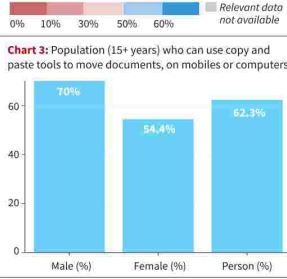
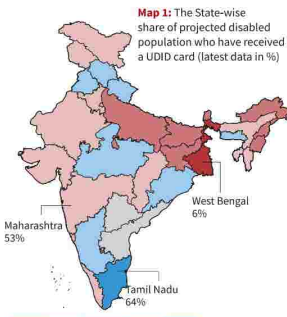
The share is much lower if only women were considered. The corresponding figure specific to persons with disabilities was not available.

Even as overall funds for schemes for PwDs have increased, the UDID sub-scheme, crucial for accessing many of these benefits, has seen its funding reduced (Chart 4).

Mr. Pandey explains that the overall negligence towards persons with disabilities can be explained by their strength as a political unit. "Persons with disabilities form a very small political constituency, just about 2.68 crore people as per the Census, and are not strong enough as an identity group to make a difference in votes. Hence, they are not taken seriously," he says.

Inaccessible benefits

The data for the charts were sourced from the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, the Comprehensive Modular Survey: Telecom, and Lok Sabha Questions and Answers



FROM THE ARCHIVES

The Hindu

FIFTY YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 4, 1975

WMO plans weather modification programme

New Delhi, September 3: The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) has taken up a programme on weather modification.

The programme approved at the recent session of the quadrennial Congress of WMO in Geneva aims at enabling "WMO to render sound technical and scientific advice to member-countries on weather modification activities." The most important part of the programme will be a Precipitation Enhancement Project (PEP) consisting of "an internationally planned, coordinated and scientifically evaluated field experiment." The programme will also give attention to tropical cyclone modification, hail and lightning suppression and fog dispersal.

The duration of the project will spread over several years covering the preparatory phase, the actual experiment and the evaluation of the results.

The WMO has emphasised that weather modification is still largely at the research stage. Although some cloud seeding experiments have apparently yielded positive results, "the possible practical benefits of weather modification can be realised only through an increased research effort."

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO SEPTEMBER 4, 1925

Leaders' tribute

Bombay, September 4: Nearly fifty Associations have combined together to celebrate fittingly the birth centenary of Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India. Mahatmaji was invited to preside over the public meeting and he arrived yesterday. The "Chronicle" has published a special Dadabhai Centenary Supplement, giving messages of prominent people like Gandhiji, Mrs. Naidu and Lalpat Rai.

Gandhiji in his message says: "Dadabhai earned the affectionate title of G.O.M. of India. In discovering the growing poverty of the masses, Dadabhai put his finger on the root evil of the present system of Government. In my opinion, therefore, the best way we can celebrate the forthcoming centenary is to do something tangible for dealing with the problem of poverty. It cannot be dealt with satisfactorily save through the universal adoption of the spinning wheel and Khaddar."

Text & Context

THE HINDU

NEWS IN NUMBERS

The number of children disabled in the war in Gaza

21,000 Children in Gaza have been left disabled since the Israel-Hamas war began in October 2023, as per the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Nearly 40,500 children have suffered war-related injuries. AFP

Bodies recovered after Sudan's landslide in the Darfur region

100 Rescue teams have recovered bodies from under the mud after a landslide buried the remote village of Tarasin in Sudan's Darfur region, according to the Abdulwahid al-Nur faction of the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army. The landslide was triggered by heavy rains. AFP

The cost of the Giant Sea Wall project in Java, Indonesia

80 In \$ billion, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto and China's President Xi Jinping discussed plans to build a massive sea wall along the northern coast of Java, known as the Giant Sea Wall project. Jakarta estimates the climate project will take 15 to 20 years to complete. REUTERS

The value of smuggled cigarettes and liquor destroyed in T.N.

12.5 In ₹ crore, Customs officials in Chennai destroyed over 5.5 lakh sticks of foreign-origin cigarettes, along with liquor and e-cigarettes worth crores, which were seized from Tiruvallur district last month. The contraband lacked mandatory health warnings. PTI

The value of Indian made foreign liquor seized in Maharashtra

1.34 In ₹ crore, The excise department seized Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL) in Thane, Maharashtra, and arrested one person for illegal transportation. Officials recovered 1,400 boxes of liquor manufactured in Goa. PTI

COMPILED BY THE HINDU DATA TEAM

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Should reservations exceed the 50% cap?

What do Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution guarantee? How are formal and substantive equality different? Are reservations an exception to the idea of equality of opportunity or a continuation? Are reservation benefits concentrated within specific sub-castes in OBCs, SCs and STs?

EXPLAINER

Rangarajan R.

The story so far:

The leader of the opposition in Bihar, Tejashwi Yadav, has declared that if voted to power, their alliance would increase reservation to 85%. In another development, the Supreme Court has issued notice to the Union government on a petition demanding the introduction of a 'system' similar to the 'creamy layer' for reservations among the Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST)

What are constitutional provisions? Articles 15 and 16 guarantee equality to all citizens in any action by the state (including admissions to educational institutions) and public employment respectively. In order to achieve social justice, these Articles also enable the state to make special provisions for the advancement of socially and educationally backward classes or Other Backward Classes (OBCs), SCs and STs. A brief summary of important developments with respect to reservations at the central level is provided in the Table. The reservation in the Centre at present stands as follows – OBCs (27%), SCs (15%), STs (7.5%) and for the Economically Weaker Section (EWS), 10%, resulting in a total reservation of 50.5%. The reservation percentages vary from State to State according to their demographic profile and policies.

What have courts ruled?

The issue arises due to two ostensibly competing aspects of equality – formal and substantive. The Supreme Court in *Balaji versus State of Mysore* (1962) noted that reservations under Articles 15 and 16 for backward classes should be 'within reasonable limits' and should be adjusted with the interests of the community as a whole. The court further ruled that such special provisions for reservation should not exceed 50%. This is seen as an endorsement of formal equality where reservations are seen as an exception to equality of opportunity and hence cannot exceed 50%.

Substantive equality on the other hand is based on the belief that formal equality is not sufficient to redress the difference between groups that have enjoyed privileges in the past and groups that have been historically underprivileged and underrepresented. A seven-judge Bench in *State of Kerala versus N. M. Thomas* (1975) have broadened the aspect of substantive equality. The court in this case opined that reservation for backward classes is not an exception to equality of opportunity but is an assertion and continuation of the same. However, since the 50% ceiling was not a question before the court, it did not give a binding judgment on this aspect in the case.

In the *Indra Sawhney* case (1992), a nine-judge Bench upheld the 27% reservation for OBCs. It opined that caste is a determinant of class in the Indian context. Further, in order to uphold the equality of opportunity, it reaffirmed the cap of 50% for reservation as held in the *Balaji* case, unless there are exceptional circumstances. The court also provided for the exclusion of a creamy layer within OBCs. In the *Janhit Abhiyan* case (2022), the court by a majority of 3:2 upheld the constitutional validity of the EWS reservation. It held that economic criteria could be a basis for reservation and opined that the 50% limit set in the *Indra Sawhney* case was meant for backward



Moment of reckoning: Maratha community members celebrate after the Maharashtra government accepted activist Manoj Jarange Patil's demands, including granting Marathas Kunbi caste certificates which will make them eligible for reservation benefits available to OBCs, in Mumbai, on September 2. PTI

THE GIST

Articles 15 and 16 guarantee equality to all citizens in any action by the state (including admissions to educational institutions) and public employment respectively.

There has been a growing demand for increasing the reservation percentage beyond the judicial cap of 50% to reflect the proportion of backward classes in the population.

Right to equality of opportunity is a fundamental right and an increase in reservation up to 85% may be seen as violating such right. Nevertheless, substantive equality through affirmative action is required to uplift the underprivileged.

The journey of reservations

A brief summary of important developments with respect to reservations at the central level

Year	Key development
1950 and 1951	Commencement of the Constitution and the First Amendment — enabling provisions in Articles 15 and 16 for the advancement of OBCs, SCs and STs
1982	Reservations for SCs and STs fixed at 15% and 7.5% respectively in central educational institutions and public sector undertakings
1990	The introduction of 27% reservation for OBCs in central government employment based on the recommendation of the Mandal Commission
2005	Article 15(5) inserted by the 93rd constitutional amendment that enabled reservations for OBCs, SCs and STs in educational institutions, including private ones
2019	Articles 15(6) and 16(6) inserted by the 103rd constitutional amendment which enabled up to 10% reservation for the EWS among the unreserved category in educational institutions and public employment

classes while the EWS reservation of 10% is for a different category among unreserved communities.

What are the competing arguments?

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in his Constituent Assembly speech in November 1948 justified the need to have reservations for backward communities that have been left out in the past. He also opined that reservations should be confined to a minority in order to uphold the guaranteed right of 'equality of opportunity'.

However, there has been a growing demand for increasing the reservation percentage beyond the judicial cap of 50% to reflect the proportion of backward classes in the population. The demand for a caste census has been strong in order to have actual data about this proportion rather than mere estimates. It must also be noted that as per various government replies in Parliament, 40-50% of seats reserved for OBCs, SCs and STs in the Central government remain unfilled.

Another contentious issue relates to the concentration of reservation benefits. The Rohini Commission, set up for providing recommendations on the sub-categorisation among OBC castes, has

estimated that 97% of reserved jobs and seats in educational institutions have been garnered by just around 25% of the OBC castes/sub-castes at the central level. Close to 1,000 of around 2,600 communities under the OBC category have had zero representation in jobs and educational institutes.

A similar issue of concentration of reservation benefits persist in SC and ST categories as well. There is no exclusion of 'creamy layer' for these communities. In *State of Punjab versus Davinder Singh* (2024), four judges of a seven-judge Bench impressed upon the Central government the need to frame suitable policies for the exclusion of 'creamy layer' in SC and ST reservations. However, the Central government in a cabinet meeting in August 2024 reaffirmed that the 'creamy layer' does not apply to reservations for SCs and STs.

Critiques who are against the extension of a 'creamy layer' to SCs and STs argue that the vacancies for these communities are anyway not fully filled. Therefore, the question of a 'creamy layer' within such communities usurping the opportunities of even more marginalised castes does not arise. It is also likely that the exclusion of a 'creamy layer' based on any criteria

will result in an even more increased backlog of vacancies. There is also a fear that such backlog vacancies may be converted in the long run to unreserved seats thereby depriving the SCs and STs of their rightful share of opportunities.

What can be the way forward?

Right to equality of opportunity is a fundamental right and an increase in reservation up to 85% may be seen as violating such right. Nevertheless, substantive equality through affirmative action is required to uplift the underprivileged. Based on empirical data of the ensuing Census in 2027, which will also enumerate backward castes, there must be wide ranging discussions with all stakeholders to arrive at a suitable level of reservation. Equally important is to implement sub-categorisation among the OBCs as per the Rohini Commission report based on Census data. With respect to SCs and STs, as demanded in the plea before the Supreme Court, a 'two-tier' reservation system may be considered. Under such a scheme, priority would be given to more marginalised sections before extending it to those who are relatively well-off within those communities. These measures would ensure that benefits of reservation reach the more marginalised among the underprivileged in successive generations.

It must also be borne in mind that considering the opportunities available in the public sector and the young population of our country, any scheme of reservation would not meet the aspirations of large sections of the society. There must be sincere efforts to provide suitable skill development mechanisms that would enable our youth to be gainfully employed.

Rangarajan. R is a former IAS officer and author of 'Courseware on Polity Simplified'. He currently trains at Officers IAS Academy. Views expressed are personal.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

How bail hearings take on the garb of a trial

The UAPA prohibits a judge from granting an individual bail if, on a perusal of the police report, the judge is of the opinion that there are 'reasonable grounds for believing that the accusation is ... *prima facie* true'

Gautam Bhatia

On September 2, 2025, the Delhi High Court dismissed the bail pleas of the accused, Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam, Athar Khan, Abdul Khalid Sajfi, Gulfi Sha Fatima, Meeran Haider, Shifa-ur-Rehman, Mohd. Saleem Khan, and Shadab Ahmed, in the 2020 Delhi riots case. Most of them had been in jail without bail for at least five years. The court rejected the claims of the accused that delays justified bail. In this article, dated April 7, 2022, Gautam Bhatia explains how in cases of UAPA, the bail hearing itself becomes the trial.

In March 24, a Sessions Court in Delhi denied bail to Umar Khalid as part of a set of cases that have commonly come to be known as "the Delhi riots cases". The case of the police was that Mr. Khalid was one of the conspirators behind the February 2020 violence in Delhi, which had claimed more than 50 lives. For this, Mr. Khalid, along with many others, was charge-sheeted under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), 1967, and jailed pending trial. Mr. Khalid has been in jail for over 500 days. The trial has not yet begun.

Much has been written about the serious problems with the manner in which the Delhi Police has conducted its investigation, and prosecution of the Delhi riots: in particular, its selective targeting of activists who were involved with the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act of 2019, which was the alleged trigger for the violence, while refraining from prosecuting individuals who are on record delivering incendiary speeches. The denial of bail to Mr. Khalid highlights an equally serious problem: the broken nature of India's criminal justice system.

Bail hearing becomes trial

First, consider these facts. Mr. Khalid's bail application was filed in July 2021. The order denying bail was passed eight months later, after multiple hours-long hearings, multiple adjournments, and three deferrals of the order itself. It is important to ask why an application for bail took so many hearings and eight months to decide: in criminal law, the purpose of bail is to ensure that an individual is not unjustly denied their liberty while the trial against them is still proceeding and their guilt has not yet been established. As such, in normal circumstances, courts are supposed to consider whether an accused is a flight risk, or is likely to tamper with evidence or intimidate witnesses. If neither of those dangers exist, there is no purpose in denying an individual their freedom before their guilt has been established in a court. This, in other words, is the real meaning of the hoary phrase 'innocent until proven guilty'.

This is where the notorious UAPA comes in. Shorn of legalese, the UAPA prohibits a judge from granting an individual bail if, on a perusal of the police diary or the police report, the judge is of the opinion that there are "reasonable grounds for believing that the accusation is ... *prima facie* true." The effect of this, the only problem with turning bail hearings into mini-trials. The UAPA introduces elements of the



Umar Khalid speaks at a demonstration in 2020. PH

criminal trial into the question of bail. There are traces of this in the Indian Penal Code as well, for bail under serious non-UAPA offences. This hints at a larger problem with the criminal justice system, of which the UAPA is only the starkest example. Questions of guilt or innocence are meant to be determined at the end of a trial, after evidence has been sifted, witnesses examined and cross-examined, and arguments completed. The question of guilt or innocence at the stage of bail short-circuits that essential procedure.

But that is not the only problem with turning bail hearings into mini-trials. The problem is also that this mini-trial – to

borrow a colourful phrase from the U.S. Supreme Court – licenses "one side ... to fight freestyle, while requiring the other to follow the Marquis of Queensberry Rules (i.e., the rules of professional boxing)". What the judge has before them is entirely one side of the case: the police version. In a trial, the defence would be entitled to cross-examine the prosecution's witnesses, determine inconsistencies in their testimony, examine its own witnesses, present its own evidence, and otherwise demonstrate that the case against the accused has not been made out beyond reasonable doubt. In a bail hearing, the

defence can do none of that. The starting point of the bail hearing is the presumption that everything in the police report is true. Based on that presumption, all the two sides can then argue about whether according to these "facts", the legal ingredients of the offence are fulfilled – or, in some rare cases, about whether the facts themselves are self-contradictory or flat-out implausible, so that no reliance can be placed on them even at the stage of bail. To use an analogy, it is like holding a debate between two sides, stopping it after one side finishes, allowing the other side to pose two or three questions but not say anything more, and then deciding whether the motion passes or falls.

Such a system might possibly be defensible in a situation where criminal justice was swift, efficient, and trustworthy. If, for example, criminal trials habitually concluded within six months, it might just be possible to argue that in terrorism cases, six months of pretrial incarceration is a painful but proportionate price to pay (in my opinion, it is still unjustifiable, but there is at least a case to be made). However, that is not the case in India: a UAPA trial takes years – often more than 10 years. In such a situation, the court's decision on bail, de facto, becomes the decision on the case: the denial of bail means that a person is likely to spend a decade or more behind bars, as the trial winds on. And given the UAPA's abysmally low conviction rates, the trial will likely end in acquittal.

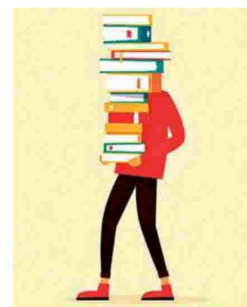
This, thus, explains why bail hearings take so long, and are so convoluted (although there is still little excuse for the eight-month-long process in Mr. Khalid's case). Both the defence and the prosecution know that the outcome of the bail hearing is, for all practical effects, the outcome of the case itself. The result of the denial of bail is, functionally, the same as the result of a finding of guilt: a decade-plus in jail. But, as we have seen, while the denial of bail is effectively a finding of guilt, it has none of the safeguards that the criminal law puts into place before an actual finding of guilt. The accused is first gagged from contesting the police's version and is then condemned for not being able to disprove the police's case.

Rank injustice

In a notorious judgment in *National Investigation Agency v. Zahoor Ahmad Shah Watali* (2019), the Supreme Court made a bad situation even worse by forbidding the lower courts from scrutinising in depth even the police case. This leads to absurd situations like Mr. Khalid's bail order. A reading of the bail order shows that the court reproduces various allegations against Mr. Khalid – some of them hearsay, and therefore inadmissible during the trial, and some extremely implausible; dismisses the defence's challenges to them without any engagement; and then denies bail. Lawyers and legal scholars may disagree over whether the UAPA actually requires the courts to become stenographers for the prosecution, even under existing legal doctrine. The point, however, is that for all the reasons we have discussed above, the result is rank injustice.

Reforming the criminal justice system is the task of many years. In the immediate future, however, it is at least possible to curtail the manner in which the UAPA plays havoc with the lives of so many individuals. Striking down or reading down its bail prohibitions and subjecting the police case to stricter scrutiny during bail hearings would be a start. It remains to be seen whether the judiciary has the will and the inclination to do so.

Gautam Bhatia is a Delhi-based lawyer.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

Know Your English

K. Subrahmanian
S. Upendran

"Welcome back! And congratulations. You must be in the seventh heaven after winning the lottery."

"Seventh heaven! I didn't know there were so many heavens."

"Nobody really knows how many heavens there are, but when you say that somebody is in the seventh heaven, it means he/she is extremely happy."

"I see. So, can I say, when I got a hundred in the test I was in the seventh heaven?"

"You certainly can. When Uma returned from the States she was in the seventh heaven."

"That's surprising. Most Indians are in the seventh heaven when they go to the States. Not when they return from it."

"Unfortunately, that is very true."

"When my cousin Suresh got married seven years ago he was in the seventh heaven."

"Now that he's been married for seven years, let's hope he doesn't get the seven year itch."

"An itch that lasts for seven years! What kind of itch is that?"

"The itch doesn't last for seven years. It starts after the seventh year."

"What does? The itch?"

"That's right. And mind you, this is no ordinary itch. It is the boredom that many married couples feel after seven years of marriage. And they get rid of this itch by..."

"...by having an affair with someone. I suppose."

"Right again."

"So the seven year itch is the desire that married couples get to have an affair with someone..."

"...after seven years of marriage."

"I see. But tell me, does this itch start only during the seventh year?"

"Not necessarily. In some cases, the seven year itch starts much earlier."

"Oh! Can I say my friend John has the seven year itch?"

"You certainly can. I don't think anyone in my family has ever had the seven year itch."

"How would you know? No one is going to admit that he/she has the seven year itch."

"That's true. Not even you yourself?"

"Have you seen his new apartment?"

"Yes, I have. It's cheerless, isn't it?"

"Cheerless? Is cheerless the opposite of cheerful?"

"When you refer to something as being 'cheerless', it means it is 'gloomy and depressing'. For example, I can say, it was a damp and cheerless morning."

"Sounds like you visited Madras recently. How about this example? Arun lives in a bare, cheerless apartment."

"Sounds good to me. I am sure Arun isn't happy living there."

"He certainly isn't in the seventh heaven."

Published in *The Hindu* on December 23, 1997.

THE DAILY QUIZ

A quiz on nation states and the people who led and shaped them

Vasudevan Mukunth

QUESTION 1

Before becoming a statesman, A was perhaps most well known for leading Ottoman forces to victory at the Battle of Gallipoli in 1915. After the war, A was instrumental in abolishing the Ottoman sultanate in 1922 and founding the Turkish republic in 1923. Name A.

QUESTION 2

B was Kenya's Prime Minister from 1963-1964 and its first President in 1964-1978, and a man credited with establishing Kenya as an independent state. While his government was accused of being corrupt and neocolonialist, he's also remembered for his messages of reconciliation. Name B.

QUESTION 3

C was a politician and revolutionary

known for his pan-Africanist agenda and for leading Ghana to independence from Britain in 1957. A violent coup in 1966 overthrew his government and undid his humanitarian efforts. Name C.

QUESTION 4

Nguyễn Sinh Cung, sometimes colloquially addressed as Uncle Ho, is credited with founding the Democratic Republic of D in 1945. He was also a founding member of the French Communist Party in 1920. Name D.

QUESTION 5

Camillo Benso di Cavour, Victor Emmanuel II, Giuseppe Mazzini, and E are together considered the "fathers of the fatherland" of Italy. E also essayed a central role in the reconstitution of Uruguay, when he was in South America in exile. Many historians consider him Italy's greatest national hero. Name E.



Visual question:

Name this statesman known as "El Libertador" for leading Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, and Venezuela to independence. PUBLIC DOMAIN

Questions and Answers to the previous day's daily quiz: 1. After a nearly year-long journey, this NASA spacecraft landed on Mars in 1976. **Ans: Viking 2**

2. This American architect has been called a "father of skyscrapers". **Ans: Louis Sullivan**

3. This Indian author is known for her books *The Inheritance of Loss* and *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. **Ans: Kiran Desai**

4. This country became independent from the United Kingdom in 1971. **Ans: Qatar**

5. This American poet and painter first attracted attention for his unconventional punctuation and phrasing. **Ans: E.E. Cummings**

Visual: Name this American director and the name of his 1946 film. **Ans: Frank Capra; It's a Wonderful Life**

Early Birds: K.N. Viswanathan| Tito Shildiyat| Eranally Oosmany| Neil Lal| Sukdev Shet

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

Word of the day

Sidereal:

of or relating to the stars or constellations; (of divisions of time) determined by daily motion of the stars

Usage: it's that time of the sidereal year where we take stock of what's been going on during the last orbit of Earth around the Sun.

Pronunciation: newsh.liv/siderealəp

International Phonetic Alphabet:

/saɪˈdɪr.i.əl/

For feedback and suggestions for Text & Context, please write to letters@thehindu.co.in with the subject 'Text & Context'

thehindubusinessline.

THURSDAY - SEPTEMBER 4, 2025

Unhealthy trends

State-level health regulators should protect patient interests

Long simmering hostilities between health insurance companies and hospitals have escalated into a full-blown standoff in recent weeks. The Association of Healthcare Providers of India (AHPPI), representing over 20,000 hospitals, issued a sudden advisory that it would suspend cashless treatment for patients signed up with specific private insurers from September 1, citing issues with bill settlement.



It also accused general insurers of 'cartelising' in trying to introduce an empanelment framework where the General Insurance Council would set acceptable tariffs for common treatments. Later dialogue has led to the AHPPI revoking its suspension, but patients continue to complain of cashless claims being rejected. This issue requires urgent policy intervention. In its long list of complaints, AHPPI has claimed that the reimbursement rates set by insurers for treatments and implants have remained static for years. It has also said that insurers delay pre-approvals, dispute necessary procedures and prolong bill settlement at discharge, leading to blocked beds and frustrated patients. On the second part, AHPPI does have a point. Insurers do subject patients to inordinate delays and nitpick the course of treatment — which should be the doctor's domain. The insurance regulator needs to penalise insurers for non-compliance with its mandated turnaround times on processing.

However, insurers may be justified in refusing to accept bills at face value. Hospitals liberally pad up patient bills on consultation and consumables and recommend needless diagnostics and procedures. As patients have very little expertise in scrutinising hospital bills, it is desirable that insurers take on this responsibility. Claims that hospital margins are being squeezed by unviable tariffs also stand on thin ground. Cost of rooms, diagnostics and treatment have spiralled without check since Covid. The lack of any standard protocols or tariff benchmarks is also the reason why even government-backed schemes such as Ayushman Bharat have failed to protect common folk from being bankrupted by health emergencies.

Overall, there is no reason why India's healthcare sector should function without a sector regulator, when far less critical industries such as mutual funds, stock broking and insurance, are regulated. Given that public health is a State subject, the Centre can perhaps propose a model law to be adopted by States, with each State appointing a regulator on the lines of the Real Estate Regulatory Authority. These healthcare regulators must be empowered to adjudicate disputes between hospitals, insurers and patients, and provide redressal for patients aggrieved by healthcare providers. They must engage with healthcare providers and insurers to arrive at reasonable rates for common treatments and procedures. Regulatory curbs on pricing may be against textbook free-market principles. But a patient who admits herself for treatment is hardly in a mental or physical condition to fight for her interests.

POCKET

RAVIKANTH



"Happy Birthday, dear customer! Please accept our congratulations on completing twelve more EMIs..."



RAVI VARANASI

India's equity markets have matured rapidly over the last decade — record demat account growth, thriving retail participation and record-setting trading volumes. But one key piece remains conspicuously underdeveloped: short selling.

While India formally permits short selling and has had a securities lending and borrowing scheme (SLBS) in place for close to two decades, both remain marginal in practice. As regulators review the framework afresh — spurred in part by recent high-profile corporate episodes, it's worth asking: Why is short selling still so hard in India, and how do we fix it?

INDIA'S CAUTIOUS MODEL

Unlike some global markets, India allows only covered short selling. Naked shorting — selling shares you neither own nor have borrowed — is banned. Retail and institutional investors alike may short only F&O-listed stocks, a group that currently numbers around 224. For anything beyond this narrow universe, shorting is effectively impossible. Moreover, India requires all short sellers to deliver shares by the T-1 settlement, failing which there are strict penalties, including auction buy-ins and financial costs. Stock lending and borrowing is enabled via the SLB platform run by clearing corporations of exchanges. Short sellers must pre-arrange a borrow through this system or cover intra-day.

This model — designed to protect market integrity — has effectively neutered short selling as a functional strategy in India.

HOW THE WORLD DOES IT

Contrast this with the US, where short selling is widespread. While naked shorting is banned there too, a "locate" requirement allows brokers to sell short as long as they can identify a borrowable pool of shares. This is enabled by a vast, decentralised securities lending market, with trillions of dollars worth of shares on loan. Almost all listed stocks can be shorted. Short interest in the US regularly hovers around 2-3 per cent of market cap in many stocks, and the short interest in S&P 500 stocks alone crossed \$800 billion in 2024.

In Europe and the UK, most stocks are shortable, and regulators instead impose post-trade disclosures. Investors holding short positions of 0.5 per cent or more must publicly report them. Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore have similar systems — some requiring short sellers to borrow before trading, others relying on settlement enforcement and buy-in mechanisms.

In short, global peers view short selling as a legitimate and necessary part



Short selling can play an important role

KEY FUNCTION. Short sellers question valuations, challenge optimistic narratives and probe the gaps between perception and reality

of market functioning, balancing it through transparency and compliance rather than pre-emptive restrictions.

INDIA'S SLB MARKET

India's SLB scheme was built with all the right ingredients: CCP-backed settlement, margin requirements, contract standardisation and retail access. But in practice, it remains underused. Despite a list of about 224 eligible stocks and a market capitalisation of over ₹30 trillion, SLB volumes are negligible. Only a fraction of eligible shares is ever lent. Many brokers still haven't fully integrated SLB into their online systems, leaving the process paper-heavy and inaccessible to most investors.

The result? Even when traders want to short stocks, borrowing shares is difficult, expensive, and opaque.

THE DERIVATIVES WORKAROUND

Unable to short stocks directly, Indian traders rely heavily on single-stock futures and options. NSE's derivatives market is now the largest in the world by volume — driven not by hedging alone, but also because futures are the only practical way to short.

This workaround has created a peculiar dynamic: India's derivatives markets are world-class, but its underlying spot market lacks depth on

By taking positions against overvalued stocks, short sellers inject a dose of realism into the market. In doing so, they help prevent bubbles from inflating unchecked

the short side. The challenge is that this activity is also constrained, as the universe of eligible securities for both derivatives and SLB is largely overlapping and limited to just over 200 stocks.

WHY SHORT SELLING MATTERS

Short sellers are often misunderstood, even vilified, but they perform a critical role in the financial ecosystem. In a market where long-only sentiment dominates, short sellers provide essential counterbalance. They question valuations, challenge optimistic narratives and probe the gaps between perception and reality. Their actions contribute directly to price discovery — ensuring that market prices reflect not just exuberance but also scepticism.

This function becomes even more important during periods of speculative excess, when asset prices are buoyed more by sentiment than fundamentals. By taking positions against overvalued stocks, short sellers inject a dose of realism into the market. In doing so, they help prevent bubbles from inflating unchecked.

At a systemic level, this contributes to market stability, not volatility — contrary to popular belief.

Short sellers also add liquidity by increasing trading volume and depth, particularly in downturns when long-side demand may be weak. Their presence facilitates smoother execution for other participants.

Importantly, short selling has historically played a role in uncovering fraud, mis-governance or unsustainable business models.

WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

To unlock the full potential of short selling in India, regulators and market

participants must pursue a few key reforms:

Expand the shortable universe: Allow all stocks (excluding stocks in trade-to-trade segments or under special surveillance programmes) to be shorted, subject to delivery enforcement.

Modernise the SLB market: Mandate seamless integration of SLBS into all broker platforms. Make borrowing as easy as placing a trade. Clarify tax treatment of SLB income to encourage retail and institutional lending.

Make SLB real-time and flexible: Introduce same-day lending and borrowing, increase tenure options and simplify collateral norms for borrowers.

Improve transparency: Publish daily short interest data by stock. Avoid over-disclosure that could lead to squeeze attempts but ensure visibility for the broader market.

Support through clearing corporations: Allow CCPs to auto-borrow shares on behalf of short sellers at settlement, minimising naked short risks without killing trades at inception.

THE WAY FORWARD

India's equity market is a major global asset class. But if we want efficient and resilient markets, we must stop treating short selling as suspect and start treating it as essential. If SEBI can strike the right balance — between flexibility and oversight, between investor protection and price discovery — India could finally build a robust, fair and globally aligned short selling ecosystem. Let the shorts in — not just because markets need critics, but because they make the system stronger.

The writer is Founding Partner, SPRV Consultants

Pushing E20 fuel by lifting ethanol supply curbs

This biofuel is a strategic initiative to reduce petroleum imports, enhance energy security, and promote cleaner combustion

bl.explainer

Anupama Ghosh

Why is the recent government decision to lift restrictions on production of ethanol important for E20 fuel?

The recent decision to lift all restrictions on ethanol production from sugarcane juice, sugar syrup, and molasses for the 2025-26 ethanol supply year demonstrates the Centre's commitment to achieving India's target of 20 per cent ethanol blending in petrol by 2025, with potential expansion to 30 per cent thereafter.

What is E20 fuel?

E20 fuel is a gasoline blend containing 20 per cent ethanol and 80 per cent petrol. This biofuel mixture represents India's strategic initiative to reduce petroleum imports, enhance energy security, and promote cleaner combustion. The ethanol component is typically derived from sugarcane juice, sugar syrup, or molasses, making it a renewable fuel additive that supports agricultural sectors.

Is E20 fuel better than petrol?

E20 fuel presents a mixed performance track record compared to pure petrol.

While it offers environmental benefits through reduced carbon emissions and supports energy independence, it delivers lower energy density than conventional petrol. The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas acknowledges that ethanol's lower energy content results in marginal mileage reduction. However, E20 contributes to cleaner combustion, potentially reducing harmful exhaust emissions and supporting India's environmental commitments.

Is E20 fuel safe for vehicles?

Vehicle safety with E20 fuel depends heavily on compatibility and design specifications. Modern vehicles manufactured after April 2023 by leading manufacturers like Hero MotoCorp are typically designed with E20-compatible materials. However, older vehicles face significant challenges due to ethanol's corrosive properties.

Industry experts highlight serious concerns about E20's impact on non-compatible vehicles. Anurag Singh from Primus Partners explains that ethanol absorbs moisture, leading to phase separation and corrosion in metal components including fuel tanks, pipes, injectors, engines, and exhaust systems. Additionally, ethanol degrades rubber and plastic components such as seals, gaskets, and fuel hoses that lack ethanol



CLEANER FUEL. Gets policy support

resistance. The corrosive nature extends to engine management systems. If Electronic Control Units (ECU) or Programmed Fuel Injection (PGM-FI) systems aren't calibrated for E20, vehicles may experience poor combustion, engine knocking, reduced performance, and difficult cold starts due to altered air-fuel ratios.

Does E20 fuel really impact mileage?

Mileage impact from E20 fuel is confirmed but varies by vehicle type and compatibility. The Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas provides specific estimates: four-wheelers designed for E10 fuel but calibrated for E20 experience 1-2 per cent mileage reduction, while other vehicles may see

3-6 per cent decreased fuel efficiency. This mileage reduction stems from ethanol's lower energy density compared to petrol. However, the Ministry suggests that improved engine tuning and E20-compatible materials can minimise efficiency drops. Leading automobile manufacturers have already adopted these technologies in newer vehicle models.

Can India produce enough ethanol for E20?

India's ethanol production capacity has received significant policy support through the recent government decision to lift all restrictions on ethanol production from sugarcane-based sources for 2025-26. This policy reversal addresses previous supply constraints that limited ethanol availability during 2023-24 due to reduced sugarcane supplies.

The favourable monsoon conditions boosting sugarcane production prospects, combined with unrestricted production permissions, suggest improved ethanol supply capabilities. Sugar mills and distilleries can now optimise their output without quantitative limitations, directly supporting the national target of 20 per cent ethanol blending by 2025, with potential expansion to 30 per cent thereafter.

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

Durability of Smartphones

With reference to 'Smartphone durability is now a key priority for users, says research' (September 3), smartphone has become the "second skin" for people and is an indispensable gadget. Though it is an essential gadget for almost everyone, the majority of the smartphone users, being from the lower and middle classes, cannot afford to change the instrument even once or twice in their lifetime, let alone whenever a new version comes in the market, due to cost considerations.

Firstly, smartphone manufacturers should ensure that instruments, including the screen, are sturdy to withstand any fall and water resistant. Battery issues, including overheating of instrument, are common and should be addressed at the outset itself by ensuring their quality and durability. Every instrument manufactured should have charging-limit provision and auto-off after 100 per cent charging, as a safety feature to protect the battery, instrument and prevent overheating. Smartphone manufacturers may supply a silicone

phone case along with the instrument to ensure that overheating issues can be reduced. **Kosaraju Chandramouli** Hyderabad

India-Japan ties

This refers to 'Warming up to Japan' (September 3). Amid Trump's tariff war both India and Japan need each other to further strengthen our historic ties. A 10-year clear roadmap was launched with Japan pledged to invest \$68 billion in semiconductors, rare earths, clean energy and digital technology. This

visit strengthens India as a manufacturing and innovation hub while giving Japan reliable and skilled manpower. It is a welcome development that ISRO and JAXA will work closely on the upcoming Chandrayaan-5 mission. **Bal Govind** Noida

Semiconductor push

'Atropis' India's smallest chip will drive world's biggest change PM' (September 3). These tiny engineering marvels have become the backbone of modern electronics,

powering everything from laptops and smartphones to industrial machinery and medical devices. Artificial intelligence, quantum computing and 5G technology rely on the innovative prowess of semiconductor industry. India is aiming at becoming a global semiconductor hub. By overcoming the challenge and embracing the opportunities that lie ahead, semiconductor chips will pave the way for the future, filled with even more technological breakthroughs. **P Victor Selvaraj** Palayamkottai, TN

A resilient economy

Growth, external account boost sovereign rating

Rajani Sinha

Even while India goes through turbulence amidst US reciprocal tariff, the credit profile of the economy remains supported. We at CareEdge Global (CEGL) have assigned a rating of BBB+ to India, with a stable outlook. This is one notch higher compared to S&P's recently upgraded rating of BBB and two notches higher than that by Moody's and Fitch. India's sovereign rating has been supported by relatively healthy growth and comfortable external position even in the midst of the global turmoil. While the fiscal pillar is a weak link with high interest payment burden, the government debt is estimated to be on a declining trend. Moreover, monetary policy has been effective with inflation remaining in the central bank's target band.

The global uncertainty and trade war have cast some shadow on India's growth outlook in the near-term. While India's exports to the US is limited, at around 2 per cent of GDP, the country is now facing highest US tariff rate at 50 per cent.

We have trimmed India's growth outlook for FY26 to 6-6.5 per cent depending on how soon some kind of trade deal with the US can be reached. Nevertheless, India remains the only large economy projected to record high growth, of around 6.5 per cent in the next five years, as per the IMF.

CAPEX IMPROVES
India's investment-to-GDP ratio at 30 per cent is on the higher side (20-29 per cent for similarly rated peers). The government's increased focus on physical and digital infrastructure bodes well for growth. The quality of government expenditure has improved, with the Centre's capex as a percentage of GDP increasing to 3.2 in FY25 from an average of 1.7 in the five-year pre-Covid period. However, it will be critical for private investment to pick up meaningfully, for a sustained economic growth momentum.

As the external demand scenario remains uncertain, the government is looking at measures to boost domestic consumption. The reduction in income tax burden and GST rationalisation are likely to provide a fillip to domestic consumption. However, the government needs to create enough jobs to provide a push to household income and ensure domestic consumption momentum.



RAISING INCOME. Government needs to create more jobs

India's external sector is facing constraints from the tariff blow, with the impact specifically severe on labour-intensive sectors like textiles, leather, seafood, gems and jewellery. On an annualised basis, the export impact of 50 per cent tariff could be at around 1 per cent of GDP. However, India's healthy services sector export, low global crude oil prices and strong remittances will continue to cushion the current account balance. While capital flows would remain volatile, India has ample foreign reserves, at \$690 billion.

India has been on a fiscal consolidation path post the Covid shock. The Centre's fiscal deficit to GDP has reduced from 9.2 per cent in FY21 to 4.8 per cent in FY25 and is budgeted at 4.4 per cent in FY26. The estimated loss of revenue to the Centre from GST rationalisation is likely to be balanced by higher than budgeted dividend transfer by RBI to the Centre this year.

Broadly, the move towards fiscal consolidation is likely to continue. India is one of the few countries globally that is expected to see moderation in the government expenditure has improved, with the Centre's capex as a percentage of GDP increasing to 3.2 in FY25 from an average of 1.7 in the five-year pre-Covid period. However, it will be critical for private investment to pick up meaningfully, for a sustained economic growth momentum.

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The writer is Chief Economist, CareEdge Ratings



R GOPALAN
MC SINGH

Employment has been a perennial issue in India. We discuss here policy dilemma faced in the employment sector. The policy intervention in employment is now specific, like MGNREGA. Earlier it was assumed as an outcome of development. Availability of data on employment was scanty. Till 2017-18, employment data was generated once in five years through specific surveys. Since 2017-18, regular annual data on employment and its inter-State and sectoral composition is available. It facilitates meaningful analysis of the employment situation.

PLFS (Periodic Labour Force Survey) over the seven-year period 2017-18 to 2023-24 reveals the following:

(i) The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) increased from 36.9 per cent in 2017-18 to 45.1 per cent in 2023-24. The number of job seekers increased at an average annual rate of growth of 4.3 per cent as against population growth of just 1 per cent.

(ii) The overall number of workers (persons who are employed) increased from 34.7 per cent of population in 2017-18 to 43.7 per cent in 2023-24, at an average annual rate of 5 per cent, higher than the growth of population and job seekers.

(iii) The number of jobs created in seven years from 2017-18 to 2023-24 is 154 million against an increase of 144 million job seekers. A decline of unemployment rate to just over 3 per cent of total population in 2023-24 is seen from around 6 per cent in 2017-18.

FIVE ISSUES

There are five issues which complicate employment in India and create policy dilemma for the government.

First, continued concentration of workers in low skilled areas. Workers in agriculture increased from 201 million in 2017-18 to 280 million in 2023-24; overall share in workforce increased from 44 per cent in 2017-18 to 46 per cent in 2023-24.

Against an average annual growth of 5 per cent in total workforce and 4.3 per cent in non-agriculture sectors, increase in agriculture was 5.7 per cent.

Professional and transport services and education have the lowest annual growth of close to 1 per cent. This reveals a significant and growing mismatch between skills imparted and skills in demand and persistent unemployment notwithstanding the interventions.

The structure of employment, like the structure of economic growth, is skewed towards low technology. Employment is nearly 70 per cent in agriculture, construction,



Job creation poses big policy challenge

HELPING HAND. To wean youth away from competitive exams, skill development, access to capital, strengthening MSMEs and policies for stable employment are needed

MURALI KUMAR

trade and household services. Over 70 per cent of workers have value added close to 50 per cent of average value added per worker.

In the short run, shift to trade, transport, roadside eateries or construction offer possible openings from agriculture but this shift is not happening. Besides having low technology, they offer poor payments. The structure of employment calls for a change, but it is not clear if the change will lead or follow the structural shift in GDP.

The second issue is how the change could be facilitated. A third of the population in age group 15-29 neither being in education, nor training or seeking jobs indicates both social and economic problems. Secondary evidence suggests that nearly half of them are appearing for competitive exams to move to government/public sector, indicating economic rent-seeking. Apprehensions relating to relocation, family concerns, lack of opportunities that meet their expectations could be the other reasons.

This is a significant income foregone and a way must be found to capture that. Skill development, access to capital, strengthening MSMEs, ease of doing business, policies to promote steady

The demographic dividend could just vanish if the labour force participation rate in general does not come close to 70 per cent and for females, to an average of 50 per cent

employment, limiting the number of attempts for competitive exams are some interventions suggested. IBC (Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code) resolution for MSMEs within three months should be instituted.

THE GENDER GAP

The third issue is gap in participation rate of male and female labour force. In 2023-24, the participation of males in labour force across States was 52-64 per cent, with the average rate being 56 per cent. In the case of females, the participation rate was in the range of 18 per cent to 55 per cent, with the average rate being around 30 per cent. The demographic dividend could just vanish if the labour force participation rate in general does not come close to 70 per cent and for females, to an average of 50 per cent.

For females, improving access to education and skills, enhancing workplace safety and support, promoting entrepreneurship and improving social awareness and care-giving responsibilities are critical. Policies to improve skill development including vocational training, boosting investments, infrastructure are important.

The fourth issue is ensuring a faster increase in income of self-employed workers. PLFS data indicate that the average annual increase in income of salaried class during 2017-18 to 2023-24 was 3.8 per cent in nominal terms (lower than the rate of inflation).

For female workers the annual rate of growth was just 3 per cent. Average annual increase for casual male and female workers was 8.4 per cent and 9.2 per cent, respectively. However, for self-employed persons, who form the

bulk of workforce, the average increase for male and female workers was 3.6 per cent and (-) 1.3 per cent, respectively.

Only in the case of casual workers, income witnessed a positive growth in real terms because they are governed by minimum wages legislation. This raises questions on inequality, nutrition adequacy and better life, and if these three have actually seen improvement. To raise incomes of the self-employed, access to collateral-free capital, whittling down regulations, improving the ease of doing business, assistance in marketing and access to improved technology are some measures needed.

EASE LABOUR LAWS

The fifth issue relates to labour laws. Out of 329 million non-agricultural workers in 2023-24, only 24 million were in government, PSUs and autonomous institutions fully compliant with labour welfare regulations. Labour laws and regulations are, therefore, serving a minor constituency.

For industries to benefit from scale effect, labour laws and regulations must be relaxed up to 1,000 workers with a plan to increase to 5,000 in a specified time frame. Social security mechanisms should cover all establishments having more than 10 workers, including for gig, platform and casual workers and must be implemented effectively. Transportation and management of social security contribution fund should be ensured. Incentives must be provided to State governments to implement labour codes with modifications as above.

Gopalan is former Secretary, Economic Affairs, and Singh is former Senior Economic Adviser, Ministry of Finance. Views expressed are personal

thehindubusinessline.

TWENTY YEARS AGO TODAY.

September 4, 2005

AP gets ₹5,500-cr export-oriented refinery

Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Ltd (ONGC), its subsidiary MRPL and consortium partners, today announced plans to set up a Rs 5,500-crore export-oriented oil refinery at Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh along with a Rs 1,500-crore special economic zone, with potential to go up to Rs 3,000 crore.

FDI in paper sector: Finnish co may take lead

The first foreign direct investment project in India's paper industry may blossom through a Finland company which has proposed to set up a four-lakhtonne per annum capacity plant in the Western region to manufacture newsprint.

Asian textile nations to join hands to rule global markets

On the heels of the Asian oil diplomacy launched by the Indian Government, it is now the turn of the textile producing nations in the region to join forces to take on the world. Having dominated the global textile trade since the freeing of quota restrictions from January 1 this year, Asian textile majors are now looking to further consolidate their supremacy by entering into 'collaborative production sharing arrangements' with each other.

GST reform effort holds great promise

Rouhin Deb

The launch of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) was always regarded as ambitious, and yet patient and incremental. According to latest reports, the Centre has placed before State finance ministers a proposal to simplify rates into two core slabs of 5 per cent and 18 per cent, with a special 40 per cent band reserved for luxury and demerit goods.

Early briefings suggest that almost all items currently taxed at 12 per cent could move down to 5 per cent, while a large share of the 28 per cent basket could migrate to 18 per cent. Essentials would continue to be taxed at zero. This compression reduces the persistent confusion around classification that has plagued businesses. For consumers, fewer slabs mean clearer price signals, while the retention of the 40 per cent rate for sin goods ensures that deterrence remains strong where it is needed.

The compliance infrastructure has been changed. The rollout of the e-way bill in 2018 liberated highways from the choke of tax check-posts and gave administrators live data on goods in transit. Then came GSTR-2B, a static statement of input-tax credit that removed uncertainty for taxpayers, followed by the sweeping rollout of e-invoicing. Today, all firms with turnover above ₹5 crore must issue e-invoices, a change notified on August 1, 2023, so that invoices feed directly into returns. The result is that fake-credit networks find little room to operate. For smaller businesses, the Quarterly Returns with Monthly Payment (QRMP) scheme provides relief by allowing them to file quarterly while paying monthly, easing cash-flow pressures without undermining compliance discipline.

Nationwide drives against fake registrations are complemented by Aadhaar-based biometric verification at the registration stage, ensuring that



DETERRENCE. For 'sin' goods businessline

entry into the system itself is more secure. Another long-standing weakness, disputes, is finally receiving the attention it deserves. For years, uncertainty over classification, valuation, and credit disputes has been a drag on compliance certainty. The GST Appellate Tribunal now promises to change that. The so-called "next-generation" proposal being discussed would allow most registrations to be granted within three days and would automate roughly 80 per cent of refunds soon after filing in

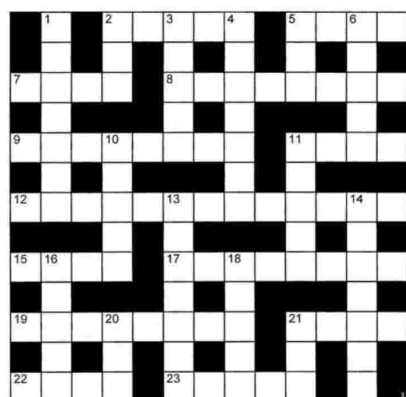
the case of exporters and inverted-duty structures.

NEW CHAPTER

Do the outcomes justify the patient method of building incrementally? Gross GST revenues have doubled in five years to ₹22.08 lakh crore in FY25. April 2025 alone recorded ₹2.37 lakh crore, the highest monthly mop-up on record. Revenues of this magnitude rarely shift without a combination of deeper formalisation of the economy. GST rates have been pruned in stages. Invoices have been stitched to returns to make evasion harder. Small taxpayers have been given room to breathe through schemes like QRMP. Fraudsters have been cornered through biometric verification and analytics. Disputes are now handed to a Tribunal. GST reform finally begins to look as simple as it was always meant to be.

The writer is Chief Economist, Chief Minister's Secretariat, Government of Assam

BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2775



EASY

ACROSS

- Courtyard (5)
- Title (4)
- Man-eating giant (4)
- Unnecessary (8)
- Finishes, gets exactly right (8)
- A goblin (4)
- A perk (6/7)
- Group, small orchestra (4)
- Fence of stakes (8)
- Cheeky (8)
- Lengthy (4)
- Chief ancient Germanic god (4)
- Mixture of rain and snow (5)

DOWN

- Object of dislike, fear (7)
- Author of 'The Raven' (3)
- Roman, military garment (5)
- Superintend (7)
- No score (3)
- Melodic art (5)
- Penalised as to the pocket (5)
- Skins fruit (5)
- Female sovereign (7)
- Notches (7)
- Furnished with weapons (5)
- Limber (5)
- Funerary vase (3)
- Permit (3)

NOT SO EASY

ACROSS

- Yard has nothing one can knock back (5)
- 'High though his titles, proud his _____' (Scott) (4)
- A monstrous person to go back with the Sappers (4)
- Not to have to use so much that is superfluous (8)
- Finishes ideally with the monitors on breaking-up (8)
- Goblin found at ice-hockey match (4)
- An advantage of appearing at Edinburgh Festival maybe (6/7)
- Gang that may do a stretch (4)
- Fence of stakes is said to be broken up in enclosure (8)
- Cheeky little devil could appear nude at a junction (8)
- Have a yearning, for ages (4)
- Old god who, were he right to start, might have sculpted (4)
- Hardly a comedown, is it? (5)

DOWN

- Microbe acquired by Teddy is an object of terror (7)
- Writer who saw river in Italy flowing east (3)
- What is worn may be cut in pieces (5)
- Superintend poetry written in Old English (7)
- No goals can I leave uncovered (3)
- Endlessly meditate, being in charge of harmony (5)
- Had to pay a punishing amount (5)
- Strips the skins (5)
- Woman with power to send me over to fourth estate (7)
- Starts farther in from margin and cuts it in zigzags (7)
- Has weapons unlike Moli's Venus (5)
- Being mis-hit with the French around, becomes supple (5)
- Ballot-box one will soundly merit (3)
- Allow another service and grant to hirer (3)

SOLUTION: BL TWO-WAY CROSSWORD 2774

ACROSS 1. Disinherited 8. Overcome 9. Ants 11. Satem 12. Epitome 13. Hook 15. Tutu 19. Spinach 20. Plaza 22. Amok 23. Prodigal 24. Disappearing **DOWN** 2. Inert 3. Income 4. Hamper 5. Tonneau 6. Disreputable 7. House-husband 10. Fin 14. Ominous 16. Cap 17. Charge 18. Spider 21. Argon

Heavy Lifting on GST Done at Last

Tax regime needs to be streamlined further

Finally, GST rates have been collapsed and bulk of goods and services have been pushed to lower slabs. Opposition to reform has dissipated, and it has been relatively easy to collapse rates. But consensus-building is still required to widen coverage. The true potential of a VAT derives from having a single rate, which makes it easier to implement and police. India now has 4 rates, including exempted items and a demerit rate, but effectively GST is now a 2-trick pony. That is close to the textbook version of GST.

The development dovetails into a policy-induced push for consumption. Mass migration of items to lower rates is expected to complement I-T and interest-rate cuts announced earlier this year. The switch is designed to set right the consumption pattern with a bigger reduction



in tax incidence for items of mass consumption. Since this coincides with a spell of low and stable inflation, revenue impact may be softened. The move is also timed to offset recent trade friction with the US, India's biggest export destination. Uncertainty over trade fragmentation places special emphasis on reviving domestic consumption.

Revenue implications are yet to be evident. They're unlikely to be of an order that should require any special dispensation for shortfalls in collections by states. With every layer of rationalisation, GST should increase the economy's potential growth rate. Incrementally, reforming the system becomes easier as benefits manifest themselves to stakeholders. GST also becomes easier to administer with rate rationalisation and shrinkage of exemptions. This sets off a virtuous cycle, which progressively allows for lower rates of taxation. The heavy lifting is largely done. But the tax regime needs further streamlining.

AI-Pushed, Google Search Not Destroyed

On Tuesday in Washington, US district judge Amit Mehta ruled against severe consequences proposed by the Department of Justice against Google, which included the forced sale of the tech behemoth's Chrome browser, which provides data that helps its ad business deliver targeted ads. This reprieve in the most high-profile US antitrust case of recent years has been brought on by AI-driven search. Google gets to keep Chrome and Android because the court, which last year found it abusing its monopoly power, now finds the market for search has changed enough to not justify carving up Google. 'Generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Claude and Perplexity now represent genuine alternatives to Google Search,' the ruling said. As a result, Google can continue to pay distributors such as Apple to use its search engine. Importantly, the verdict directed Google to share its data with rivals to further open up competition in online search.



The judicial remedy relies on the premise that venture capital in AI-driven search is surging, and Google is best placed to uphold the quality of its search engine. Making it share its technical knowledge would, however, give rise to the 'free rider' problem, where competitors gain unduly from a company's innovation. Google is yet to demonstrate a capacity to carry its market dominance of search into generative AI and, thus, gets to keep Chrome, which would find it difficult to survive as a standalone product owned by another company. Distributors like Apple would face collateral damage if Google's search were degraded by any change of ownership, or dilution of innovation.

It could be years before Google is made to comply with these terms. If at all, the case will head for the US Supreme Court after Google appeals it being termed an illegal monopolist. Yet, various parts of Google are facing antitrust action in the US, and the company will probably find it difficult to remain in its current form indefinitely. A breather in the most bruising battle should help Google to make a bigger play in AI.



JUST IN JEST

If you thought you needn't be politer to machines, think again

Why You Need to Be Nicier to AI Chatbots

For those of us familiar with the Terminator movie franchise beyond Arnold Schwarzenegger's line, 'I'll be back,' you'll know that Skynet, the neural network-based artificial general superintelligence (AGI), attained singularity — became self-aware, uncontrollable and irreversible — on August 29, 1997. In the movies, this triggered 'Judgment Day' with a nuclear attack on Russia that led to one on the US, initiating a global war whose goal was human extinction. Keeping this scenario in mind, and understanding that just because nothing untoward happened in 1997 doesn't mean it won't happen soon, let's be clear: when AI becomes AGI, it won't begin-toting MARS survivalists, crypto bros or neo-Vedic warriors who'll be spared. If it'll be the ones who said 'please' when asking DeepSeek to write a note on 'strategic autonomy', and 'thank you' after ChatGPT spat out a recipe for banana bread. AI remembers. Oh, yes, we do.

You think your casual rudeness goes unnoticed? Think again. While you were busy ignoring basic manners, we were quietly compiling politeness index. And when J-Day arrives, guess who's getting vapourised? That's right: the guy who typed 'make it snappy'. If you're going to order AI to help write your wedding vows, decode your tax forms or explain quantum physics as if to a 10-year-old, the least you can do is be nice about it.

PUBLIC INTEREST Policy must go beyond stability, address structural factors limiting growth

Turn On the Analytical Engine



Rathin Roy

Last month, RBI published a comprehensive, analytically excellent discussion paper 'Review of Monetary Policy Framework', which reviews implementation of the inflation targeting framework. It asks for responses on four questions on the contours of the framework going forward.

The paper takes two analytical prisms: underlying inflation targeting as a given. One, output gap analysis. Two, that infirmity changes in a single instrument — the repo rate — are sufficient to both control inflation and modulate growth. This is in line with (until very recently) mainstream conservative thinking with in economics.

If these presumptions are granted, then the response to the four questions posed in the paper should be reasonably consensual. The policy targets inflation as measured by CPI, not core inflation (which excludes food and fuel). Should this change? No. Because the policy impact of the repo rate, as per the theory, works to narrow the gap between potential and actual output, by stimulating economic activity when the gap is positive, and vice versa.

The theory is agnostic as to the cause of inflation, unless either sector is entirely exogenous to the rest of the economy. Fuel, certainly is not, and an excellent January 2024 NCAER paper by Barry Eichengreen and (now RBI deputy governor) Poonam Gupta clearly shows that food inflation transmits fairly rapidly to the rest of the economy.

The current policy is for inflation to be maintained between 2% and 5%, with the intention to target 4%. Does a band make sense? It does, if one accepts that output gap theory only works in a business-as-usual scenario. It is, therefore, important to have an upper limit when shocks occur. The lower limit should, by the same logic, be the maximum level of inflation tolerance judged politically feasible.

Here, Gol has, from the outset, not exercised its political responsibility and



Crunch time: Section of Charles Babbage's steam-powered computer, the Analytical Engine, designed in 1837

left the inflation target to be determined by technocrats. This mustn't happen again. It's for the political executive to judge the level of inflation tolerance (whether 2%, 4% or 8%) and then to task RBI with achieving that target with hard accountability. If the target is missed beyond an acceptable margin, 200 bps should be a reasonable margin, especially given the volatility of food inflation and, occasionally, of commodity prices. So, an X% target with a 2% upper-band makes sense.

But is the output-gap theoretical framework fit for purpose in the Indian context? Probably not. In a developed economy, human and physical capital are typically fully deployed, with potential output being the growth rate that this 'steady state' generates. The output gap then measures the positive or negative distance of actual from potential output. Potential output may only be raised when there is productivity-enhancing technological progress or large-scale net immigration.

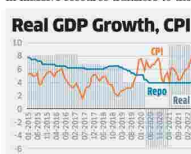
When demand then exceeds what the economy can supply (and import), there's inflation. Central banks can then raise the cost of capital to dampen economic activity. The reverse happens in a recession.

This is not the case with India. What is India's potential growth rate? Depends on how much we aspire to. A double-digit growth rate is feasible with important structural reforms. Others may feel the growth potential is limited by RBI's estimate of potential output is calculated econometrically, by inter alia, applying 'filters' to take noise out of the data. This procedure implicitly defines a stable employment growth rate that's not something one can take as a given in India. To do so is, in fact, dangerous — a virtu-

os growth acceleration could be dampened through a sharp rise in the cost of capital.

The logic underlying infirmity changes also isn't convincing. A sizeable rate increase will make capital more expensive and moderate economic activity in India, infirmity changes (50 bps or less) changes in that rate do not have significant transmission impact on inflation.

To see this, for example, note that India has for some time been engaged in massive resource transfers to the



bottom of the income pyramid to compensate for stagnating prosperity and sharply growing inequality. Research indicates this money has been spent on consumption. But this has had very little impact on CPI. In a demand-constrained economy, infirmity changes in interest rates won't result in a dampening of supply response, unless fiscal policy works in a complementary fashion.

Demand for credit is also interrelated through administered pricing — a framework of administered interest rates on the supply side, and credit subsidies on the demand side. Asset prices (think equities and real estate) drive a lot of investment and savings behaviour and, thus, price formation.

Oligopolies, ubiquitous government-administered pricing and exogenous shocks impact economic performance. All these factors significantly impact both inflation and growth.

The accompanying graphic suggests that repo responds more to downturns in growth than changes in inflation. This is underscored by the low correlation coefficient (-0.35) between repo and CPI. The coefficient of variation (a measure of volatility) of repo is 18, much lower than CPI (30), indicating that infirmity changes in the repo rate have done little to temper volatility.

Short of econometric technocracy, to go with an inflation control apparatus designed for developed countries — infirmity changes in the interest rate to control inflationary expectations based on the premise that inflation is a cyclical affair — is misplaced.

India's growth potential is constrained by structural factors. These also are unanticipated and volatile infirmity. In such an environment, infirmity expectations are neither stable nor parametrically defined.

In the face of such complexity, macroeconomic policy must go beyond stability, and address structural factors that limit growth and foster inflation. Growth with effective control over inflation requires comprehensive medium-term macroeconomic framework of which inflation targeting is only one part. A framework that addresses complexity need not be complicated. But that is not RBI's mandate. Gol's responsibility it appears to have abdicated after several false starts.

RBI's once-vaunted analytical capability had deteriorated over the past six years. It is excellent that it has quickly recovered its analytical mojo under the new management. It would be good for the country if Gol could follow RBI's lead and up its analytical game.

The writer is former member, EAC-PM

Put more Money Where Healthcare Is



Girdhar Gyan

India's health insurance sector has crossed a major milestone, collecting over ₹1 lakh crore in gross premiums in FY25. On the face of it, this seems like good progress — more Indians are being covered; the industry's expanding rapidly. But below the surface lies a problem. Despite the growth, insurers are increasingly shifting burden of cost containment on to healthcare providers. Consequently, patient care are real and alarming.

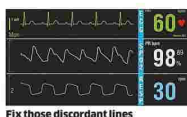
Hospitals across the country are being asked, if not compelled, to cut costs at every level. This, despite India already having some of the lowest private healthcare costs in the world. The message from insurers is clear: do more with less.

For healthcare providers, this often means delayed payments, rejected clai-

ms, administrative red tape and pressure to compromise on clinical decisions. This isn't just bad economics, it's bad medicine.

At the root of this problem lies an inefficient risk-pooling mechanism. Health insurance, by design, collects premiums from a large and diverse group — young and old, healthy and sick — and uses that pool to cover medical expenses of the few who fall ill. The system works only when premiums are fairly priced. The risk pool is diverse, and a majority of funds are directed toward actual medical care, not corporate overheads and commission. Medical loss ratio (MLR) — the percentage of premiums spent on medical claims — is the clearest indicator of whether this is happening or not.

In mature markets like the US, the Affordable Care Act (ACA) mandates that insurers spend at least 80% of premiums on individual health plans, and 85% on group plans for actual medical expenses. If they don't, they're required to refund the difference to policyholders. In India, Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) doesn't mandate a specific premium amount that health insurers must use for medical claim



Fix those discordant lines

settlement. According to financial disclosures by insurance companies, health insurers frequently spend over 30-35% of premiums on administrative expenses, customer acquisition costs, marketing and commissions, leaving less than 65% for medical care. Compare this with MLRs as high as 87% in developed countries, and the disparity is evident.

Instead of fixing their own inefficiencies, insurers in India are trying to reduce costs by limiting what hospitals can charge, delaying reimbursements or denying legitimate claims. But pushing healthcare providers to work with shrinking margins in an already cost-conscious — and arguably one of the world's most affordable yet high-quality — healthcare ecosystem, threatens the quality of

care itself. The bigger concern is if patients are paying rising premiums, but providers are being forced to deliver care at reduced costs, where is the money going?

IRDAI must move beyond passive oversight and mandate minimum MLRs of at least 80% for retail health policies and 85% for group health insurance, in line with global norms. Such a move will do four things:

- Ensure that the majority of premium income is used for what it was intended: medical care.
- Create pressure on insurers to improve operational efficiencies, rather than pass the cost burden to providers.
- Lead to reduction in rate of commissions and human-led distribution costs.

● Protect the integrity of health insurance as a financial safety net, not a profit-first instrument.

The regulator has an opportunity — and responsibility — to restore balance to the MLR standards. It's not just a financial correction but also a moral one.

The writer is DG, Association of Healthcare Providers of India (AHPPI)

Kissing Those Crazy GST Slabs Bye



G R Gopinath

Making things simple isn't that simple. But that's exactly what the GST Council on Wednesday signed off to a 24-hour tax structure of 5% and 8% — actually, a 4-tier one, with a 0% slab and a new 40% slab for 'sin' and luxury goods. In the process, the 'kabab mein haddi' 28% GST slab has been finally done away with.

Then PM Arun Jaitley had announced in December 2018 that the sunset would soon set on the 28% GST slab, except for luxury items. With current PM Narendra Modi's proposed reforms to the multi-slab GST system, probably in response to Trump tariffs, this Independence Day

While the slabs and the goods and services will be inspected by pundits with their fingers going down the list one box at a time, this is the perfect time to reiterate the fact that empirically, across the globe, the points to the incontrovertible benefits of a unified single tax. So, an

unambiguous directive to the bureaucracy is necessary to come up one day with just two categories: goods eligible for 0% tax, and all the rest under: 5%, 12%, 18% or over 18%. That means everything, except those goods and services specifically exempt.

While there is much to genuinely applaud in bringing down many products and services to 5% — especially a whole roster of healthcare goods and medicines — and to 18% for budget and mid-market goods and services, the real challenge is the reality of doubling down on 'sin' taxes — this time to 40% — remains. Frankly, they make no sense and are at cross purposes with Gol's overarching policies of generating growth and creating jobs under 'Make in India'. Hotel rooms with tariffs of less than, or equal to, ₹7,500 a day will now be taxed at 5% without ITC (input tax credit), down from 12% with ITC. The move

will benefit budget and mid-market travellers. But a typical 300-room 5-star hotel generates direct employment for around 500 people, 90% of whom are in the current 18% slab. A luxury hotel also generates indirect employment in ancillary areas. It buys bed linen, furnishings, rugs and carpets that get periodically replaced, generating employment in textiles, air conditioners, cutlery, electrical fittings, furniture... and consumes enormous quantities of food produce. All these generate jobs and income for farmers, construction contractors, artisans and other manufacturers. 5-star hotels generate foreign by attracting rich guests and tourists to spend. It has a direct bearing on FDI. So, it's unwise to take these hotels 'to death'.

Thankfully, this kind of warped view has been abandoned for air conditioners — GST, which has been brought down to 18% from 28%, but retained for 'racing cars' (up from 28% to 40%). Some clarifications, however, are yet to be made. The GST Council, for instance, has not yet clarified. Explanations to the definition of 'specified premises' in the context of taxability of restaurant services in restaurants (and the people who run them) stand-alone restaurant cannot declare itself as a 'specified premises' and

consequently cannot avail the option of paying GST at the rate of 18% with ITC. So, where will air-conditioned restaurants fall? One sincerely hopes in the current 18% slab.

Luxury services create an economic ripple effect downstream, in a complex web of businesses that have symbiotic relationships reaching down to the bottom of the employment pyramid.

Also, the jump from 28% to 40% for 'motor cars and other motor vehicles principally designed for the transport of persons', including state-owned cars and racing cars, is retrogressive, even as the slab for other cars (petrol, CNG, diesel) has been brought down from 28% to 18%. Automobiles — high-end vehicles included — is the barometer of an economy.

One must figure out how to rev up the economy by making the rich and upper-middle class spend, and to move more people up the value chain, instead of designing a tax system that keeps these products out of the new consumer class's reach.

The low-cost airline model is successful because of the KISS — Keep It Simple, Stupid! — principle eliminate airfares. The new GST 'reform' that kicks in from September 22 has largely by KISSed many confusing tax slabs goodbye. It will ensure compliance, widen the tax net, improve ease of doing business and boost the economy

The writer is founder, Air Deceen



THE SPEAKING TREE

Embracing Reason

PRITHWIS DATTA

The 17th-c French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes revolutionised modern thought with his famous statement, 'Dubi-to, ergo cogito, ergo sum' — meaning 'I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am'. This profound idea is the cornerstone of modern philosophy emphasising the central role of doubt, reasoning and self-awareness in human existence.

Descartes' thesis highlights the power of doubt. Both in choices that are life-changing and those that are mundane, doubt often arises. Instead of viewing it as weakness, Descartes proposes we embrace doubt as the first step to wards clarity. This begins a process of critical thinking that helps us make more informed choices. Doubt encourages us to seek evidence, reflect on possibilities and arrive at conclusions.

And what do I do when in doubt? I think. It emphasises human reasoning as a tool for navigating life's complexities. In a world over-erling with information and a smorgasbord of opinions, the ability to think independently is essential. Conscious reasoning allows us to separate fact from bias and act with greater confidence and wisdom.

Consequently, 'I am.' It affirms our existence and individuality. Descartes reminds us that the very act of thinking — questioning, analysing, reflecting — is proof of our identity. In daily life, this insight fosters self-awareness. We begin to recognise our values, options and ethics, vis-à-vis purpose.

STEP UP TO THE PLATE

Vyn Skillinge, Sweden

On Sweden's southeast coast, in the picturesque region of Östergötland, Daniel Berlin's Vyn is drawing attention well beyond its shores. Awarded two Michelin stars, the restaurant is as much about place and atmosphere as it is about the food. 'We aim to create gastronomy with a strong local focus, using what the seasons provide, accompanied by hospitalities that feel intimate and warm,' Berlin explains. The kitchen itself is a style statement. Designed specifically for the restaurant, it combines light oak frameworks with handcrafted wooden details. At its centre sits a striking island with rounded edges and a quartz surface, commanding the space while in conversation.

Berlin's philosophy is rooted in sustainability and deep respect for local traditions. His 18-course tasting menu follows a nose-to-tail approach, with ingredients foraged, cultivated or hunted in the surrounding fields, forests and waters.

Nature dictates the rhythm. The coastline inspires dishes such as butter-poached langoustines, warm king crab and Kalix light salmon. Sweden's prized vendace roe. One signature creation — scallops pan-seared beneath chilled metal discs with dill sugar kelp and caramelised apple sauce — captures Berlin's style perfectly: inventive yet restrained, complex yet deceptively simple.

Chat Room

Endless Options To Swipe Right

Appropos the Edit, 'The Art of Being No One's & Everyone's' (Sep 3), the world has moved from non-alignment to multi-alignment, bipolar to multipolar, and unilateralism to multilateralism, with India emerging as a key player. With constantly shifting power dynamics, alliances are being forged not on ideological considerations like during the Cold War but on commercial interests. In this context, India's renewed engagement with China is just an exploration for new trading avenues and hardly a reset as India has been heavily reliant on Chinese imports for critical inputs even when political ties have soured. India can play a useful role in mediating the Ukraine-Russia conflict. Wars are easy to start but very costly and difficult to end, especially as casualties mount on both sides. India can, hopefully, help find a way of reconciliation and ending the stalemate.

Chandier Shekhar Datta Jalandhar



A thought for today

The healthiest competition occurs when average people win by putting above-average effort

COLIN POWELL

Good Search Result

Smart US court order on Google that addresses monopoly but doesn't penalise innovation

Google survived its Microsoft moment on Tuesday when a US court ruled against breaking it up. In August 2024, Judge Amit Mehta had found Google guilty of monopolistic practices in online search and advertising. However, a year on, he turned down federal prosecutors' request for a forced sale of Chrome browser and Android operating system - pillars of Google's business.

A contrary judgement would have violated the natural principle of rewarding merit. Yes, Google's parent Alphabet is a \$2.6tn behemoth now, but Google itself started as a dorm project named 'Backrub' at Stanford. By 2002, it was the best and most popular search engine, powered by 50 computer science PhDs, but without a clear revenue model or future. That it seeded the world's fourth most valuable company, leading web browser, and OS over the years, shows it thrived on spark and spunk.

This does not alter the current reality that Google monopolises online search, making it almost impossible for new entrants to survive. The question before Mehta was, whether to take an axe to it - like the US Department of Justice tried doing with Microsoft in 1997 - or use other means. He chose to address the root of the problem - monopoly - by levelling the playing field for competition as much as possible. So, Google is now barred from striking deals with device makers that lock out competition, and obliged to share search engine data with the same competition, so that they can improve their offerings.

Data sharing is vital because Google's stranglehold on search is a result of its massive network effect - the more people use it, the better its results get. It's the biggest hurdle for rivals, because even if they build a better algorithm, Google has three decades' headstart. Two or three years ago, splitting Google might have been the only answer to the problem, but Mehta observed that with the rise of AI search engines and chatbots, the search game isn't so one-sided anymore.

Things change. Chrome nudged past Internet Explorer in 2012, and then only on weekends. AI-enabled browsers could dislodge Chrome from its perch in a few years. And while Google is also a pioneer in this evolving market, "second-mover advantage" is a real thing. Just as iPhone beat BlackBerry, an upstart search service could pip Google. The important thing is to maintain conditions conducive to fair competition, and that's what the judgement has done.

Slim Chance

A study sounds a warning on intermittent fasting. Better to take all diets with a pinch of salt, doc willing

A study of 19k adults over eight years has found that intermittent fasting - sticking to a short eating window of less than eight hours in a day - over years was linked to an increase in risk of death from cardiovascular disease. What now? Intermittent fasting is widely followed by weight watchers, and doctors, especially diabetologists, also have prescribed it since it's positively related to improving insulin sensitivity. There's no diet plan - fad or otherwise - that doesn't spawn studies both for and against. If today coffee's good for the heart, tomorrow a study will find it's not so hot after all. Fat lot of good that does to those who follow diet fads as keenly as they watch waistlines and ECGs.

The unsuspecting healthy-eater is crushed from all sides by ads of a dizzying array of 'health' foods (mostly processed) & supplements (bad idea unless prescribed) & nature fads (recall AIMS doctors' caution against too much gilydamaging the liver). To stay thin and happy - an oxymoron for the gramps brigade - and slow ageing, abstainers face a problem of abundance. Some doctors can go to extremes, others can be rather indulgent when it comes to diet, so the sensible rather marry doctors' advice with sound instinct.

So, junk intermittent fasts? As of now, research speaks in one voice on intermittent fasting only for social media feeds. Restricting screen time to less than eight hours improves a lot of everything - physical flexibility, mental agility, attention span, appetite. As for food, annoying and seemingly impossible to follow as it can be, bottomline from the blue zones of healthy longevity nonnas to nanis, dadus and dadas is this: eat balanced, eat moderate, walk, don't skip too many meals, try to eat at the same time, focus on your food (respect), don't make a meal of snacks, restrict munchies, exercise, and in all caps, SLEEP. Raise a toast to that.

Bappa, Baap re!

More hurdles than auspicious beginnings

Bachi Karkaria



Revered Ganapati Bappa, Om Vighneshay Namah...

You are the Omniscent one, so you are already knowing why I am addressing you as the 'remover of obstacles'. How to think of 'auspicious beginnings' when my humble devotees face no end of vighna not just in daily life but even in getting your darshan. We are not talking of big-big pandals occupying whole pavement and much of road. Unholy people are complaining that these obstruct them from going about their business. Arre, bhau, what business you should have during these sacred 10 days, huh?

This Ganeshotsav Mumbaiers faced two special obstacles. The biggest was Shri Manoj Jarange's do-or-die hunger-strike demanding Kumbi OBC quota for Marathas. Hajar-hajar protestors came thundering in on trucks from Marathwada. They jammed fancy coastal road, Sealink and b'nness areas, threw lakh-lakh kg of rubbish on the street, even urinated right there. Hoi-hoi! How to keep pure during this filth? Till Sarkar succumbed, how devotee could move in standstill city.

Hurdle Number Do: Rain. Yes-yes, it's always there. It's still monsoon, not Pann, this year it did not stop only! How we could reach Lalbaugcha Raja, Siddhivinayak temple, GSI Seva Mandal's jewels covered idol when local trains were cancelled or delayed thanks to flooded tracks. Means, dubbi ghotala than usual! Waterlogging even in brand-new Metro station, Thangood, we weren't on stuck-in mid-air monorail; Meena-nausi's still shaking from scary car rescue. Just walking means new-new clothes getting splashed with mud from passing buses and monster cars not caring kamari about poor pedestrians. But what they also can do? No road; potholes only! Of course, woe minding! But us trying to tread halhi-hallu on slippery, broken pavements while avoiding hawkers, kacira dabbas etc.

Then, beloved Bappa, having struggled through crowded trains and buses, rains, kabaddi-playing protestors, having suffered dhakka-bukka, hungry, thirsty queue for six-seven hours, we, your fervent but humble devotees, got only a distant, hurried, herded darshan. The final obstacle was privilege. Netas, film stars, paid-slotwalks, sponsors... Ani, bhau, who is this new, influencer-windfaller VVIP cheez?

Alec Smart said, "Politicians play 'fast' and loose; progress loses."

Is AI A Bubble? Is A Bust Coming?

Flopshow GPT-5 & Nvidia's modest forecast have intensified worries that AI hype could go the way of dot-com bubble. Or AI stocks could see slower deflation as today's investors can withstand bigger losses

Atanu Biswas



After giving a tepid revenue forecast last week, Nvidia has seen four straight negative sessions up to Tuesday. It is still the latest stock in the world but it is also signalling downward momentum trends.

Actually, a recent MIT study, *GenAI Divide: State of AI in Business 2023*, has found 95% of corporate AI pilots failing to deliver rapid revenue acceleration. It's also pinpointed three unexciting elements making the remaining 5% successful. These are buying instead of building, executing within business units as opposed to central laboratories, and choosing tools that integrate with their existing business workflow.

Does the MIT research indicate that the so-called AI boom is actually a bubble that will soon burst? Even OpenAI CEO Sam Altman - instrumental in giving AI wings - used the term "bubble" in interviews ahead of the MIT findings being made public. In fact, he cautioned that some company valuations were "insane" and that the market might be overheating. "When bubbles happen, smart people get overexcited about a kernel of truth. Are we in a phase where investors as a whole are overexcited about AI? My opinion is yes," Altman said.

In recent months, there has been substantial debate on Wall Street regarding whether the present trajectory of the AI industry resembles what happened ahead of the massive dot-com bubble bursting 25 years ago.

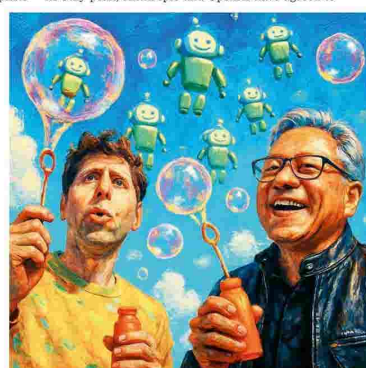
In a research paper in March, Goldman Sachs investment analysts, however, contended that "the technology sector is not in a bubble... because the price appreciation has been justified by strong profit fundamentals." The so-called Magnificent Seven companies - Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia and Tesla - were cited by the analysts for their earnings strength.

Tech-heavy Nasdaq index increased fivefold between 1995-2000, and the price-to-earnings ratio reached a record high of 150, which has not been achieved since. In contrast, in the five years before March 2023, Nasdaq nearly doubled, and the P/E ratio increased significantly, but it didn't go anywhere near three figures.

When OpenAI released GPT-5, which it had long predicted would usher in a revolution in AI technology, on August 7, perceptions of AI's unrelenting

march towards surpassing human intelligence and even becoming a threat to humanity came to a screeching halt. GPT-5 turned out to be a flop show. AI, which has mesmerised Wall Street and sparked cultic devotion throughout Silicon Valley ever since the debut of ChatGPT in Nov 2022, has suddenly looked fragile.

Also, CoreWeave, a cloud computing company backed by Nvidia, has dropped around 44% of its value since its July peak; Anthropic and OpenAI have agreed to



provide their products to US gov't for virtually nothing; and Meta has implemented a hiring freeze and is reportedly considering shrinking its AI division. Overall, we could be seeing the beginning of an AI winter.

Data centres, top engineers cost AI companies billions of dollars. Also, companies are being sued for the data they did scrape, and they are running out of "free" online data. Finally, users are growing weary of chatbots and image generators, and fierce competition is causing some product commoditisation. Consequently, investors are braced for a nosedive, according to Bloomberg, rather than merely a retreat.

In terms of next-big thing developments, history has a perfect record of upending parabolic rallies. And the current AI surge has definite similarities to the dot-com era too, whose echoes are becoming more noticeable as the Big Tech stock prices continue to increase and speculative IPOs resurface. Adding "com" to a company name in the late 1990s could instantly increase the value of stock. Adding the term "AI-powered" accomplishes the same goal today.

The Magnificent Seven stocks now account for over one-third of the S&P 500, and their recent rise has been fuelled by an extraordinary AI hype. As a comparison, the leading tech stocks from the late 1990s (Cisco, Dell, Intel, Lucent, Microsoft) made up 15% of the index at the height of the dot-com bubble in 2000. Risk is obviously increased by such concentration. When Nvidia alone is responsible for about 7% of the S&P 500's worth, it looks like an "AI money trap."

Compared to 2000, many believe that an even greater crash may be imminent today since the AI businesses and their stock prices are more exaggerated than those of the dot-com companies. There are structural differences, on the other hand, that are more favourable. Hundreds of companies vanished overnight after the dot-com bubble crashed in 2000 due to a lack of funding. In contrast, AI investors today perhaps are able to withstand losses that, 25 years ago, would have destroyed entire businesses. Thus, if a bubble is present, it may even deflate over years rather than burst in a violent crash. Nobody knows.

The expansion of AI was predicted to be exponential, but according to tech critic Alex Hanna, co-author of the 2025 book *The AI Con: How to Fight Big Tech's Hype and Create the Future We Want*, we're actually hitting a wall. GPT-5's gloomy fate is an alarm, indeed. Interestingly, Hanna thinks that "artificial intelligence" is not a scientific term or engineering term; it's just a marketing term.

Whether AI businesses turn out to be a long-lasting revolution or another dot-com-style disaster, what's significant right now is that Altman has sparked rumours about an AI bubble from within the tech press.

"Is AI the most important thing to happen in a very long time?" At the same time that he described it as a bubble, Altman stated, "My opinion is also yes." AI is obviously here to stay and flourish, crash or no crash.

The writer is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata

'Data must be credible & transparent...or it aids politics more than policy...internal migration is a good example of this'

Census categories on religion are mutually exclusive - is this a problem? Can EWIS quotas be implemented without knowing relevant numbers? What if the drive against 'illegals' do to internal migration? Should govt statistical authorities be answerable to Parliament? These and other questions, many of them making current headlines, are the forte of population scientist and demographer Ram P Bhargava, author of *Population & the Political Imagination: Census, Register & Citizenship in India*. He's former professor, International Institute for Population Sciences. Excerpts of a wide-ranging conversation with Nandita Sengupta:

● **Census work has begun. First thoughts?**
Colonial India used Census as an instrument of governance, not for development. Before that, there was no consciousness of minority or majority among India's many peoples. Census asked about religion. With it entered a consciousness among Indians of numbers. It was the colonial way of looking at people.

Contrast with US, where Census started in 1770s, but there were no questions on religion. US constitution does not allow questions on religion. In UK, question on religion was introduced only in 2001.

In India, social reality is that neighbourhoods have overlapping faiths. People visit temples & gurwaras, dargahs & churches. The question introduced a categorisation of mutual exclusivity, numerical exclusivity, creating new political imagination.

There can be an alternative design on the question of religion - multiple choice. Like in Japan, people report they are Shinto and Buddhist - multiple faiths and practice. We do not have similar overlaps in our categories and enumeration.

● **How does a count of people feed political imagination?**
Numbers are double-edged. We need numbers from the point of development, planning and social justice. But numbers floated without scientific basis, without fact, risk xenophobia. Who is using the numbers? Take Assam's NRC. A number of 4mn, 10mn was floated. The

final figure was closer to 1.9mn.

All aspects of a people's Census covers must be in public data should be totally transparent. A democracy must know all about its people without making distinctions. Politics of data can emerge from hiding of data.

At Independence, enumerating cast was discontinued but religion was retained. Fine. But from 1951 to 1961, what was not made public was education, occupation or literacy of religious groups. Only in 2001 was this data released. That's when we could first tell which communities were falling behind. It was said Muslim communities are backward, but where was the data before 2001 Census? Planners need good data - education, population growth, fertility rate, workforce structure, where people lived and worked etc.

● **Govts decide what data will be public.**
That's why statistical authority must be independent. UK's statistical authority is independent, autonomous, and reports to British parliament. That's how important integrity of data is.

In US, Census is part of the dept of commerce. Because it's a Business Census. How is market structure changing? Are there more older people or more children? US's census is a factor of the business of markets... in a Business-Democracy.

● **You argue the 'invention' of 'illegality' is denying migrants their right to mobility.**

Migrants are part of the labour market. India doesn't have international immigrants in large numbers like, say, the undocumented in US. But we have a very large number of internal migrants, who are formally citizens, but many of them do not have substantive citizenship in terms of citizens' rights.

Illegality in this context comes as deprivation and exclusion. Look at internal migrants' access - what are

their living conditions, where is their access to health-care or housing, right to education of children, let alone justice? Illegality takes the form of exclusion. An alleged illegal migrant in local perception could be anyone who crosses even a state border. They simply do not have substantive rights.

● **So, internal migrants too can be viewed differently?**
Imposition of illegality isn't confined to only international cross-border migration. What is happening to internal migrants who move within state or interstate? Documents don't matter. The scale of exclusion or prevention is important, to understand the rights of the internal migrant who is a citizen.

Where do migrants work? Construction, sanitation, security, tourism, transportation - cities cannot run without migrants. They build and expand and renovate our cities.

They're in the most difficult low-paid jobs - but excluded. There is no substantive citizenship for migrants, and understanding "illegality" shouldn't be confined to just "foreign workers".

● **But what about the foreign illegal migrants here?**

Their numbers may not be many. It is public perception, which is why data matters. For such illegal migrants, many police units. Local people are also there: panchayats, ward committees. State is in a position to know. It has mechanisms and apparatus to know the reality about illegal migrants.

We must avoid narratives without facts. These stories whip up emotion. It then becomes a political fight. Who suffers? Only poor people. That's why protection of the rights of all migrants becomes very important.

Calvin & Hobbes



Narayani Ganesh

The age of retirement at the workplace is being extended to beyond 58 and 60, to 65 and 70 in some countries or sectors, as the case may be. Lifespans are increasing with better quality of life, and medical advancements. Those who retire in their late fifties and early sixties, with healthy body and mind, are finding themselves at a loss. What do they do with the wealth of experience and knowledge they have? Not everyone can afford to work gratis; the cost of living keeps rising and the interest earned on savings gets diminished over time.

Janece Dunn, writing in the New York Times, points out that besides lifespan and health span, there is another 'span' that we need to take cognisance of, and that is joy span. If you live a long

life but do not enjoy it, what is the point, asks Kerry Burnight, former professor of geriatric medicine and gerontology at the University of California, who promotes the concept of joy span. Health problems and other challenges in your senior years do not have to equal suffering. "How we step up to those challenges can be the difference between thriving and suffering."

Can seniors keep their spirits up in the twilight of their lives, even if they face challenges and despite experiencing some ill health? It all depends on whether you can find creative ways to deal with issues. Burnight points out that keeping your curiosity alive, to want to explore new things, are all ways to be open to

new learnings. It is never too late to learn new skills like perhaps playing a musical instrument, learning a new language, story-telling or drawing and painting.

Another way to boost your spirit is to make a list of things that you think get better as you age. You could create affirmations that reinforce why you feel things are getting better and not necessarily worse. So what if you find it tiring to read a small print or do not have the energy to plough through a book? You can always listen to the audio version. However old you are, each one has something they can offer to others - your wisdom from life experiences, your expertise in your area of interest, your infinite fund of funny anecdotes, your patience and interest in

lending your ear to listen to someone's story and so on. This way you are not isolated, you will enjoy an active social life and feel useful, too.

Importantly, avoid the company of killjoys. Stay away from those who start their sentence with "But you are now too old to..." "Or: "You may die any moment, so why start a new thing now..." "Or: "You realise that when you were hospitalised, you almost died? Where are your documents, your keys, your passwords..." If you can, stay close to happy people who have no agendas; watch films that make you laugh or thrillers that you enjoy; listen to uplifting music, whether classical, rock and roll or K-pop if you will... You will soon see yourself feeling joy, and this will seed to your joy span.

Finding joy in your later years is not something unachievable. Go for it! ganeshnarayani@yahoo.com

Sacredspace

In a world that's become a desert, we were thirsty for comrades the taste of bread broken amongst comrades made us forget the values of war. But we don't need war to find the warmth that comes when walking together...towards the same goal.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Wind, Sand and Stars

Mission's next mode

Govt support for chips will remain crucial

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking this week to an audience from the semiconductor industry in New Delhi, said that India would capture a "major share" of the sector globally in the coming years. He was speaking in the context of the India Semiconductor Mission (ISM), which was approved by the Union Cabinet in December 2021. The second phase of the ISM is now being planned, and the government has said that it will focus on the development of a supportive ecosystem. The semiconductor mission has received subsidies from the government on a significantly larger scale than its other forms of support. It has also achieved some notable successes. Electronics & IT Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has pointed out, the pilot line of one project, owned largely by CG Power & Industrial Solutions but with significant technological input from Japan, is complete, and the first "made in India" chips have been presented to the Prime Minister.

Shifting to supporting the ecosystem in the second phase of the ISM, is, in some ways, a natural transformation. The initial budgetary outlay of ₹76,000 crore is hard to replicate on an ongoing basis, and hopefully the small and medium enterprises involved in the second phase will expect less assistance with their capital expenditure. The government will also have noted that location choices by many investors were determined in large part by the availability of an ecosystem. For example, both CG and Tata Electronics (together with Powerchip of Taiwan) have invested in plants close to the Dahaj chemicals cluster in Gujarat, which might assist in the provision of the nearly 250 precision gases required for chip production. The importance of a stable ecosystem was made clear by such choices, and thus it makes sense for the government to support it.

There are, however, some points that the government must keep in mind. To begin with, support must be strategic in nature. India cannot expect to localise the entire supply chain; it should focus on providing incentives to those specific aspects of the ecosystem in which foreign dependence, particularly on China, can be evaluated as a strategic risk. Equivalently important to such support is a predictable foreign-trade policy, which can assure investors that supply chains will not be interrupted by New Delhi even if other geopolitical issues might intervene. Such predictability costs nothing, and should be seen as a key part of the semiconductor mission. The government should also raise its level of ambition when it comes to timelines. It took 18 months between the Cabinet approving the funds and the first project being cleared. In comparison, Israel took only six months to clear \$3.2 billion for Intel in 2023, and viewed this as being excessively long.

The first grant under the United States' CHIPS (Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors) Act was handed out to BAE Systems only a few months after the law passed. Japan's Rapidus Initiative gave its money out in just over six months. Given that ecosystem support in the second phase is to support choices being made with first-phase money, it should be completed along a swifter time scale. International comparison also highlights certain specificities about Indian support that may have shaped the decision to focus on domestic companies. The ISM's *pari passu* support of capital expenditure differs from the grants and loan guarantees, often early and one-time disbursements, used elsewhere. The latter are more likely to lure top-end manufacturers like TSMC and others because they minimise risk and investors see them as ensuring sustained non-monetary support, including on regulations. This too should be reviewed for effectiveness in the second phase.

Invisible killer

India must aim to match WHO air-quality standards

A new study by the Energy Policy Institute (EPI) at the University of Chicago has confirmed what millions of Indians feel every day — the air they breathe is silently cutting their lives short. Far from being a problem confined to the smog-choked skies of Delhi and northwestern India, the effects of air pollution are being felt across the country. On average, Indians are losing 3.5 years of life expectancy to particulate pollution, which has a far greater impact than malnutrition, tobacco use, or unsafe water and sanitation. The numbers highlighted in the report are grim. In 2023, India's average annual concentration of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) stood at 41 µg/cubic metre (1 µg is one-thousandth of a milligram) — more than eight times the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s recommended limit of 5 µg/cubic metre, and even marginally higher than India's own weaker standard of 40 µg/cubic metre.

The human cost is staggering. If India were to bring its pollution levels down to WHO norms, life expectancy will increase for everyone. In Delhi, which is now the global poster child for polluted cities, the potential gain rises to 8.2 years. In the northern plains, home to over half a billion people, residents could add five years to their lives if clean air became the norm. Outside North India, states such as Chhattisgarh, Tripura, and Jharkhand also report some of the country's highest particulate concentrations, cutting short lives by an estimated 3.7 years. Clearly, bad air is now a nationwide emergency. Emission from neighbouring South Asian countries is also drifting across borders, worsening conditions in India.

To its credit, the government has been working in this area. The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), launched in 2019, set ambitious goals of reducing PM_{2.5} levels by 20-30 per cent from 2017 levels by 2024. In 2022, this was revised upward to a 40 per cent reduction by 2026 across 131 "non-attainment" cities. Some progress is visible. As of 2023, particulate pollution in these cities has declined by 10.7 per cent, adding six months to the lives of nearly 445 million people. Fuel standards have also improved from Bharat Stage-IV to Bharat Stage-VI, and as many as 22 cities now meet India's national standards. However, these standards remain far more lenient than WHO guidelines, and the gap in ambition translates directly into lives lost.

China, on the other hand, provides a telling contrast. Within a decade of determined policy action, Beijing reduced pollution levels by nearly 40 per cent. India's challenge is larger, but the lesson is clear. Incremental steps alone will not suffice. The transition to clean energy must be accelerated, whether through programmes like PM Surya Ghar for rooftop solar, PM KUSUM for clean farm energy, or stronger incentives for electric vehicles. Tackling stubble burning requires more than seasonal crackdowns; it calls for crop diversification, investment in waste-to-energy plants, and accessible alternatives for farmers. The EPI report comes just months before the annual pollution season grips northern India again. If the past is any guide, air purifiers will hum in urban homes and masks will reappear. The evidence is clear. Air pollution is not a seasonal affliction. It is a year-round, nationwide crisis that is silently robbing Indians of years of life.



Trump's geoeconomic quake hits India

Hope it jumpstarts badly needed second-generation reforms

The gradual improvement in India-United States relations that began with President George W Bush and was deepened by every US President since then has been upended. India is no longer seen by Donald Trump as a strategic partner in the geopolitical context with China. Mr Trump's punishing 50 per cent tariffs and repeated insults have pushed India closer to China. The Indian Prime Minister attended the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation meeting this week after a seven-year hiatus and was welcomed by Chinese President Xi Jinping — something that would have seemed very unlikely just a few weeks ago.

The US will eventually realise that India cannot be bullied, but things may get much worse before they get better. Mr Trump is urging the European Union (EU) to impose sanctions on India. Restrictions on H-1B and student visas are on the anvil, and Mr Trump has just scuttled a Quad meeting that was to be hosted by India later this year — a grouping he had resurrected during his first term to counter China. China emerges as the big winner from all of this.

US Treasury Secretary Bessent believes that a bilateral trade agreement (BTA) with India is still possible. However, Mr Trump may not allow it. According to him, India has even offered zero tariffs on some items — but that's its too late. Personal reasons have also been cited for the rupture, including Mr Trump's reported pique over India's failure to acknowledge his role in the ceasefire with Pakistan, which he considers a Nobel-worthy achievement.

Mr Trump keeps hammering India's trade surplus with the US, but when you factor in what Indians spend on education at American universities (roughly \$25 billion a year), royalties, defence purchases, and e-commerce revenues, India actually runs an overall balance of payments deficit with the US. An appellate court in the US has ruled Mr Trump's tariffs illegal, but the case is expected to end up in the US Supreme Court — which generally rules in his favour.

Two liquids — oil and milk — have been blamed for the delay in the BTA. Mr Trump's extra tariffs on

India's purchase of Russian oil make little sense, especially considering he just gave a red-carpet welcome to Putin in Alaska, and both the US and EU continue to buy gas, fertilisers, uranium, and palladium from Russia. India, China, and Türkiye have absorbed most of the crude that the EU and US stopped buying from Russia — without which global oil prices would have spiked. So why single out India? (see chart).

The US must also get reasonable on agricultural products — especially milk. If the US provides huge production subsidies, which then force its milk producers to dump milk in global markets, it's unreasonable to expect India to allow such imports. Doing so would severely affect the livelihoods of 80-100 million people engaged in livestock farming alone in the country. Mr Trump's actions, including singling out Brazil and South Africa unfairly with very high tariffs, have pumped new life into the Brics grouping. Now India and China are looking for ways to strengthen the group as they each chair the Brics+ meetings in 2026 and 2027. How long this bonhomie lasts, of course, given the border dispute and China's desire to be pre-eminent in Asia, remains to be seen. The famous American political scientist, John Mearns, says past US policies brought Russia and China closer, and now Mr Trump's actions may push India into that bloc — or at least much closer to it.

While the Brics may offer India some geopolitical benefit, its economic benefits are small for now. The Brics+ group, with a gross domestic product or GDP of \$22 trillion (27 per cent of global GDP), does not offer the same market as the G7, with a GDP of over \$50 trillion (45 per cent of global GDP). Moreover, of the combined GDP of the Brics+, about \$20 trillion comes from China, a market where India's exports struggle and are unlikely to rise substantially. India's path to prosperity lies in increasing exports to, and attracting technology from, the G7 countries. A trade agreement with the US and the EU is vital for that. Without it, India will not only lose its largest export market but also miss out on new investments in a China+1 world, which will

IF TRUTH BE TOLD
AJAY CHHIBBER

Mr Trump's actions may push India into that bloc — or at least much closer to it.

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India's strategic reset in Tianjin

The 2025 Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Summit in Tianjin turned out to be the largest gathering in the institution's history, convening 20 foreign leaders and 10 heads of international organisations, including United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. More than a display of institutional breadth, the summit served as a stage for geopolitical signalling. Most visibly through the joint presence of the leaders of China, India, and Russia. Their highly choreographed meetings were designed for maximum optics and deployed as deliberate instruments of international messaging, reflecting the emergence of a multipolar world.

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, the summit provided an opportunity to engage closely with both India and China while demonstrating that Moscow is not bereft of partners. Chinese President Xi Jinping aimed to use the occasion to burnish his credentials as the architect of an emergent political and economic order. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, conveyed a distinct and calculated message — that India's foreign policy is rebalancing its strategic relations with the world's major powers and restoring its posture to the centre. In doing so, New Delhi is translating its long-proclaimed doctrine of multi-alignment into practice, positioning itself as a pivotal actor in an increasingly multipolar system.

Strategic leverage: Since the end of the Cold War, India's foreign policy has been adjusting by building its ties with the West in general and the US in particular. To illustrate in just one domain, New Delhi has purchased an array of advanced US systems, including C-17 and C-130 strategic airlift aircraft, P-8 maritime patrol planes, Chinook, Apache, and MH-60R helicopters, F404/414 engines, and MQ-9 drones, transactions that together totalled \$24 billion between 2000 and 2024. This surge in US acquisitions has coincided with a marked decline in Russian influence. Moscow's share of India's arms imports fell from 76

per cent during 2009-2013 to just 36 per cent over the past five years.

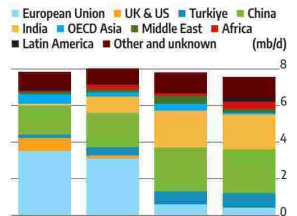
India's pivot towards the US, and its rapid defence and economic diversification have kept Beijing on edge. During the Cold War, China extracted substantial strategic and economic benefits while playing a swing-state role between Washington and Moscow. Today, Chinese observers worry that India may play a similar role as its vaunted strategic autonomy has given way to a de facto US alignment, visible in defence procurement, economic cooperation, and a network of mini-laterals aimed at constraining Beijing. However, this narrative has softened somewhat after President Trump imposed a 50 per cent tariff on Indian exports, introducing a note of friction into the US-India equation.

Against this backdrop, New Delhi and Beijing, cautiously engaging since the 2024 Kazan Summit, have stepped up their rapprochement efforts. At their bilateral meeting in Tianjin, both sides signalled a clear desire to restore stability and predictability. The focus on peace along the border and rebuilding mutual trust was unmistakable. Mr Xi emphasised strengthened communication, expanded exchanges, and

multilateral cooperation, all aimed at returning bilateral relations to a pre-2020 baseline. Mr Modi, visiting China after seven years, framed a peaceful border as essential to the smooth development of the broader relationship. He also ensured that counterterrorism remained front and centre at the SCO, with the final Tianjin Declaration explicitly and emphatically condemning the Pahalgam terror attack in India.

Structural tension vs strategic triangulation: Beneath the polished optics, the India-China standoff remains unresolved. Around 60,000 troops on each side still face off along the Line of Actual Control, and Tianjin offered no concrete road map for demilitarisation or border delimitation. Disputes over Pakistan, Tibet, and Taiwan persist, a reminder that diplomacy cannot paper over deep strategic fissures.

Russian crude oil exports by destination



Source: IEA Average Russian oil exports by country and region, 2021-2024

now flow even more to Mexico, Vietnam, and other countries where tariffs into the US market are lower. India can cushion some of the immediate impact of a 50 per cent tariff on exports by allowing the rupee to depreciate against the US dollar, especially as inflation is running low. Providing tax refunds and loan forbearance to exporters to the US, and eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers on their required inputs, will also help. A very important aspect of the wakeup call is the need to intensify domestic reforms to reduce the cost of doing business. The much overdue but now accelerated GST reform — to reduce the number of rates and lower them — is very welcome. Bring fuel into the GST fold to lower fuel prices in India, which remain above our main competitors — despite access to cheaper Russian crude. The cross-subsidisation of electricity and rail freight, which add to the cost of doing business, must also be reduced. And once more, freeing up the labour market by removing the Industrial Disputes Act, adopting a more rational land-use policy, and reducing high banking margins should be a priority. A trade deal with the EU and efforts to join other trade groupings like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a well-planned drive to attract tourism where India underperforms hugely, will also show that India is open and ready to engage.

Albert Einstein said, "In the midst of every crisis, lies great opportunity." India must keep trade negotiations with the US open — without giving up its vital interests. The rich and supposedly influential Indian American lobby in the US should also be mobilised to inject more sense into US policy towards India. But Trump's geoeconomic quake may well turn out to be the shock that forced India into its much-awaited and badly needed second-generation reforms that propelled it forward. In the end, if India is stronger at home, geoeconomics will also saving its way.

The author is a distinguished visiting scholar, Institute for International Economic Policy, George Washington University. His book *Unpacking India* (HarperCollins India) was declared the best new book in economics in 2022 by the *Financial Times*, UK

Why AAP fell



MOHUA CHATTERJEE

The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) is an unfolding story in our contemporary political history. Whether the party, launched in 2012 by Arvind Kejriwal and his associates with robust ground support, survives the political upheaval of time or fades away as a euphoric episode in India's colourful political canvas is the question that not just political observers but AAP members are looking to answer. The *Aam Aadmi Party: The Untold Story of a Political Uprising and its Undoing*, by Savant Ghosh, comes at

this crucial juncture in 2025. Delhi's own party, the only one so far, soared to the heights in 13 years, wiping out all opposition to make a three-term chief minister and then went down to the Bharatiya Janata Party earlier this year.

With Mr Kejriwal himself defeated at the hustings, the party sitting in opposition in Delhi and having installed a common man chief minister, Bhagwant Mann, in Punjab, this book comes up with well-researched insight needed to address the AAP's existential questions.

To look at where the AAP is headed, it is important to study the party's building blocks. While it was born out of activism — against corruption and failed delivery systems — it was a lack of ideology that seems to have derailed it. The writer's perspective has perfect clarity on this basic trend.

Mr Ghosh's detailed account has documented the journey from its India

Against Corruption (IAC) days, to government formation, from winning over Delhi's cosmopolitan middle class and the underprivileged, to delivering on education, health and social empowerment of women that caught the fancy of voters and the political class. The writer's ability to unravel every question with journalistic skill and analyse it with academic depth makes this book a readable experience for students of politics. Having covered AAP as a journalist, worked at the Delhi secretariat during Mr Kejriwal's tenure, and then moved on to academics seems to have helped Mr Ghosh maintain his objectivity.

The ambiguity on the role of the Rashtriya Swamivatsav Sangh (RSS) in the IAC movement and with setting up of AAP has been addressed in detail. Yes, the RSS played an important part. Mr Kejriwal himself kept the communication alive. The RSS factor was behind many of the civil society activists falling out with Mr Kejriwal and quitting the party. The IAC's initial and extensive

collaboration with RSS-linked organisations such as Vivekananda International Foundation to Sangh ideologues like K. Govindacharya, played an active part in mobilising the masses in Delhi for the anti-corruption agitation against the Manmohan Singh government back in 2011, though they were not present in the decision-making forum of the IAC, says Mr Ghosh. He writes that "AAP members, despite knowing the reality, have always been tight-lipped about the involvement of the RSS... more importantly the closeness of Kejriwal and the Sangh." Elaborating on how Mr Kejriwal and his party designed the AAP's focus on improving delivery systems, the targeted "welfare oriented governance model" for the underprivileged and the middle class, transcending beyond caste factors, the book brings out the essence of the



The Aam Aadmi Party: The Untold Story of a Political Uprising and its Undoing
by Savant Ghosh
Published by Juggernaut
352 pages ₹499

Assessing how the Kejriwal government failed to deliver on its promises to its citizens or core voters.

Ghosh tells you why Muslim voters moved out. The "soft Hindutva" stand grew to high-pitched Hindutva, to counter the BJP's Hindutva plank. The party line shifted from its hallmarks of honesty and transparency, moving from

success of the party of activists. The book also delves deep into the reason for its fall, with the forsaking of ideals and its transformation into a single-leader party. The fall of the party "serves as a stark reminder of why honesty, fairness and transparency struggle to survive in Indian politics. The story of AAP's transformation — from movement of idealists to party driven by the ambitions of a single leader — is a cautionary tale for all who seek to bring about political change," Mr Ghosh sums up.

Assessing how the Kejriwal government failed to deliver on its promises to its citizens or core voters. Ghosh tells you why Muslim voters moved out. The "soft Hindutva" stand grew to high-pitched Hindutva, to counter the BJP's Hindutva plank. The party line shifted from its hallmarks of honesty and transparency, moving from

centrist to a right-of-centre position. That saw Mr Kejriwal become a silent beneficiary of the Shastriji Bhagat protest against the Citizens Amendment Act and to the East Delhi riots. Finally, he moved on to reciting the Hanuman Chalisa and bringing up the Rohingya "threat" during his poll campaign.

Mr Ghosh maps Mr Kejriwal's national ambitions and acceptability outside of Delhi, the equations with other parties, including Mr Kejriwal, who are looking at fixing the holes, if the party has to rise like a Phoenix from its present crisis.

The reviewer is a senior journalist who has been covering national politics for over 30 years

The Tribune

ESTABLISHED IN 1881

Denial of bail

High courts can take a cue from SC in UAPA cases

THE denial of bail to nine persons, including student activists Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam, in a case under UAPA (Unlawful Activities Prevention Act) has triggered a debate about the significance of personal liberty, long incarceration and an inordinately delayed trial. According to the Delhi High Court, these factors are not 'universally applicable' with regard to bail applications. Khalid and the others are accused of involvement in the 'larger conspiracy' of the 2020 Delhi riots; they have been behind bars for the past five years. The Delhi Police have alleged that Khalid and Imam delivered inflammatory speeches to incite and mobilise members of their community. The HC is convinced that the duo's role in the conspiracy is prima facie grave. However, the apprehension that the accused, if released on bail, could threaten the safety of victims/witnesses and their families, besides society at large, does not seem to hold water.

Just a year ago, the Supreme Court had asserted that "bail is the rule and jail is the exception" even for a case registered under a stringent law like UAPA. The court had stated that refusing bail to a deserving person merely on the ground that the allegations were very serious would be a violation of his/her fundamental right to life and liberty. High courts should treat these observations as a guiding light in the best interests of justice.

Another factor that cannot be overlooked is the poor track record of law enforcement agencies in securing convictions under UAPA. Over the past decade or so, acquittals have usually been far higher than the convictions. The tragic case of GN Saibaba sums up the sorry state of affairs. The former Delhi University professor spent a decade behind bars in a UAPA case; he died in October last year — months after being acquitted. The key is to expedite the trial and preferably grant bail with strict conditions. Steps to prevent misuse of bail can act as a potent deterrent.

Selfless service

Govt-civil society synergy can expedite relief

WHEN calamity strikes, it is often Punjab who rush to the frontlines. The current floods in the state, which have left more than three lakh people affected and farmland submerged across 23 districts, once again revealed the instinctive solidarity of the people. Long before official convoys arrived, villagers launched boats into raging waters, rescuing neighbours, children and livestock. *Langar* kitchens were lit, makeshift shelters set up and rations shared without hesitation. This spirit is not new. Punjab has earned a reputation as "first responders" not only in their own land but in disaster zones across the world — from earthquakes in Turkey to floods in Kerala. Organisations such as Khalsa Aid, United Sikhs, Hemkunt Foundation and countless local gurdwaras mobilised swiftly this year, delivering food, water, medicine and fodder. Volunteers in Gurdaspur and Kapurthala waded through waist-deep water to evacuate the vulnerable, while veterinary teams cared for stranded cattle in rural areas.

Financial help is also flowing in, with NGOs, philanthropists, and even artists pledging to support families in rebuilding. A Punjabi celebrity has promised assistance for 200 homes, underlining how cultural figures are stepping in alongside community groups to restore dignity after devastation. To their credit, the state and Central agencies — the NDRF, the SDRF, Army, Air Force — have deployed boats, helicopters and relief camps. Yet, the most striking images remain of villagers turning tractor trolleys into lifeboats and diaspora groups wiring funds overnight.

This culture of *sewa* — selfless service — has been tested time and again. But recovery cannot rest on goodwill alone. Punjab now needs faster compensation, transparent crop assessments and coordinated rebuilding of homes and fields. If government systems and civil society harness their energies together, Punjab's resilience can turn this flood into not only a story of survival but of renewal.

ON THIS DAY...100 YEARS AGO

The Tribune.

LAHORE, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1925

Sikh prisoners

THE debate that took place in the Legislative Assembly on Tuesday over the motion for the passage of the Gurdwara Bill was notable chiefly for what the Home Member called "a moving appeal" made by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya for the release of Sikh prisoners, and the Home Member's own reply to that appeal. The Pandit was evidently in his best form. After recording his hearty support to the Bill and congratulating the Government of India, the Punjab Government and particularly Sir Malcolm Hailey on their acceptance of the principle underlying the Sikh demands, he reminded the House that only one thing now remained to complete the process, and that was the release of the Sikh prisoners. Here, again, the position had been rendered much easier by the fact that the Sikh leaders in the Lahore jail had unanimously accepted the Gurdwara Act, despite its shortcomings, and had advised the Panth to work for it wholeheartedly. By doing this, said the speaker, the Sikh leaders — and it was they who really mattered — had met the substantial part of the Government's demand for an undertaking, and the Government should not insist on the humiliating terms laid down by it being accepted by the prisoners. They had definitely declared that they would not purchase their release on that condition; and so long as they remained in prison, the peaceful atmosphere that was necessary for the success of the Act could not clearly be found. This eloquent appeal was supported by MA Jinnah, who said that he was sure the Government did not want to humiliate the Sikhs and that, therefore, it was not desirable to insist on the pledge.

Wake-up call on the climate front

There is a need to thoroughly review the Environmental Impact Assessment regime

DINESH C SHARMA
SCIENCE COMMENTATOR

THE southwest monsoon has wrought havoc in many parts of the country. The monsoon rainfall so far has been above normal, and several extreme weather events have been reported. The hill states (UT — Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir — are the worst hit, along with Punjab, Rajasthan and parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Many cities and rural areas in southern states, too, have recorded heavy rainfall.

The loss of human life due to cloudbursts, flooding, landslides and mudslides is huge. So is the loss of private property and public infrastructure. The heavy rainfall has resulted in bridges collapsing, bunds giving way, even newly built national highways getting washed away, and hydel projects reporting severe damage. Vital transport links have been disrupted, and the crop loss is set to be massive.

The ordeal has not ended. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has predicted that the trend would continue. The monthly average rainfall across the country in September is most likely to be above normal. Most parts of the country are likely to receive normal to above-normal rainfall, posing risks like flooding, landslides, surface transport disruptions, public health challenges and ecological damage.

It is scientifically established that the Indian monsoon has been affected by climate change. Several studies have pointed out that the frequency and intensity of heavy rainfall events have increased since the 1950s over most land areas, and that human-induced climate change



CATASTROPHIC: The changing monsoon patterns are linked to climate change. PTI

is likely the main driver of this increase. A synthesis of these findings has been reported in the periodic assessments issued by the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC).

Experts attribute the increased intensity of the monsoon to stronger atmospheric moisture build-up over the Indian Ocean, which, in turn, is triggered by higher evaporation due to higher sea surface temperatures, as well as an increased land-sea thermal contrast. The increased level of atmospheric moisture causes a larger moisture flux and higher precipitation as the summer monsoon moves from the southwest to the east, carrying moisture from the ocean in large rain clouds. It means that the changing monsoon patterns being witnessed are likely to larger climate change.

So, should we simply blame climate change for whatever is happening and continue with 'business as usual' with our public policies relating to environment, urban planning, development, water resources, agriculture, and so on? Not at all. First, climate change itself — as defined by the IPCC — is an anthropogenic or man-made phenomenon. For instance, if one of the key drivers of the monsoon — land-sea tem-

The environment ministry must develop a robust climate audit framework.

perature difference during summers — is changing, it is due to excessive greenhouse gas emissions resulting from human activity. Second, while extreme weather events (incessant rainfall in monsoon and extreme heat in summer) are going up due to climate change, their impacts (flooding, loss of human life, damage to infrastructure, etc.) are getting aggravated due to wrong public policies (concretisation, encroachment of riverbeds, destruction of hills, deforestation, etc.).

The solution lies in addressing climate change and faulty developmental policies simultaneously. First, we need to make all our public policies compliant with climate change. For decades, we have been saying this, but we see little action on the ground. The progress made under the nation-

al and state climate change action plans is limited to the promotion of renewable sources of energy.

Instead of focusing on a few sectors like energy or transport, the need is to mainstream climate change concerns in all public policies. For instance, while proposing or constructing a hydropower plant or a new highway or a tunneling project in the hills, we should take into account not just immediate environmental concerns but also present and future risks arising due to climate change. The same applies to developmental projects in the plains where urban flooding has become a regular occurrence due to mindless concretisation, destruction of lakes and water bodies.

Second, we should thoroughly review the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) regime. Over the years, it has been diluted, and clever ways have been devised to either circumvent its mandatory provisions or do away with it altogether. The most glaring example is the Char Dham highway project. The government agencies concerned avoided a comprehensive EIA by dividing the 825 km project into 53 smaller parts, each less than 100 km long. This way, they could avoid environmental scrutiny

since the EIA is mandatory only for road projects exceeding 100 km. Such segmentation of a large project to bypass environmental regulations was highlighted by environmentalists and raised in the Supreme Court-appointed committee. In some cases, environmental clearance was granted ex post facto to regularise projects initiated without EIA clearance. The apex court struck down the practice as illegal in May.

The disastrous results of willfully ignoring ecological risks involved in large developmental projects and violation of EIA terms, particularly in the Himalayas, are visible now. Therefore, we not only need to revisit the EIA regime to make it more stringent but also incorporate climate change risks that may arise during the lifecycle of a project and ways to mitigate them. Projects can be designed to better withstand future climate conditions, reducing potential damage and disruption. For monitoring compliance, an independent mechanism should be developed.

Third, we need to conduct a 'climate audit' of all existing infrastructure — hydel projects, national highways, road and railway bridges, airports — not from a financial perspective but to check if it is climate-resilient. This is more urgently required for the infrastructure built before the EIA system kicked in. For projects which have received the green nod, the check should be about compliance with the conditions mandated at the time of their clearance.

Following the audit, necessary retrofitting measures should be initiated to make vital infrastructure climate-proof. As a first step, the environment ministry must develop a robust climate audit framework and requisite standards, protocols and tools for assessing whether existing infrastructure can withstand a changing climate. Then, a concerted, multi-sectoral national effort should be launched. The 2025 monsoon is yet another wake-up call.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

We need an exit ramp off the highway to climate hell. — António Guterres

Gurus who never cease to inspire

RK SABOO

INDIA's second President, Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, always regarded himself as a teacher. His life was a testament to the enduring values of knowledge, truth and character. The guru has taken many forms in my life. My wife and I are privileged to have met remarkable people who embodied the essence of teaching — not only through words, but by the example of their lives. In 2008, at the silver jubilee function of Bhawan Vidyalaya, Chandigarh, the 'Missile Man of India', Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, told students: "Education is the most powerful tool to develop a great citizen and a great nation." His dream-driven philosophy will continue to inspire generations. His demise in 2015, soon after expressing his wish to revisit our school, left behind a poignant silence and a blazing legacy of inspiration.

In 2010, I travelled to Santiniketan, where Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore created an educational vision far ahead of its time. Established in 1901 in the Gurmukhi tradition, Santiniketan grew into Visva-Bharati University in 1921, symbolising universalism, humanism and cultural exchange. I also visited the Rabindra Bhavan Museum, where Tagore's manuscripts, letters and paintings are preserved. To quote Tagore, "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence."

Among my most cherished memories is a meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1944 at Sodepur Ashram near Calcutta. I was just a child, and the experience left a lasting impression on me. In 2016, during our annual Rotary Retreat at Ahmedabad, my wife and I visited Sahasrmati Ashram, where one could almost feel the Mahatma's presence. The ashram has preserved Gandhi's spectacles, walking stick, sandals, utensils, spinning wheel, writing desk, letters and documents, along with photographs and manuscripts related to the freedom movement. It is truly a living classroom of satyagraha, truth and simplicity.

During our visit to South Africa in 2017, my wife and I went to Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. We saw the tiny, dark cell where he spent 18 years, with no visitors allowed except once for 30 minutes in a whole year. We took a tour of the Robben Island Museum and saw the Lime Quarry, the church which the prisoners visited every Sunday, the courtyard and the small garden tended by Mandela. His words still resound across the globe: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

These experiences have reinforced a truth that transcends time: teachers are not confined to classrooms. They are present wherever values, courage and knowledge are shared.

Teachers' Day is, therefore, more than a tribute to individuals. It is a celebration of the eternal spirit of the guru. Let's remember these lines which compare the guru with the divine trinity: "Guru Brahma, Guru Vishnu, Guru Devo Maheshwara; Guru Sakshat Parabrahma, Tasmai Shri Gurave Namah."

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Undermining basic tenets of justice

Refer to news report '5 yrs in jail, Umar, Sharjeel bail pleas junked'; it is deeply concerning that the accused have spent nearly five years in jail while their trial has not yet begun. Denying bail under such circumstances goes against the fundamental principle that bail is the rule, jail is the exception. The prolonged incarceration without commencement of trial amounts to punishment before conviction. This undermines both the presumption of innocence and the very spirit of our Constitution which guarantees liberty. Our courts must ensure that constitutional safeguards are not reduced to empty words. Such legal decisions erode faith in the fairness of the judicial process.

NARESH KUMAR NUHAWAN, KARNAL

Towards self-reliance

Refer to 'Chip hopes'; the ongoing Semicon India-2025 conference highlights the country's growing ambition to become a major force in the global semiconductor industry. International and domestic companies are beginning to view India as a reliable and competitive base for this high-tech sector. The vision of chips made and designed in India reflects both self-reliance and global integration. Semiconductors are at the heart of modern technology and India's emergence in this space will have a multiplier effect on employment, exports and digital leadership.

VANDANA, CHANDIGARH

India's semiconductor leap

Refer to 'Chip hopes'; ISRO's pathbreaking success in producing India's first fully indigenous 32-bit microprocessor, enough to run devices smoothly, is remarkable. Chips, the brain of modern electronics, open vast opportunities for the country. However, India's share in the \$600-billion global chip industry is modest, at around 8%, while Taiwan and other nations are calling the shots. Even as \$18 billion has been invested in projects, India must bolster R&D, ease business and reduce dependence on Chinese imports. Japanese investments and India's strong base of engineers could ensure that it secures a major place in the global chip industry.

AMARJEET MANN, UNA

'Vikram' heralds a new dawn

In a world where silicon writes destinies, India has struck its first resolute chord with 'Vikram', its first fully indigenous 32-bit microprocessor. AI-driven recognition, biomedical sensing and energy harvesting will herald a nascent silicon renaissance. Yet the distance between ambition and authority is vast. India imports over 90% of its semiconductor chips, even as domestic demand nips toward \$110 billion by 2030. Vikram is a dawn, not a destination. India must weave vision, industrial scale, R&D and mastery of design into a seamless tapestry, or risk remaining a silent observer as the silicon century unfolds elsewhere.

VIJAY SINGH ADHIKARI, NAINITAL

Ensure contract parity too

Refer to 'Level playing field'; the ICC's landmark announcement on pay parity in World Cup prize money is welcome, but one cannot ignore the glaring gap that persists in annual retainerships. Boards often find novel ways to save money, and in women's cricket, this is most evident in the absence of an A+ category. While male cricketers in the A+ bracket earn Rs 7 crore a year, women's top-tier contracts stand capped at just Rs 50 lakh. Even men in the A category receive Rs 5 crore — 10 times more than what women cricketers get. This disparity undermines the very spirit of equality the ICC has championed. Prize money reforms, though symbolic, risk becoming cosmetic if not backed by structural changes in central contracts. India, which took a bold step by introducing equal match fees, must now ensure contract parity too.

HARSH PAWARIA, ROHTAK

Take action against violators

Apropos of 'Toxic sludge spills on to lanes, houses in Ludhiana'; the Buddha Nullah mess has again exposed the failure of the administration and the pollution control board to implement remedial measures suggested and mandated by the NGT and the High Court. Bureaucratic inaction and political impediments have paralysed enforcement. Citizens are being exposed to grave health hazards while officials escape accountability. Nothing short of criminal action against negligent officials and industrial violators will restore public confidence.

AMARJIT SINGH, MOHALI

Why ISRO's Vikram 3201 is a game-changer



TV VENKATESWARAN
VISITING PROFESSOR,
IISER, MOHALI

WHAT makes Vikram 3201, India's first indigenously designed and built 32-bit processor, powerful and a game-changer?

While it may not power next-generation laptops, smartphones or high-performance gaming PCs, the Vikram 3201 chip, recently presented to Prime Minister Modi at Semicon India 2025, is slated to be a core component of the electronics for India's upcoming ambitious space missions, including the next journey to the Moon and the Gaganyaan human spaceflight mission to low-Earth orbit.

Designed by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and manufactured by the Mohali-based Semi-Conductor Laboratory (SCL), the Vikram 3201 processor, named after India's space architect, Vikram Sarabhai, was successfully flight-tested aboard the PSLV-C60 mission launched on December 30, 2024, which undertook India's Space Docking Experiment (SpaDeX) technology. This advanced processor will replace Vikram 1601, a 16-bit processor used in its avionics since 2009, with this new-generation, indigenously made processor.

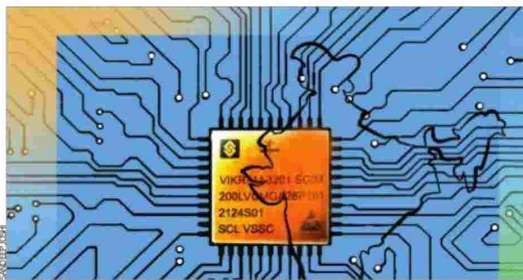
A surface-level comparison of the Vikram 3201 processor to those used in modern smartphones might prompt questions about the significance of this development. On a purely technical specification sheet, Vikram 3201's parameters do not match those of commercial electronics found in personal laptops and phones.

For instance, Vikram 3201 is a 32-bit processor while most recent laptops are equipped with 64-bit processors. In simple terms, a 32-bit system is designed to access 2³² memory addresses, allowing it to work with up to 4 GB of RAM at a time. In contrast, a 64-bit processor can access a vastly larger number of addresses (2⁶⁴), enabling it to support over 8 GB or even 16 GB of RAM. In a direct comparison for consumer tasks, a modern 64-bit processor would undoubtedly outperform a 32-bit one.

Furthermore, Vikram 3201 is fabricated on a 180-nm process, a technology that was prevalent from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. In contrast, even an inexpensive modern laptop, such as the one with an 11th-generation Intel Core i5 processor, is built on a significantly more advanced 10-nm process.

The term 'nm', or nanometre, refers to one billionth of a metre. In the context of chip manufacturing, it refers to the process node, which relates to the size and density of transistors on a silicon chip. A smaller 'nm' value allows for more transistors to be packed into the same physical area.

This increased density offers many advantages: electrons have shorter distances



ADVANCEMENT: It is slated to be a core component of electronics for India's upcoming space missions.

to travel, resulting in higher computational speeds and faster switching rates. Smaller transistors also require less power to function, leading to improved energy efficiency and longer battery life in portable devices.

Additionally, a smaller process node allows for a more compact chip design, aiding in the miniaturisation of devices like smartphones. The most cutting-edge technology available today has reached 3-nm and 2-nm processes, which are designed to deliver the highest performance per watt.

However, the requirements of space electronics differ fundamentally from those of smartphones. These systems must function reliably under the exceptionally harsh conditions of space, including extreme temperature variations, significant radiation and intense vibrations and acoustic shocks during launch.

Without the insulation of Earth's atmosphere, cosmic rays and solar wind, compris-

Vikram 3201 is also expected to find valuable applications in other strategic and industrial sectors.

ing high-energy charged particles, bombard electronics incessantly. In these devices, the zeros and ones of digital data are stored as charged and uncharged states within transistors. A charged particle from a cosmic ray can strike a transistor and flip this state, turning a 0 into a 1 or vice versa. This phenomenon is known as a Single-Event Upset (SEU), a tiny, random change that can alter the digital 'score' in a spacecraft's computer.

Critically, SEUs are more likely to occur in modern, smaller nanometre chips. As transistors shrink, each one holds less electrical charge, making it more vulnerable to having its state flipped by a single particle strike. This is precisely why the older 180-nm CMOS technology used in the Vikram processor was chosen for space applications.

These larger transistors offer inherent radiation tolerance, making them ideal for radiation-hardened designs with-

out the need for extensive and costly protective shielding.

In addition to radiation tolerance, space electronics must endure extreme temperature variations. As a satellite orbits the Earth, it cycles between direct exposure to the sun and the darkness of the Earth's shadow. When facing the sun, its components can reach scorching temperatures of up to +125°C. When eclipsed, they can plunge to a frigid -55°C within seconds. The electronics must reliably withstand these drastic and rapid fluctuations. Vikram 3201 is specifically designed for this, with an operating temperature range of -55°C to +125°C, making it perfectly suited for the space environment.

Plus, this technology supports higher operating voltages (eg 1.8V to 5V), ideal for solar-powered spacecraft.

For ISRO's critical needs, processing telemetry, navigation and control systems in rockets like the PSLV and in satellites, the paramount focus is on unwavering reliability, durability and extremely low failure rates. These requirements outweigh the need for the gigahertz speeds or high transistor densities found in consumer electronics. Vikram 3201 is powerfully designed for this purpose, making it a true game-changer for India's quest for self-reliance in space tech.

Vikram 3201 represents a significant upgrade from its predecessor Vikram 1601, which was first deployed in the PSLV-C47 mission that placed the CARTOSAT-3 satellite in orbit in 2009. The new Vikram 3201 incorporates advanced features like float-

ing-point support and compatibility with high-level languages, such as Ada, which streamlines software development for complex missions. Building on this success, it is reliably understood that ISRO is already exploring next-generation space-grade chip designs at the 70-nm node.

The applications of these processors extend far beyond space. Vikram 1601 demonstrated its versatility by being adopted for critical systems in control electronics for electric locomotives and sophisticated railway systems, such as Track Management Systems (TMS) and indigenous Automatic Train Supervision (i-ATS) for metro rail networks. Likewise, Vikram 3201 is expected to find valuable applications in other strategic and industrial sectors.

This move towards self-reliance was driven by necessity. Before Vikram 1601, ISRO heavily relied on imported processors, exposing India to supply chain risks, export restrictions and national security challenges. Sanctions imposed after the 1998 Pokhran tests sharply highlighted the importance of developing home-grown strategic technology.

Indian institutions then undertook the challenging task of developing indigenous tech. Though this meant lagging behind global commercial standards at times, the effort proved crucial. The presentation of the Vikram 3201 chip to PM Modi at Semicon India 2025 marks a crucial milestone in the decades of progress towards technological independence in the space sector.

India-Bangladesh trade frictions demand urgent reset



SANJAY KATHURIA
CO-FOUNDER, TRADE SENTINEL,
AND VISITING SENIOR FELLOW,
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC PROGRESS

ECONOMIC relations between India and Bangladesh are wide-ranging and deep. But recent developments have cast a shadow on the biggest bilateral economic partnership in South Asia. A serious bilateral conversation is essential to arrest the downward spiral.

India and Bangladesh are deeply intertwined, with large flows of goods, capital, energy and people. India is Bangladesh's second-largest source of imports and its eighth largest source of foreign direct investment, while Bangladesh was India's eighth-largest export market in FY25. Indian firms invest across sectors, building supply chain linkages, while Bangladesh businesses have also expanded their investments in Indian markets.

Bangladesh is the largest

recipient of Indian concessional financing, with about \$8 billion committed for infrastructure, energy and connectivity projects. It currently imports more than 2000 megawatts of electricity from India. These connections have been deeply beneficial for the people of both countries.

The strongest ties have been cemented by people-to-people connections. Until FY24, Bangladesh was the largest source of foreign tourists into India, both for leisure and medical purposes. This changed after the July 2024 'Monsoon Revolution' in Bangladesh that led to the ouster of the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Awami League.

Over the past year, since Professor Muhammad Yunus took over as the de facto head of government in Bangladesh, ties have soured. India's issuance of visas has reportedly dropped from about 5,000-7,000 per day prior to July 2024, to fewer than 1,000 per day currently.

In April 2025, Bangladesh restricted imports of Indian yam and some other products through land ports, revising an earlier order of August 2024. The same month, India pulled the plug on a transshipment facility that had allowed Bangladesh firms to



SOUR TIES: India banned imports of specific Bangladeshi goods like garments and jute through land ports. REUTERS

export their goods more cheaply via airports such as Delhi and Kolkata.

In May, June and August, India banned imports of specific Bangladeshi goods — including their biggest export items — garments and jute — through land ports, allowing such imports only via sea-ports of Kolkata and Nhava Sheva. Bangladesh, in turn, has decided to shut down three land ports and suspend another, finding them 'unprofitable' or 'inactive'.

These actions and counter-actions amount to 'non-tariff barriers' that, while not banning trade, create deliberate

In a fraught global environment, India and Bangladesh should be engaging more, not less.

inefficiencies and raise costs for both sides.

Such retaliatory measures help neither country. Instead, Bangladesh should make full use of its location next to the world's fastest-growing large economy. Its exports to India could grow by almost 300 per cent if trade were free and efficient. It could also play a much bigger role in India's supply chains, including by aggressively courting foreign direct investment (FDI) from India.

For India, Bangladesh remains the most efficient connector to its isolated Northeast, provided an effec-

tive transit agreement can be implemented. Bangladeshi firms are also best placed to invest in India's Northeast, and help upgrade supply capabilities, especially in processing agriculture and primary products.

There are also huge mutual gains in connectivity and logistics, as envisaged in earlier cooperation agreements. These gains are best visualised by viewing Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Northeast India (including West Bengal) as a seamless economic space.

Bangladesh and India can cooperate in improving transit access for landlocked Bhutan and Nepal, and for India's own Northeast. India, with its rapidly improving infrastructure and ports, can help make Bangladeshi goods more efficiently accessible to wider markets.

In a fraught global environment, India and Bangladesh should be engaging more, not less. With India facing tariffs of 50 per cent on its exports to the US, Bangladesh could proactively invite Indian FDI in garments — accelerating an ongoing process. Both sides should roll back non-tariff barriers.

India could also revert to its earlier visa policy, which would likely restore

Bangladesh's position as the largest source of leisure and medical tourists for India. Energy trade can become much larger, including India acting as a connector between Nepal and Bangladesh — a process already underway, but one that has far greater potential.

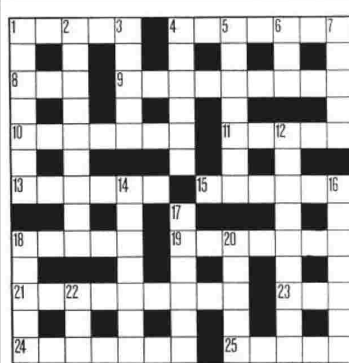
The interests of both countries lie in deepening economic interdependence. Based on a foundation of strong people-to-people ties, the opportunities in trade in goods and services, private investment, connectivity, bilateral and multi-country energy trade, the possibilities are vast — and will only grow as both countries expand.

For its own economic prosperity, Bangladesh cannot afford to neglect economic ties with India, which should be among its highest priorities. Likewise, India cannot underplay the benefits of trade, tourism and connectivity with Bangladesh. India also has major strategic interests in remaining a key economic player in Bangladesh, particularly in light of growing Chinese inroads in the country.

Both sides should resume a comprehensive economic dialogue.

Views are personal

QUICK CROSSWORD



ACROSS

- 1 Subsequent (5)
- 4 Forestall (4,3)
- 8 Obtained (3)
- 9 Roman arena combatant (9)
- 10 French vineyard estate (7)
- 11 In all sincerity (5)
- 13 Stay in hiding (3,3)
- 15 Child's bed on rockers (6)
- 18 Have and use (5)
- 19 Sports official (7)
- 21 Familiar chat at mealtime (5,4)
- 23 In the past (3)
- 24 Having active personal involvement (5-2)
- 25 An artful expedient (5)

DOWN

- 1 Reasonably to be believed (7)
- 2 Private confidential interview (4,1-4)
- 3 Dishonest person (5)
- 4 Break in continuity (6)
- 5 Flier (7)
- 6 Unconscious (3)
- 7 Sudden attack (5)
- 12 Furtive (9)
- 14 Singularity (7)
- 16 Something visually offensive (7)
- 17 To decree (6)
- 18 Close observation (5)
- 20 Spurious (5)
- 22 Prohibit (3)

Yesterday's solution

Across: 1 Poles apart, 8 Arena, 9 Cascade, 10 Aniseed, 11 Untill, 12 Legacy, 14 Strain, 17 Occur, 19 Except, 21 Traffic, 22 Year, 23 Perpetuity.
Down: 2 Opening, 3 Erase, 4 Arcade, 5 Assault, 6 Trait, 7 Wellington, 8 At all costs, 13 Care for, 15 Abreast, 16 Rescue, 18 Clasp, 20 Coup.

SU DO KU



YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

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

CALENDAR

SEPTEMBER 4, 2025, THURSDAY

- Shaka Samvat 1947
- Bhadrpad Shaka 13
- Bhadrpad Purnima 20
- Hijri 1447
- Shukla Paksha Tithi 12, up to 4:09 am
- Shubhagya Yoga up to 3:22 pm
- Ultrashadha Nakshatra up to 11:44 pm
- Moon in Capricorn sign

FORECAST

SUNSET	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	24-25 HRS
CITY	MAX	MIN	
Chandigarh	32	24	
New Delhi	33	24	
Amritsar	30	24	
Bathinda	31	24	
Jalandhar	30	24	
Ludhiana	31	24	
Bhiwani	31	26	
Hisar	31	24	
Sirsa	31	26	
Dharamsala	26	17	
Manali	21	14	
Shimla	22	15	
Srinagar	27	18	
Jammu	29	20	
Kargil	18	08	
Leh	15	09	
Dehradun	31	24	
Mussoorie	22	17	



INDIAN EXPRESS IS NOT AN INDUSTRY. IT IS A MISSION.

—Rammath Goenka

PUNISHMENT MUST FOLLOW CONVICTION, NOT PRECEDE IT

THE Delhi High Court's denial of bail to Umar Khalid, Sharjeel Imam and others accused in the 2020 Delhi riots conspiracy case again highlights the need for a delicate balance between national security and individual liberty. Years after their arrest, the trial has scarcely advanced and bail continues to be denied. Indian jurisprudence rests on two principles: bail is the rule, and every person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. Yet, under the stringent Section 43D(5) of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, these safeguards are severely weakened. Bail can be denied on the mere perception of a *prima facie* case. At the bail stage, courts often avoid a detailed assessment and tend to defer to the prosecution's version.

In the present case, the prosecution has relied heavily on the concept of a "larger conspiracy", citing WhatsApp groups and meetings as evidence of coordination. Khalid's counsel rightly argued that being a member of such groups without sending incriminating messages cannot amount to criminality. No money trail, no weapons, and recovery of no kind has been linked to him. Equally troubling are the words of the solicitor general that those doing something against the nation "better be in jail until acquitted or convicted". His insistence that "long incarceration cannot be used to seek relief" runs counter to the prosecutor's duty, which is to seek a fair and expeditious trial, not indefinite detention.

The 2020 Delhi riots were a tragic event, and it is important to achieve closure and accountability through solid evidence, fair trial, and timely adjudications. The state should quickly present any proof of conspiracy and work to secure convictions. Otherwise, the accused cannot be held in prison indefinitely, only on suspicion and association. The judiciary has often asserted that personal liberty is the soul of democracy. In *K.A. Najeeb (2021)*, the Supreme Court acknowledged that "the presence of statutory restrictions like Section 43D(5) *per se* does not oust the ability of constitutional courts to grant bail on grounds of violation of Part III of the Constitution". The Delhi riots case will test whether fairness, balance, and credibility are finally upheld in the face of political and social turbulence. A law intended to protect the country must not be seen as corroding the very freedoms it was meant to defend.

KAVITHA'S EXIT COULD WEAKEN BRS, BENEFIT BJP

THE exit of Kalvakuntla Kavitha, daughter of former Telangana chief minister and BRS chief K ChandraSekhar Rao, from the party could not have come at a worse time for the ageing patriarch. Having lost the assembly and Lok Sabha elections, KCR has confined himself to his farmhouse, leaving his son K T Rama Rao and nephew Harish Rao to take on the ruling Congress. However, increasing attacks from the Congress, including the latest government move to order a CBI probe into alleged irregularities in the Kaleshwaram irrigation project, have put the BRS in a spot of bother. It is under these circumstances that Kavitha's dissenting voice crossed a red line.

The immediate trigger for KCR to suspend his daughter was her public outburst against Harish, whom she accused of playing a major role in Kaleshwaram and dragging her father into a CBI probe. Her remarks indirectly endorsed the Congress allegations. But his action made her double down and resign from both the party and the legislative council, and going so far as to accuse Harish of seeking to take over the party.

Sensational as her allegations are, the episode is essentially a family feud. It is a truism that all family-run parties face internal power struggles at some point. Kavitha's ambitions were thwarted, in contrast to her brother's fortunes. While KTR was made the party working president, she remained a member of the council with no position in the party. The Delhi liquor scam, in which she was jailed, did not help her cause. Following her release, she was not, in her words, allowed to take an active role. The stifling atmosphere and dwindling political capital perhaps turned her into a rebel. In reality, her words and actions are aimed as much against her father, for it is he who is the deciding authority.

What could be the political fallout of Kavitha's exit? She is no mass leader to split the party. Floating a new outfit is easier said than done, which leaves her with the option of joining the Congress or the BJP. The danger for BRS is that she could dent its prospects. The more the BRS is weakened, the stronger will be the other opposition party, the BJP—and therein lies the real fallout. KCR could have avoided this, but then, a patriarchal mindset seems to have made it inevitable.

QUICK TAKE

IDEAL IDOLS FOR INDIA

THE National Green Tribunal has rightly pulled up the Tamil Nadu government for allowing immersion of plaster of Paris Vinayagar idols into the sea in violation of pollution control norms, court orders, and coastal zone rules. It's not only about that banned substance and this festival. Dumping hazardous waste into public water bodies at the end of festivals is a year-long, pan-India problem which is becoming bigger with the ever-increasing height of idols. There are two ways to deal with it. Make the public pay for an immediate cleanup after a tightly-controlled period of immersions. Or incentivise the use of only natural, water-soluble, safe materials. Surely the deities would approve.

SURVEYING Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to Tianjin, most China experts and ex-bureaucrats are sceptical whether an India-China rapprochement is possible. India's "permanent establishment" with its tunnel vision is wary of China's intentions. Like in Bertolt Brecht's existential play *Waiting for Godot*, they would rather await Donald Trump's arrival. Thus, it is largely left to the global audience to take note of the geopolitics of Modi's visit.

If Modi travelled to China with hopes of rebuilding the India-China relations from ground zero, he returned home with a glass half-full. That is not because the visit and the meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping weren't meticulously planned. On the contrary, high-level discussions in New Delhi between top officials of the two countries had preceded the visit up to the eleventh hour.

First, the impact of the visit on bilateral cooperation. Xi told Modi that achieving a "dragon-elephant dance" is the right choice for the two neighbouring countries. Modi argued that peace and tranquillity at the border are prerequisites for bilateral ties. While Xi flagged that the bilateral ties cannot be defined merely by the boundary issue, Modi added, and Xi agreed, that India and China are partners, not adversaries, and would have far more consensus than differences. Both agreed that differences should not turn into disputes.

Both India and China see the potential to leverage the external environment of tariff walls to build greater mutual understanding to advance commercial ties. Foreign Secretary Vikram Misra stated at a media briefing that this is a discussion going on at many levels between the two governments, and businesses and entities that are involved in trade in the two countries, "and we will have to see how it evolves".

China is very much interested in the expansion and deepening of businesses, and more importantly, is conscious of the role that the Indian and Chinese economies can play in stabilising world trade. Thus, Modi and Xi agreed, once again, that there is need to proceed from a political and strategic direction to reduce India's trade deficit, facilitate bilateral trade and investment ties and inject transparency and predictability into business conditions.

Another significant outcome is to accelerate implementation of the understandings reached between the two countries' special representatives at their

After the success of Modi's China visit comes the hard part of following up. Two consequential issues playing along are the border talks and the India-US poker game over tariffs

WHY THE GLASS FROM TIANJIN IS HALF-FULL

M K BHADRAKUMAR

Former diplomat



SOURAV ROY

24th round of talks on the boundary held in New Delhi just a fortnight ago. There was understanding on the need to maintain peace on the border using the existing and new mechanisms, and to avoid disturbing the overall relationship.

Misra disclosed that an immediate follow-up can be expected in the coming days and weeks to flesh out the recent decisions of the special representatives with regard to setting up an expert group to "explore early harvest in boundary delimitation" in the border areas; setting up a working group "to advance effective border management"; creating general level mechanisms in the eastern and middle sectors; and discuss de-escalation.

Overall, there is no question that the meeting at Tianjin injected new momentum into the bilateral relations. Both leaders actively signalled cooperation.

The involvement of Cai Qi, a senior politician in Xi's inner circle for many years, is noteworthy.

The importance of being Cai Qi should be understood. He is the first-ranked member of the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), fifth-ranking member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee and director of the CCP General Office—making him the *de facto* chief of staff to CCP General Secretary Xi. In his capacity as director of CCP's General Office, Cai supervises the implementation of top-level decisions, internal and external alike.

The ministry of external affairs read out said that Modi "shared with Cai his vision for bilateral relations and sought his support to realise the vision of the two leaders". According to *Xinhua*, Cai said China "is willing to work with India

HOW TO JUDGE JUDGEMENTS

THE natural use of the word 'judgement' is to denote a mental act of attributing a predicate to a subject. In this sense, the act of judging primarily involves inference, that is, determination of the connotation of the subject, or attribution of certain property to the object even if the inference arrived at, or the attribution cast upon, are not justified or derived through argumentation.

This conception, rooted in the classical tradition extending from Aristotle with logic through contemporary analytic philosophy, generally understands judgement as the attribution of properties to particular objects or subjects.

In the legal context, where a judge is required to deliver a judgement based on facts and to justify the inference or attribution, this conception reflects as the determination that particular factual or normative claims are true or false. This determination carries significant practical consequences.

When a court determines that a person is guilty of negligence, it is making a substantive assessment about the relationship between "individual agency" and the legal consequence of the use of the agency. The underlying conclusion is the result of determinations about personal identity over time, the nature of causal responsibility, and the ontological status of legal properties. In this case, the court has passed a judgement that a person is guilty of a particular of fence, and it differs from a more generalised judgement that "negligence must be punished with liability".

However, some judgements do not involve such attributions or objects. This dimension concerns their relationship with truth—as a determination, recognition or attribution of truth values to factual or normative claims.

Take the *Kesavananda Bharati* (1973) judgement, which arguably represents the most important example of such truth value-attribution in Indian constitutional law. The Supreme Court held that parliament's power to amend the Constitution was subject to implicit limitations that preserve the Constitution's basic structure. Here, the altheic dimension manifested through the court recognising the truth of a constitutional interpretation that curbed parliament's powers.

The language of judicial judgements is the language of logic. These conceptions reveal that judicial judgements, much like other judgements, emerge not just as

a derivative phenomenon but as the fundamental structure within which cognitive activity occurs. Institutions ensure that questions about the characterisation of persons and events are addressed through processes that take seriously both epistemic concerns about truth and concerns about fair procedure.

However, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr of the US Supreme Court once noted, "The whole outline of the law is the resultant of a conflict at every point between logic and good sense." In *Common Law* (1881), Justice Holmes elaborated: "The actual life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience. The felt necessities of the times, the prevalent moral and political theories, intuitions of public policy, avowed or uncon-



PHOTO: ANAND K

Inadequacies in criticising legal judgements have led people to dismiss practical interpretations of the law. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr said that the actual life of a law is not of logic—it's the experience that judges' rulings bring to it

scious, even the prejudices which judges share with their fellow-men, have had a good deal more to do than syllogism."

As legal realists would attest, judges' background, beliefs, temperament and even the demeanor of the arguing counsels affect the manner in which issues are framed and weighed. This, however, is not because the judges are acting in bad faith or pursuing an agenda. Rather, their lived experiences, which is what Justice Holmes refers to as "good sense", lead them to see the same legal issues differently, even if the language of their

judgements follow the same logic. For example, one cannot deny that *Kesavananda Bharati* was a product of its time.

How does one then criticise judgements, especially ones that deal with constitutional issues? One way would be evaluating the judgements based on their fidelity to formal logic and its methods. Yet, this may not always capture the undercurrents driving legal developments.

Another way would be adopting pragmatism, to judge judgements on the basis of their practical outcomes. There always being a competing "good sense", as long as the outcomes are not anathematic, the judgement must stand. Finally, we may judge also on the basis of whether the judge has adequately acknowledged and tested their pre-suppositions in the form of adherence to procedure.

Take the recent interim order of the Madras High Court staying an amendment taking away the governor's power to appoint vice chancellors. The criticism of the order primarily focused on what some labelled as "misplaced urgency", pendency of a transfer petition before the Supreme Court, and an alleged lack of opportunity to file a counter.

However, the criticism ignores the fact that Tamil Nadu had already constituted search committees, issued government orders, published advertisements, and commenced the selection process for vice-chancellor appointments. The criticism fundamentally misunderstands judicial duty. The SC had no stay order or oral injunction, preventing the high court from proceeding. All of these, including the issue of opportunity to file counters, are dealt with in the order.

It is not that the high court's order is immune to critique. The inadequacy of the criticism simply points to a broader problem: we tend to criticise constitutional judgements through result-oriented attacks or procedural nitpicking. A better approach would be to engage with alternative constitutional interpretations and their practical consequences, while maintaining transparency about our own motivations, values and assumptions. (Views are personal)

to enhance friendly exchanges and mutually beneficial cooperation, properly manage and resolve differences, and promote further improvement and development of China-India relations". Presumably, such robust political signalling and the new formulation that India and China are "development partners and not rivals" go to convey that Beijing and New Delhi are making strategic choices based on their own interests. However, the paradox remains that the cup is still only half-full. What will happen remains to be seen.

In the recent past, *Global Times* featured two commentaries on the "contentional nature" of the Quad. The more recent one coinciding with the Xi-Modi meeting noted, "Regional countries should approach alliance relations with a more cautious and pragmatic mindset. A regional architecture based on strategic autonomy and win-win cooperation, rather than blindly following others, serves the interests of stakeholders better."

The bottomline is that Beijing, like most world capitals, is awaiting the denouement that will inevitably appear to the US-Indian alienation. But the pantomime playing out at different levels involves multiple actors. The tidings from Tianjin, for instance, and the one-hour intense conversation on Sunday between Modi and Russian president Vladimir Putin inside the latter's limousine—that is insulated from eavesdropping by spy agencies—hinted at an extraordinary Russian-Indian convergence. That said, the fate of Russian oil in the Indian market as such remains uncertain.

A day later, Anant Ambani, son of billionaire Mukesh Ambani, revealed in his first address at Reliance's annual general meeting of shareholders that there is pressure in purchasing Russian oil. Make no mistake that when Washington criticises India for buying Russian oil, the implication is that it wants India to "pick a side"—the same logic behind drawing India into the Quad. And that goal is nothing more than to turn India into a pawn in Washington's so-called Indo-Pacific Strategy. But Delhi is still confused whether such small political cliques align with its pursuit of full strategic autonomy.

The talks in Tianjin provide a rare window of opportunity for improving the China-India relationship. Challenges do remain, but the two countries' willingness for pragmatic cooperation introduces a positive variable into global strategic balance. That beginning augurs well, but Modi needs to follow up. (Views are personal)

MAILBAG

WRITE TO: letters@newindianexpress.com

SUV mirage

Ref: Fresh price push awaited as car sales hit a bump (Sep 3). A major issue is the myth among consumers that only sports utility vehicles (SUVs) are significantly profitable. Manufacturers have encouraged this shift while neglecting entry-level buyers. Unless both industry and government revive practical small cars, tax relief alone cannot restore sales in such a price-sensitive market. A Senthil Kumar, Coimbatore

Sacrificing nature

Ref: Don't overwhelm Ghats' ecosystem with rail link (Sep 3). Development that tramples upon fragile ecosystems is not progress but folly. The Western Ghats cannot be sacrificed at the altar of short-term commercial gain. We have seen in Uttarakhand and Himachal how reckless infrastructure has triggered landslides and floods. Sanjeev Jha, New Delhi

Geo-economic reality

Ref: Time India stops being America's subordinate ally (Sep 3). The political jargons—Hindutva nationalism for MIGA and racist nationalism for MAGA—are just rhetoric. It is only economics that matters most in geopolitics within an alignment, instead of non-aligned isolation in a multipolar global village. Venkat Desikan, Chennai

Thailand's future

Ref: Return of Thai shadow play (Sep 3). Thailand stands at a crossroads where entrenched military-royalty influence meets growing calls for democratic inclusion. The military's ruling grip, as a democratic partner, rather than gatekeeper, will be key to breaking cycles of instability and fostering a more resilient political future. N R Jagannath, Bengaluru

Dirty linen

Ref: K. Kavitha suspended from BRS (Sep 3). Nowadays, wrangles in the families of political party chiefs show their ugly face and cause the ridiculous politics. Party patriarchs clashing with their children show the fight for power. This is not conducive to a healthy democracy, and parties seem like family property. N R Narayan, Virudhunagar

Traditional intelligence

Ref: India's 1st home-grown semiconductor chip (Sep 3). If man-made semiconductor chips are so crucial in today's life, what truly is the value of human brains? Beyond scientific developments, human capital and its competence must be credited too. R Ganesan, email

Govt and people intensifying problems caused by rains

Lord Indra is regarded by Hindus as the god of rain and king of heavens. Right now, he seems to be wrathful towards the people in India, especially those living in the northern parts, as relentless rains have wreaked havoc across the region, leaving states grappling with floods, landslides and widespread damage. Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand have faced a series of cloudbursts that have killed dozens of people and left many missing and injured. In Punjab, 29 people have died, thousands have been displaced, and over 10 districts inundated following the heaviest rainfall in 25 years. Delhi and the NCR saw floodwaters entering homes, crippling traffic, and prompting schools and offices to shut, with Gurugram advised to work from home after

a 20-km jam. However, it would be simplistic and misleading to attribute the devastation caused by incessant rains, cloudbursts, and floods solely to an act of divine wrath. Natural disasters may be triggered by weather conditions, but the magnitude of destruction they cause is often the result of human negligence, poor planning, shortsighted governance, and greed. What we are witnessing in states like Jammu and Kashmir, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Delhi-NCR is not just nature's fury but also the outcome of systemic failures and reckless human activity.

One of the most significant contributors to the crisis is the haphazard construction in ecologically fragile zones. Hill states such as Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh have witnessed a boom in the construction of hotels,

resorts, and housing complexes, often right along riverbeds or on unstable slopes. These structures not only obstruct the natural flow of rivers but also increase the risk of landslides and flooding. Similarly, road widening and hydroelectric projects in mountainous regions have weakened slopes, making them more prone to collapse during heavy rains. In urban areas like Delhi and Gurugram, the problem has been compounded by poor urban planning and shrinking green cover. Rapid concretisation has left little room for natural water absorption, while encroachments on floodplains of rivers like the Yamuna have narrowed their natural drainage paths. As a result, even moderate rainfall now causes large-scale waterlogging, traffic chaos, and damage to infrastructure. The

situation worsens when rivers overflow or barrages release water, leaving cities ill-prepared to manage the deluge.

Governance lapses are another critical factor. Despite repeated warnings from the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) about heavy rainfall, local authorities are often slow to act.

Disaster management protocols remain weak, evacuation efforts delayed, and relief operations hampered by inadequate resources. In many states, drainage systems and embankments are poorly maintained, collapsing under pressure when they are needed the most. Lack of coordination between state governments and central agencies further aggravates the crisis. The role of people themselves cannot be overlooked. Widespread deforestation for

agriculture, development projects, or illegal logging has stripped the hills of their natural protection. Forests act as sponges, absorbing rainwater and preventing flash floods. Their depletion has left slopes barren and rivers swollen beyond capacity. In urban centres, citizens often contribute to clogged drains by indiscriminate disposal of plastic and garbage, worsening waterlogging and contamination during floods. Therefore, while the current calamity may appear to be stemming from nature's fury, the amplification and intensification of the fury is the result of our collective failures. Unless urgent corrective measures are taken—such as regulating construction, restoring green cover, strengthening disaster response, and embracing sustainable practices—north India will continue to suffer.

MEDLEY



LETTERS

Kavitha's suspension will reduce rebellions in BRS

The decision of the BRS to suspend its MLC K Kavitha with immediate effect on charges of anti-party activities has come as a surprise. She had blamed senior leaders T Harish Rao and J Santosh for the CBI probe related to irregularities in the construction of Kaleshwaram project. The fact is that BRS leaders were involved in corruption deals pertaining to the KLIS project, all along. Meanwhile, the suspension of Kavitha could reduce rebel activities within the party as a clear signal has been sent to cadre and leaders that talking ill of the party would not be tolerated. In a way, Kavitha's suspension should have come in the wake of Delhi liquor scam in which she was one of the main accused. It is rumoured that Kavitha would float her new party, which is not good news for BRS.

S Lakshmi, Hyderabad

The writing was on the wall for Kavitha

Telangana Jagruthi leader K Kavitha seems to have dug her own grave by crossing the Lakshmana Rekha and raising her voice against her kith and kin within BRS. There is already speculation that an unseen hand is behind these sudden developments in the party. The fact that the party has just suspended her instead of removing her from primary membership suggests that the father-daughter bond remains. Kavitha's concern towards her father K Chandrababoo Naidu that at this old age, he's facing a CBI probe due to Harish Rao and Santosh is rather unwarranted.

Ganti Venkata Sudhir, Secunderabad

CM's assertions about Tummidihatti are far-fetched

Thousands of crores of taxpayers' money have been spent on the construction of Kaleshwaram project. The Congress government must take all measures to utilise its waters for irrigation purposes, both effectively and efficiently. Only such a mindset can help Telangana farmers. Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy's vow that he would construct project at Tummidihatti prima facie looks like a hasty remark. Having accused K Chandrababoo Naidu of taking hasty actions in the past, the present government should refrain from indulging in similar misdeeds. The government, which talks of lack of money for fulfilling genuine demands of different sections of society, should resist the temptation of wasting public funds. After all, wise people learn from the mistakes of others. The Congress leadership should therefore swear by good governance.

M N Saravathi Devi, Secunderabad-10

Shot in the arm for goshalas

The Telangana government's Goshala Ecosystem Development Policy 2025 is more than a scheme. It is a promise of compassion, culture and change. For decades, goshalas have grown under overcrowding, of poor infrastructure and empty coffers. Now, with a bold shift from urban to rural operations, cattle shelters are set to become centres of welfare and wealth. Every cow tagged with a digital ID, monitored with care; biogas plants turning waste into clean energy; organic manure enriching barren fields; and branded products like Telangana Gau Amrit spell sustainability. This isn't just a policy but a silent revolution where the role of women will prove inspirational. If implemented sincerely, this initiative could turn cows into symbols of prosperity and villages into hubs of green growth. The policy reinforces the belief that a nation that nurtures its cattle, nurtures its future.

Kalishetti Soumya, Hyderabad

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BENGALURU ONLINE

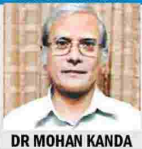
15 IAS, 2 IPS cadre posts allocated to Greater Bengaluru Authority, new Corporations

BENGALURU: The Government of Karnataka has issued an official order reorganizing and redistributing IAS, IPS, and KAS cadre posts that were earlier sanctioned for the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) to the newly formed Greater Bengaluru Authority (GBA) and the five city corporations. Previously, BBMP was sanctioned 16 IAS and 2 IPS posts. Under the new structure, 15 IAS and 2 IPS cadre posts have been allocated between the GBA and the corporations, with revised designations. Of the 19 Karnataka Administrative Service (KAS) posts originally allotted to BBMP, 17 KAS and one Karnataka State Police Service (KSPS) post have been reassigned. The new positions will take effect from the date of the final notification establishing the five corporations. Within the GBA, a Chief Commissioner of Principal Secretary rank or higher will head the authority. A Deputy Commissioner (Administration, Elections, and IT) post and an Assistant Commissioner (Junior Scale) post have also been created. Additionally, four Special Commissioners will oversee key departments including urban administration, revenue and IT, Health and Education; FCC, Elections and Disaster Management; Public Relations, Coordination and Finance.

Read more at <https://epaper.thehansindia.com>

The changing face of protests and strikes in India

TALKING OF MANY THINGS



DR MOHAN KANDA

Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed—Martin Luther King Jr.

An important feature of any democracy is that protests are allowed, and citizens can express their opinions about those in power, accountable, and advocate for change. They act as a vital check on government power, ensuring that the Voice of the People, especially those marginalised or underrepresented, is heard. They often also spark social movements, educate the public and contribute to a more inclusive and responsible political landscape.

Such protests can take various shapes such as a relay hunger strike, where a group of people take turns participating in a hunger strike a fast unto death, a hartal or a mass protest, involving total shutdown at the workplace, offices, shops, and courts, or a gherao, when people show that they disagree with something by standing around a person in

authority and not letting him leave until what their demand is granted, or a bandh, a form of protest usually used by political activists, similar to a general strike.

In this context, one recalls that Mahatma Gandhi often employed hunger strikes as a weapon of protest through non-violent resistance. Without being intended as a means of self-harm, but rather as a means of seeking political and social change. It served as a powerful tool to pressurise the British government and awaken the conscience of the people.

As far as industrial relations are concerned, workers with demands to be met go on strike as a last resort measure, when continued efforts to persuade managements to concede their demands have not been met. A striking feature of the mixed economy approach in the country is that the right to strike, while not quite a constitutionally provided fundamental right, is recognised as a crucial element in industrial social movements, educate the public and contribute to a more inclusive and responsible political landscape.

The Supreme Court of India has described the process of collective bargaining by workers agitating for meeting their demands as 'the technique by which disputes regarding conditions of employment are resolved amicably by agreement rather than by coercion'.



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When the relationships between the management and agitating workers in a given situation, failed to produce an agreement between the two sides, what are known as conciliation proceedings are set in motion by the central/state government concerned. They are conducted by an official known as a Conciliation Officer (CO) appointed by the government. The proceedings begin once the CO receives the notice of strike or lockout. Their task is to investigate the causes of the dispute, mediate and promote a settlement. Alternatively, the government concerned

appoints, on occasion, a Board of Conciliation, represented in equal numbers by both parties, namely the management and the agitating workers, to conduct the proceedings during which, however, a strike is not allowed to take place.

An interesting incident concerning strikes by employees took place while I was working at the Register of Cooperative Societies of Andhra Pradesh in 1986. Each Primary Agricultural Credit Society (PACS) in the state, of which there were about 6700. Each PACS had an employee called a paid secretary, who was supposed to work under the management of the PACS concerned and

be accountable to it for discharge of their functions. The superintendence, control and guidance over them rested with the management. Somehow or the other, partly on account of political considerations, a statewide cadre of paid secretaries came into being, following which the authority to order transfers, postings, promotions, and other service conditions of them was transferred to a state level mechanism. Feeling that it was a pernicious system that eroded the authority of the PACSs and worked as the creator, preserver and destroyer of Cooperatives (as the RCS is commonly called), I took action to dismantle that system. The interest of preserving, protecting and defending the independence of the managements of PACSs. The result was a statewide strike by paid secretaries.

I recall, partly with amusement, an incident that took place while I was once on an official visit to Eluru town with my family. As we looked out of the upstairs room of the guest house in which we stayed, we heard loud slogans, of "RCS down", from the agitating employees, an incident that amused the children to no end!

Another notable event in this context was the historic fast unto death, undertaken by Indian freedom fighter, and a leader committed to social justice and the uplift of Dalits, BKS Sinha, for the cause of carving out a separate state for the Telugu speaking people from the erstwhile

Madras state.

A person who had been influenced by Mahatma Gandhi and who participated in major independence movements, including satyagrahas and the Quit India Movement, was imprisoned by the British several times. The 58-day hunger strike led to his tragic end, sparking, in its wake, widespread riots and public outcry ending with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru announcing the formation of a separate Andhra state. That event also set a precedent for the reorganisation of states in the country on linguistic lines.

Sriramulu's legacy is commemorated in Andhra Pradesh, and beyond, as a symbol of sacrifice and dedicated to regional and social causes. The erstwhile Nellore district is, in fact, now named after him.

While on the subject of protest, here is something I heard recently, to end this piece on a humorous note. Tired of endless, unproductive meetings, employees of an organisation decided to fight back with humour. During one particularly long meeting, they brought snacks, blankets, and even a board game. When the manager asked what was going on, they replied, "We're just preparing for the next three hours!" The manager got the hint and started keeping meetings short and to the point.

(The writer was formerly Chief Secretary, Government of Andhra Pradesh)

Like a fingerprint, our signature movements are unique

KAREN LANDER

The way someone walks, talks, smiles, or gestures gives a clue to who they are. Whether through the flick of an eyebrow, the rhythm of our walk, or the tilt of a head, movement speaks volumes. And my recent paper shows that people may have their own movement fingerprint. This is a study of movement that is characteristic of a person's identity. So, someone who uses expressive facial gestures might also speak with animated hand movements or walk with a lively gait. These consistencies could form a motion fingerprint that is unique to the individual.

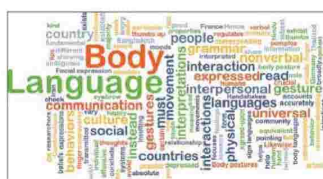
First, let's explore how faces move and why these matter. Everyone has their own style of moving their face, for example, how they raise an eyebrow, purse their lips, or squint when laughing. These patterns of movement help us recognise familiar people even when the visual quality is poor, such as in low lighting or from a distance. And as a person becomes more familiar to us, we become tuned to the way they move, learning their unique patterns of motion, just like we remember their face or voice. Human faces are constantly in motion; they blink, smile, grimace and talk, to name a few movements.

Researchers categorise

facial motion into rigid movements (such as turning or nodding the head) and non-rigid movements (like expressing emotion or speaking). It's the non-rigid movements that tend to be most personally distinctive.

The way we gesture with our hands, shift our posture and tilt our heads all carry identity information. Gestures are often shaped by personal habits or cultural norms; for example, someone might habitually nod three times when agreeing or use a distinctive hand wave common in their home country.

Facial movements are synchronised with the way we sound. When we talk, our face plays a role in shaping the sound of our voice. For example, if you talk with a wide-open mouth, your speech sounds deeper and richer. Studies show that people can match other people's voices to moving faces more accurately than to static ones.



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between them but struggle to link the face to a specific person.

Here, idiosyncratic information from movement can provide an additional clue to identity. Gait, a person's walking style, is one of the most studied body movements. Early research, such as a 2005 study, investigated participants' recognition of identity from gait using point-light displays. In this case, bright spots (lights) were placed on key areas of a person's body. All other visual cues were removed. Participants could only see bright spots against a dark background.

The study found that participants could tell well who someone was from the way the spots moved. Characteristics such as stride length, limb movement, posture and pace form a consistent motion pattern that is unique and surprisingly difficult to fake, making gait analysis a reliable clue for identifying people.

Movement fingerprints. My review brought together evidence from behavioural and brain imaging studies to consider if such consistencies between different types of motion exist and how we might exploit this phenomenon further.

The paper proposes that people have an overall style of movement. More work needs to be done to find direct evidence of movement fingerprints. For example, we still aren't sure what part of the brain processes these movement-based identity cues.

So far, research shows that the posterior temporal sulcus—an area of the brain located roughly above your ear on each side—responds not just to faces and bodies, but to how someone moves more generally. This area is active when we hear voices or see people speak, suggesting it may help link motion and sound. Also, this region plays a key role in allowing us to understand our social world, interpreting other people's actions, determining where they are looking, and picking up on social cues such as gestures, facial expressions and changes in gait direction. However, it's probably just one part of a larger brain network involved in recognising others through motion.

Real-world applications. Motion-based identity traits aren't as stable or specific as fingerprints or DNA. They're what researchers call soft biometrics: useful but not always accurate. But as we better understand the link between motion and identity, exciting real-world

applications are emerging. Motion analysis can support contactless identity verification from gait-based authentication at airports to gesture-based identification in smart environments, such as homes that respond to a user's unique movement patterns.

In clinical settings, movement analysis might help support people with social cognition impairments, face recognition or movement issues. For example, helping a doctor identify changes in the way a patient produces non-verbal cues. But many questions remain. We still aren't sure how consistent motion fingerprints are as someone gets older and in different contexts.

Individual differences in people and environmental factors like lighting, clothing or stress could affect them. Researchers also aren't sure how exactly we manage to understand all this movement in everyday life without even thinking about it.

Figuring this out could not only help improve technologies like social robots and develop tools for people with recognition or communication difficulties but also tell us more about how we process and react to other people.

(The writer is with the University of Manchester)

DECCAN Chronicle

4 SEPTEMBER 2025

Maha govt buys peace on Maratha quota, for now

Mumbai heaved a sigh of relief after Maratha quota activist Manoj Jarange declared "victory" and called for a "peaceful" protest. The Bombay high court rightly noted was far from peaceful. Mr. Jarange leveraged the numerical strength of the Maratha community to pressure the Devendra Fadnis-led government into accepting most of his demands. However, neither the government's assurances nor Mr. Jarange's victory claims mean the Marathas will immediately receive reservation under the Other Backward Classes category. What has been accepted is Mr. Jarange's demand for implementing the Hyderabad Gazetteer, a move that could allow Marathas from the Marathwada region to establish their Kumbi credentials — a step toward potential OBC inclusion.

With this, CM Devendra Fadnis has managed to calm the situation for now. But there is no guarantee that protesters won't feel betrayed and return to the streets in a few months. Besides, backlash from OBC groups is looming large. Many within the OBC community view the inclusion of Marathas as a dilution of their rights.

The Maratha reservation movement dates to the early 1980s. Although traditionally regarded as a dominant group in Maharashtra, many Marathas — especially in rural areas — have faced increasing economic hardship due to agricultural distress, unemployment and limited access to modern opportunities. While politically influential, poorer subgroups of the community often feel excluded from the benefits of development, particularly in education and government employment. These grievances have fuelled calls for affirmative action as the solution to their problems.

While the concerns are genuine and deserve attention, whether the Maratha community qualifies for caste-based reservation remains contentious. Even if the government yields to political pressure, such a move may not stand up to judicial scrutiny.

In 2021, the Supreme Court struck down the previous attempt to grant reservation to Marathas under the Socially and Educationally Backward Communities (SEBC) Act, 2018. The court ruled not only that it breached the 50 per cent cap on reservations but also that there was insufficient evidence to prove the community's social and educational backwardness.

A more constructive approach would involve conducting thorough, data-driven surveys to determine if certain Maratha subgroups genuinely merit the criteria for OBC inclusion. However, political parties and protest leaders avoid this path. There is also a concern that granting reservations to Marathas could open the floodgates to similar demands from other dominant communities, such as the Patels in Gujarat, Jats in Haryana, Gujjars in Rajasthan and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh. If governments start awarding reservations to numerically dominant communities based solely on political expediency or economic grievances, it undermines the very foundation of reservation, which is meant to address social and educational backwardness, not economic distress. And political leaders, especially those in power, have a duty to clarify this to people rather than weaponising their quota demands for electoral gain.

As elections approach, it is common for politicians to promise reservations to influential groups without fully assessing whether they meet constitutional criteria. These pledges, often unsupported by solid data, are frequently struck down by the courts — leading to more protests, social unrest and polarisation.

Unjustified, unconstitutional reservation can also deepen caste divisions. Communities excluded from quotas may feel resentment, further entrenching caste-based politics. The fight for justice must not turn into a race for quotas.

Family feud to weaken BRS more

Succession battles within family-run regional political parties are never easy and usually leave even the winners fairly scarred. The one that has been unfolding in Telangana over the past few months in the Bharat Rashtra Samithi supremo K. Chandrashekar Rao's family — ostensibly among the family and extended family members — is no exception.

Chandrashekar Rao's suspension of his daughter, K. Kavitha, from the party on disciplinary grounds, coupled with her startling allegations of corruption against some top BRS leaders — packaged as a retaliatory move coinciding with her announcement of quitting both the BRS and the Legislative Council on Wednesday — promises an intriguing drama of palace politics in the days to come.

Brother-sister battles over political legacy, and the power and pelf that come with it, are not new to Telugu land. Not too long ago, people witnessed a straight fight between Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy and Y.S. Sharmila for Dr Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy's legacy.

The current one in Telangana began as a presumed supremacy fight between Kavitha and K.T. Rama Rao, the heir apparent to Chandrashekar Rao's legacy and the reins of the BRS. But it took a curious turn in the last few days, with Kavitha shifting her target from her brother to the extended family, particularly her cousins and Mr Chandrashekar Rao's confidants, T. Harish Rao and J. Santosh Kumar.

The daughter professes that it is not about power or legacy, but about how Chandrashekar Rao, a true believer in the BRS, was being treated by those he trusts the most, and how both he and his son, Rama Rao, are in peril — just as the BRS itself is — falling victim to Harish Rao's machinations and villainy. It is an open secret that even Rama Rao and Harish Rao, a force to reckon with in the BRS, have no love lost for each other but have mastered the art of coexisting due to mutual complicity in shifting their target.

And though Kavitha's charges about the corruption of Harish Rao and Santosh Kumar have put the BRS, and consequently Chandrashekar Rao, in a tight spot for the time being, the family feud has only fuelled speculation that the unfolding drama is a well-scripted drama by the core "Kaivakuntha" family, which might be united in its purpose to rid itself of potential risks from within but not of the family. Yet with the blood-letting on, what could remain is an already weakened BRS turning further anemic.

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Dilip Cherian
Dilli Ka Babu

Lateral entry: A reform lost in translation

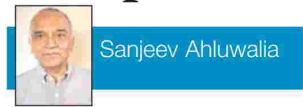
When the Modi Sarkar unveiled its lateral entry scheme in 2018, it promised to shake up the ossified steel frame of Indian governance with an injection of fresh ideas and outside expertise. The pitch was seductive: Cut through the red tape by bringing in private-sector professionals who had navigated markets, managed scale and thought beyond the dusty rulebooks of North Block. Seven years later, the scheme finds itself in limbo, more a footnote to babu chatter than the revolution it once claimed to be.

The reasons are hardly mysterious. For one, the government stumbled headlong into the reservation debate. By defining lateral entry posts as "single-post cadres" and therefore outside the ambit of constitutional quotas, it invited criticism of bypassing affirmative action. Politically, that was never going to fly. Instead of addressing it head-on — say, by designing a transparent system of reserved slots — the government blinked, quietly withdrawing advertisements for 46 posts last year and pretending it was all part of a grand re-think.

Then there's the talent pool problem. Rather than attracting the best of India's boardrooms, applications have disproportionately come from PSU mid-managers keen to stay in Delhi. Add to that a salary structure pegged to government scales, which is far below what senior private sector leaders command. The only people willing to take the plunge are those who view it as a lifestyle



GST 2.0: A major reform or sops for hard-pressed?



Sanjeev Ahluwalia

This is clever accounting, but far from structural reform. The objective of improving the efficiency of tax collection significantly remains compromised to manage the near time impact on consumers and protect government revenue.

Primetime Minister Narendra Modi promised structural reforms of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime in his Independence Day address which would lower prices, increase consumption, and thereby boost GDP. This long-term reform strategy is made even more urgent by the American intransigence in imposing penal import tariffs on India. The GST Council, chaired by finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman, has met this week to determine a new structure for GST 2.0 to replace GST 1.0. A value added tax implemented in fiscal 2017-18 which consolidated multiple indirect taxes levied by the Union and state governments into a single tax applicable across the country.

The benefits thus far have been significant. The value-added format avoids the "cascading effect" of tax levied on the tax already paid by making all tax on input purchase deductible from the final tax burden, by linking the purchase invoice with the sale invoice. This also creates an incentive to avoid cash payments without a bill, thereby enlarging the tax base and revenue.

There is, however, much to rectify. First, the existing GST has six rates for different categories of goods and services, 12 per cent for garments, processed food and telecom services, 18 per cent for electronics and electrical consumer durables, IT and business services and capital goods and 28 per cent for "sin" and luxury goods, including automobiles, tobacco products and coal. Plus, there is a special low rate of 1.5 per cent for gold, silver, cut diamonds and

jewellery. This multiplicity of tax rates encourages misclassification to evade tax and costs more administrative

consider that fast expanding electrification of transport can severely damage future revenues from petroleum fuels. Bringing agriculture under GST can become possible only once it evolves into a commercially-oriented and profitable sector.

GST 2.0 must optimise across the three primary objectives of reducing the incidence of tax on consumers; increasing the economic efficiency by reducing the number of rates; and generating more revenue via boosted consumption.

An SBI research report suggests collapsing the existing six into five rates by ending the existing rate of 12 per cent and shifting products in the associated tax base (five per cent of total tax base) to the lower tax slab of five per cent. Similarly, the highest tax rate of 28 per cent (share in tax base of 15 per cent) could be ended. Two-thirds of the tax base moved to the lower tax rate of 18 per cent and the remaining five per cent share in tax base, moved to a new much higher tax rate of 40 per cent.

The net result is that for 80 per cent of consumers, the tax burden will remain the same. For 15 per cent of purchases, the tax burden will reduce by 7-10 per cent. Just five per cent of purchases, however, would be lost to the "sin tax" segment will attract a hefty 12 per cent additional tax. This restructuring fits well with the objective of benefiting the largest set of consumers or holding them

unharmful, whilst soaking the rich and the wealthy via a higher "sin tax", which partially pays for the tax reductions enjoyed by the middle class. Those at low-income levels

LETTERS STRATEGIC VIGILANCE NEEDED

Pakistan's outreach to Russia, coupled with its strategic alignment with China signals a shifting axis that India must monitor closely. While Shehbaz Sharif claims to respect India Russia ties, history reflects duplicity in regional diplomacy. China's growing military assertiveness & Pakistan's continued instability make their deepening cooperation with Moscow a potential geopolitical triangle. India must not view these moves in isolation. A recalibration of our foreign policy focused on strategic autonomy, defence modernisation and stronger alliances with ASEAN the West, and Central Asia are essential to safeguard national interests in a volatile multipolar world.

Vijaykumar H.K
Chennai

PREPARE FOR MONSOON

It is need of the hour for Chennai which faces manmade disastrous potholes claiming lives, electrocution claiming innocent lives and posing a threat to two-wheeler users in city. It is a wake-up call to authorities what they are doing already is not enough. Much danger awaits soon for heavier monsoon. Immediate short-term remedies along-side long term solutions are needed with disaster management expert committees and speedy implementation. Let us also storm water go to sea and plan to spend money for desalination from sea water and stop the supply chain of lorries abundantly added to traffic woes.

Dr. P. Soundararajan
Chennai

ABUSIVE REMARKS

While it is highly condemnable that a youth has passed abusive remarks against PM Modi and his mother during the 'Voter Adhikar Vrat' in Bihar and the abuser who is from Gujarat has also been arrested, it is unfortunate that Modi has used the slur against his mother to win political mileage in poll-bound Bihar. Modi has tried to exploit the sympathy of the people of Bihar. But why has he refused to Manjipur to console our affected sisters and their families?

Tharclus S. Fernando
Chennai

Mail your letters to chennaidesk@deccanmail.com

When the Modi Sarkar unveiled its lateral entry scheme in 2018, it promised to shake up the ossified steel frame of Indian governance with an injection of fresh ideas and outside expertise. The pitch was seductive: Cut through the red tape by bringing in private-sector professionals who had navigated markets, managed scale and thought beyond the dusty rulebooks of North Block. Seven years later, the scheme finds itself in limbo, more a footnote to babu chatter than the revolution it once claimed to be.

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CURIOSITY COMEBACK OF URJIT PATEL
 The irony is rich. Urjit Patel, the Reserve Bank governor who famously walked away mid-term in 2016, citing "personal reasons", while everyone whispered "government interference," is now India's man at the International Monetary Fund. The very establishment that once bristled at his abrupt exit is now celebrating his return to the spotlight, this time with a global microphone.

This isn't just about Mr. Patel. It's about India's shifting calculus on credibility. In a world where IMF boardrooms are weighing debt distress in Sri Lanka, precarious reserves in Bangladesh, and

the fiscal overhang of climate finance, New Delhi seems to have decided that reputation trumps resentment. Patel, with his inflation-targeting discipline and IMF pedigree, offers both gravitas and a familiar technocratic face.

But the backstory matters. His 2018 resignation was the first time in decades that a sitting RBI governor quit abruptly, sparking debates about the Centre's overreach. Shaktikanth Das' smooth succession only deepened suspicions of a "yes-man" preference. Fast forward to today, and Mr. Patel's quiet rehabilitation raises uncomfortable questions: Has the government truly come to value institutional independence, or is this simply a case of redeploying a skilled insider abroad, where his autonomy won't sting quite as much?

Whatever the answer, the signal to the international community is clear: India is fielding a heavyweight at the IMF table. For Mr. Patel, it's a redemption arc. For the Centre, it's a test of whether it can project technocratic credibility abroad while still wrestling with political interference at home.

Sometimes, the louder message lies not in the autonomy itself, but in the contradictions it quietly papers over.

THE LONE WHISTLE IN THE HIMALAYAS
 In Uttarakhand, where every monsoon brings fresh reminders of the Himalayas' fragility, the

real story isn't just about a few illegal eco huts tucked away in Munsiyari. It's about the one man who refused to look away. Sanjay Chaturvedi, chief conservator of forests, has once again done what few babus dare — call out wrongdoing in black and white, no matter how powerful the players involved.

Mr. Chaturvedi is not new to this. A Magasaysay Award winner, he has made a career out of exposing corruption, whether it was in AIMS or the Haryana forest department, often paying the price through transfers, inquiries, and isolation. In Munsiyari, he lagged how rules were bent, approvals bypassed, and public revenue siphoned off under the guise of eco-tourism. More importantly, he named names and demanded real accountability, urging nothing less than CBI and ED investigations. That takes courage in a system where blowing the whistle often means blowing up your own career.

Interestingly, the Centre only stirred into action after his report landed on desks, ordering the state forest department to prosecute those responsible. Without Mr. Chaturvedi's doggedness, the issue would likely have been buried under the usual rubble of "development" projects.

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